

ROBERT LOWELL AND HAROLD SCHIMMEL: A JERUSALEM ENCOUNTER

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In its Fall 1965 issue, the editors of *Epoch*, a literary journal published out of Cornell University, wrote the following on one of its frequent contributors, the poet Harold Schimmel: “Harold Schimmel is, according to our frequent re-assertions, one of the most powerful voices in contemporary poetry in English; his continued residence in Jerusalem removes him from the American scene.” This observation also marked Schimmel’s last appearance in *Epoch*, though he continued to publish in other journals over the next several years. Following the 1962 publication of his first collection, *First Poems* (Milan, 1962), the New Jersey native (b. 1935) relocated to Israel, where he has remained to this day. In Israel, he immediately befriended many important writers and artists of the period, among them Avot Yeshurun and Yehuda Amichai whose works he also translated into English. After a poetic “silence” of about 10 years, Schimmel published *Shirei Malon Tsion*, a collection that consisted entirely of Hebrew poems, including three translations of poems originally written in English. With this publication, Harold Schimmel entered the Israeli literary scene as a Hebrew poet.

In this talk, I will discuss Schimmel’s poetic oeuvre as it relates to general questions of translation, language politics, and canon-formation in Israel, focusing particularly on his 1986 collection *Lowell*. The 100 sonnets of *Lowell* comprise a detailed and personal homage (as the collection’s title suggests) to the U.S. poet Robert Lowell (1917-1977), a major “father figure” for many U.S. poets of the 1960s. These poems respond, in part, to Lowell’s 1973 volume of sonnets *History* and, at various moments, directly intersect with this text; but *Lowell* also serves the purpose of plotting an intimate cartography that embraces contradiction, divergence and non-linearity. It constantly shifts its point of origin. In his preface to *Lowell*, Schimmel remarks that “with the publication of this poem, I am correcting a mistake that I have made: namely, writing in Hebrew only about the land (*ha-arets*)—not as though I had been born into Hebrew or in this land, but rather as though I had had no past before Hebrew and before this land. The Hebrew Encyclopedia includes entries on Boston and New York, now I, too, have these entries.” Schimmel’s work remains largely unfamiliar to both Hebrew and English-language readers, perhaps, I would argue, because of the complex cartography he gradually illustrates in *Lowell*. Through my reading of select poems of *Lowell*, I will approach the question—and problem—of how and where one locates Schimmel in contemporary Israeli poetry.