

Louis Simpson's "Chicken Soup": Revelations for the Mind

by Rod Jellema

Notice the thrust of my title; Simpson's great poem about World War II, "A Story About Chicken Soup," does not hawk yet another swig of that mass-circulation pabulum *soup for the soul*. The poem uses that Jewish tradition ironically while creating a depth of insight into war that's beyond the range of expository prose. Forget the endless series of little self-help booklets in which *schmaltz* has been converted from honest chicken fat to a metaphor for unctuous writing. The last time I counted (January 2017) there were 267 of these purveyors of pop sentimentality and optimism in print. Chicken Soup for the Soul is what we call an industry.

Louis Simpson (1923–2012) was anything but an industry. He was his own individual witness for his convictions. Example: At a 1968 conference on Poetry and the National Conscience, he explained his way of protesting the war in Vietnam. He would join the marches dressed not in the accepted uniform—torn, faded jeans, patches, and a proclamation-laden sweatshirt—but in a blazer, white shirt, and tie. He looked like an English professor from SUNY-Stony Brook, which is what he was. Having emigrated from Jamaica at age 14 and having kept dual citizenship, he felt positioned uniquely to be an observer of America, free to be both grateful and critical. His kind of detachment from others is worth keeping in mind when reading "Chicken Soup." The poem shows us clearly why poems cannot be appropriated if we read them the way we read prose. Here it is:

A Story About Chicken Soup

In my grandmother's house there was always chicken soup
And talk of the old country—mud and boards,
Poverty,
The snow falling down the necks of lovers.

Now and then, out of her savings
She sent them a dowry. Imagine
The rice-powdered faces!
And the smell of the bride, like chicken soup.

But the Germans killed them.
I know it's in bad taste to say it,
But it's true. The Germans killed them all.

*

In the ruins of Berchtesgaden
A child with yellow hair
Ran out of a doorway.

A German girl-child—
Cuckoo, all skin and bones—
Not even enough to make chicken soup.
She sat by the stream and smiled.

Then as we splashed in the sun
She laughed at us.
We had killed her mechanical brothers,
So we forgave her.

*

The sun is shining.
The shadows of the lovers have disappeared.
They are all eyes; they have some demand on me—
They want me to be more serious than I want to be.

They want me to stick in their mudhole
Where no one is elegant.
They want me to wear old clothes,
They want me to be poor, to sleep in a room with many others—

Not to walk in the painted sunshine
To a summer house,
But to live in the tragic world forever.

(Louis Simpson, "A Story About Chicken Soup" from *The Owner of the House: New Collected Poems*, 1940-2001. Copyright © 2003 by Louis Simpson. Reprinted by permission of BOA Editions, Ltd.)

An easy, preliminary stroll through "A Story About Chicken Soup" shows us that it is in three movements. The first part creates the warm feel of a Jewish family and its young lovers, with the folk tradition of chicken soup, plus memories of "mud, boards, and poverty" at its center; it ends with the clever-chop repetition of "the Germans killed them. The Germans killed them all." The second movement remembers a scene with a German girl-child, "all skin and bones—/ Not even enough to make chicken soup." Somewhat strangely, the American soldiers "forgave her." In the third movement the speaker of the poem feels a nightmarish presence of sharp, disembodied eyes judging him. He feels "doomed to live in a tragic world forever."

Now go back and come through the poem again, more slowly. You are not looking for information that will add up to a statement of “meaning.” A good question to ask yourself might be, which for you is the strongest, most memorable line in the poem? I’ll assume most of you will say it’s the description of the yellow-haired skin-and-bones girl. But rest for a moment on this one:

She sat by the stream and smiled.

What is that doing there? It seems to have no context. It ought to awaken a quote from the Hebrew bible—the Old Testament, ancient but vaguely familiar to millions. It sticks in my own memory since childhood as a mix of song and scripture. The whole of Israel is captive to the Babylonians, centuries distant from Jerusalem; the captors are “seeking mirth” by asking their captives, tauntingly, to sing some of their songs from back home. And the Israelite people respond:

By Babel’s stream we sat and wept.
To Zion’s memory still we clung.
We hung our harps in the willow trees
And would not sing.

This is surely a supreme moment in Jewish identity, closely allied to a few more lines:

If I forget thee, O Jerusalem,
May my tongue cleave forever
To the roof of my mouth.

The never-to-be-forgotten. A constant in the undercurrent feeding Jewish self-awareness. A nation wept. And now a German girl child smiled and the soldiers, splashing in the sun, forgave her laughter because they had killed her “mechanical brothers,” whom we may take to be the clever designers of death camps, rockets, and gas ovens. The experience at this moment of the poem is one of total disorientation. The simple world of mud, boards, poverty and chicken soup from the first part can no longer hold a tradition together.

I have been dropping into this essay lines from the poem for “the speaker” to say. Not the poet’s lines. I recommend that as a good habit. Don’t assume the poet to be always the speaker. It is not Robert Frost who says, in “Mending Wall,” “Something there is that doesn’t love a wall, that wants it down”—it’s the speaker. It’s not the poet, Louis Simpson, saying that the long-dead lovers have a demand on him. That’s the voice of the poem itself, speaking not for him, but to him, and even against him. It’s the devastating moment of experience that the poem has discovered. I imagine Simpson grieved by, even shuddering from, what his poem has uncovered in re-experiencing war. He is convicted by the poem he created.

Strangely, by the way, Simpson cannot anyway be the speaker in this poem. The whole of that first section, the uniquely Jewish family experience of chicken soup and “talk of the old country,” he imagines effectively, but he had never lived with it. He was a teenager before he discovered, accidentally, that he was Jewish. His mother, Jewish, had never hinted it. He caught his Jewish grandmother secretly lighting Hanukkah candles. This is a mere fact, irrelevant as such facts usually are to the ways in which poems create.

If we read this or any poem with mainly the brain’s analytic function, we will have to be busy looking for evidence of the poem’s message. Might we overplay the demands of the dead lovers, and underplay catching the deep resonance of the girl at the stream? In any case, literary analysis by its nature wants to explain things (how about Berchtesgaden?) while the whole mind wants to take in the poem’s unfolding of its experience, even where we cannot “understand” it. Mind exercises our imagination, our ear for sound (say out loud *and would not sing*), our contact with dreams and history, with tribal memory, with whatever can break its way out of the subconscious—all that and much more—in addition to the summary of meaning that analysis can give us.

Literary analysis, housed in sturdy non-fiction prose, is a great cultural asset. But not as a guide to reading poems. The modernist revolution in poetry, now a century old, makes more interesting demands on its readers than what Yvor Winters wanted—everything defensible by reason. Simpson like most poets has his complaint about analytic criticism: he finds it “ridiculous” that there are commentators who “describe rational thought processes”—putting an enormous restriction on the creative powers of poetry.

Reading poetry can be finally not so much chicken soup for the needy soul as life for the full and active, wondering mind.