

Leonard Cohen's "Last Years Man" in the light of William Blake's "Illustrations of the Book of Job"

By C.B. Wilde

Sometimes it is illuminating to look at an artist's work through the lens of another's. Things that seemed difficult or obscure can suddenly come into sharp focus whilst others, previously seeming simple and transparent, are seen in a new way, acquiring depth and meanings that were hidden. I want to explore one of Leonard Cohen's songs, *Last Year's Man*, in the light of the work of the visionary English poet and painter, William Blake with particular reference to Blake's *Illustrations of the Book of Job*.

Now, let's be clear, I am not saying that Blake *influenced* Cohen, or even that Cohen has read Blake – I have no idea about either. But both men drank from the same well - both were brought up on and deeply influenced by the Bible, and both read widely in what can loosely be called the esoteric tradition – that broad river of non-mainstream religious thought that encompasses the Jewish Caballah, Gnosticism, neo-Platonism, Hermeticism, the medieval mystical tradition, Rosicrucianism and much more. Moreover, though separated by nearly two centuries in time, both men's work is focused on the same territory – those strange, sacred places where flesh and spirit meet, where sensuality and spirituality are one. It should not be surprising, therefore, that there are resonances between the two men's work. It is those resonances that I want to draw attention to. I think that fans of Cohen will find this illuminating but first we have to look at Blake and the Book of Job.

For those who are not familiar with the story of Job here is a brief summary:

Job was a good man, a faithful and loyal servant of God: "and that man was perfect and upright, and one that feared God, and eschewed evil" ¹. But Satan suggests to God that Job's godliness is only self-interest since God has "blessed the work of his hands, and his substance is increased in the land. But put forth thine hand now, and touch all that he hath, and he will curse thee to thy face."²

So God allows Satan to put Job to the test allowing him to do what he will (except "upon himself put not forth thine hand") to shake Job's faith. Soon Job's life, hitherto blessed with children, wealth and happiness is blown apart: his livestock are stolen by his enemies or destroyed by fire, his servants are slain and even his children killed, but through it all Job remained faithful to God. God then permits Satan to test Job further by attacking Job himself: "Behold he is in thine hand, but save his life". So Satan "smote Job with sore boils from the sole of his foot unto his crown"³. Still Job does not curse his God.

In the final act of this drama God rewards Job and "blessed the latter end of Job more than his beginning"⁴: Job is given great wealth, ten children and lives for a further 140 years.

Any literal interpretation of this story would have great difficulty reconciling it with a belief in an omniscient and merciful God. Why would God need to test Job? – Surely, being omniscient, he would know what the result would be? Why would he listen to the arguments of Satan who is after all, well, Satan? And what of Job’s first children and servants? All slain for the sake of a wager!

Blake’s illustrations to this story are far from a literal portrayal of it – they are Blake’s radical re-telling of it from his own unique perspective. Blake had what we would call a humanistic view of God: “God only acts and is through existing beings and men”⁵. The Bible is as much the word of man as it is the word of God – it is divine in the sense that it is a work of the “poetic imagination”. The poetic imagination or the “Poetic Genius” is, for Blake, the essence of our humanity – it is also the essence of God. According to Blake, Christ was an artist – the poetic imagination in human form - and in order to be a Christian it is necessary to be an artist: “A Poet a Painter a Musician an Architect: the Man Or Woman who is not one of these is not a Christian”⁶. Mere passive obedience to a set of rules or commandments is the worship of “Nobodaddy” - the jealous, tyrannical God of organised religion.

Blake’s first plate of the Book of Job shows Job looking pious and surrounded by his adoring wife and children. But behind him, abandoned and ignored are musical instruments – symbols of creativity, the poetic imagination. Blake’s interpretation of this story is clear – Job is really in a bad state – he has abandoned the poetic imagination in favour of passive conformity and in doing so has separated himself from the only real God – the imagination. The accompanying text “The Letter Killeth. The Spirit giveth Life” reinforces this interpretation. Blake makes sense of the Biblical story by ignoring the literal, surface



Figure 1 Plate 1 of Blake's Illustrations of the Book of Job

meaning and interpreting it as psychological drama of a man suffering because he has lost his essential self.

If we now turn to *Last Year's Man* the parallels are striking. Here again we find a man who has forsaken his art – the Jew's harp is abandoned on the table, and although there is a crayon in his hand, the hand is frozen, motionless. The blueprint or design has been abandoned for so long that that its corners have rolled up beyond the stems of the thumb tacks that secure it. Like Job's, last year's man's house is in ruins and all the rain falls down upon his work. Both Job and last year's man are fallen creatures separated from God – the poetic imagination.

This interpretation of Cohen's song is strengthened by examining some of the key words in the chorus: "and the skylight is like skin for a drum I'll never mend". On the face of it this seems like a simple simile – a broken skylight could look like a torn drum skin. But if we look at the Hebrew equivalents of some of these words it takes on a much deeper significance. But first a few words on Hebrew are necessary.

Hebrew has a very different lexical structure from English: it has far fewer unique words and builds its vocabulary by adding suffixes to these relatively few "roots". There are many examples of this in English – bookcase, bookkeeper, bookmark, for example all have the root word "book"; headscarf, headache, headdress all have the root "head". But this is taken to a whole different level in Hebrew not just in frequency but in kind. In English these suffixes are generally just added to *things* (book, head) and the extended word 's meaning is clear and unambiguous - a bookcase is a case for books, a headscarf is a scarf for the head. But in Hebrew the relationship between the root and the suffix can relate to the *qualities* of things. So, for example, the root for the descriptive term "far-sighted" is "hawk" because hawks are associated with having very keen eyesight. Whilst a writer might make use of such devices in English in a poetic or literary context, in Hebrew, the very essence of the language is built this way and it is impossible to avoid even in the most prosaic writing. Hebrew is then, a much more poetic, allusive and essentially more ambiguous language than English. (Bad news for fundamentalists and literalists wanting just one definitive meaning!)

Anybody schooled in Hebrew, as Cohen was, could not escape these allusions, these cross-referenced meanings between words, the transference of the qualities of one thing to another through their Hebrew roots. So how does this relate to the chorus of *Last Year's Man*? Well, the words "sky" and "skin" in Hebrew are in fact identical, and the word "skylight" has the same root as both. Here are the Hebrew words alongside their usual translations:

שמיים עור skin/sky

שמיים עור רקיע אור light

שמיים עור רקיע אור אשנב skylight

And we must add one more very important word:

שמיים עור רקיע firmament

As you can see all these words have the same root (highlighted in bold – and remember Hebrew is read from right to left) and that is because from an ancient Hebraic cosmological viewpoint they all share the same basic qualities – in fact some are indistinguishable from each other. Skin is a thin membrane stretched around a body, sky is the same – a thin membrane stretched around the earth. The heavens, the sky and the firmament are all virtually the same word used interchangeably throughout the Old Testament and all are derivatives of skin. You will recall that in Genesis, God created a firmament (skin/sky) to separate the waters above the Earth from the waters below – the oceans, rivers and lakes. All that is needed to cause a deluge is for this thin membrane to rupture “and the skylight is like skin for a drum I’ll never mend, and all the rain falls down...”

Given the Hebrew roots of these words it is scarcely conceivable that when Cohen wrote them he was not thinking of the skylight as the firmament, the sky, the heavens and that this falling of rain upon the works of last year’s man is not an allusion to the Noachian deluge, the flood used by God to wash away the iniquities of a fallen man and start again with a new covenant. The analogy between the torn sky light and the torn drum skin now takes on added power and significance – the torn drum skin which, in the singer’s present state of mind, he will never mend – is the abandonment of his art, of his essential self and it is linked essentially through its Hebrew root to the Flood. The message here is the same as Blake’s – the abandonment of art (the Jew’s harp, the blueprint) is coexistent with a lapsed state, of separation from God, from the essential self.

So is Cohen being deliberately obscure here, hiding his meaning behind a Hebrew “code” that relatively few will decipher? Of course not! You don’t need to know a single word of Hebrew to get the gist of Cohen’s song and many other commentators have detected allusions to the Flood in *Last Year’s Man*, but like all artists Cohen brings the whole of his self to his work and it is expressed in it both consciously and unconsciously. Drawing out these influences enhances our appreciation and understanding and sometimes intensifies the emotional power of a song and here the link between a torn drum skin and the rendering of the firmament intensifies the power and symbolism of the image.

But if this is a reference to the Flood, it must also be the case that the works referred to in the song are those of God. In the Deluge, it is worth remembering that God destroys his own creation. The man in *Last Year’s Man* is God as well as the artist – we are in the Blakean world of the Artist as both man and God.

So where do the song and Blake’s re-telling of The Book of Job take us? In Job we have resolution – a happy ending, if you like. In the literal interpretation Job is rewarded for his unswerving faith through adversity with more children and many happy years. In Blake’s version cause and effect are reversed. The final plate which shows Job and his children playing their musical instruments is not the result of Job’s reward but the cause of it – because Job has re-discovered his essential self, his “Poetic Genius” his happiness is restored - the harp is no longer abandoned it is being played.



Figure 2 Plate 21 of Blake's *Illustrations of the Book of Job*

The spiritual regeneration of Job begins when he stops bemoaning his fate and turns outward – praying for his friends and giving money to the poor – and culminates in the playing of the musical instruments by Job and his family.

There is no such happy resolution, however, for last year's man. The last verse laments "an hour has gone by and he has not moved his hand". In that hour (year, decade, eternity) last year's man has, like Job, been on a pilgrimage. But the lack of creativity which is afflicting Cohen (and/or the lack of creativity in God) still casts it's watery shadow over his work.

If we confine the identity of last year's man to Cohen for a moment, we know that this can only be a temporary state of affairs – the very act of writing the song is a creative act marking the beginning of spiritual regeneration. And there is hope even in this fallen state: "but everything will happen if he only gives the word, the lovers will rise up and the mountains touch the ground". We know that "in the beginning was the word" – the beginning of the creation of heaven and earth – Cohen is hoping for/invoking that creative process to begin again.

The lovers will rise up because in the tradition that Cohen and Blake were working in the perfect union between lovers, between the male and the female aspects of the psyche, is often seen as a spiritual union, a transformational proces leading to union with the Godhead. This was already referred to in an earlier verse of the song "our flesh was like a veil, that I had to draw aside to see the serpent eat his tail". The image of the serpent eating its tail is an ancient symbol, the Ouroboros, signifying the eternal cycle of life, the infinite, the creativity of the universe, God – like all symbols it is multifaceted and its meaning shifts with context. Cohen's and Blake's works are full of such symbols.

But although Cohen understands that he had to draw aside the veil of flesh and move beyond it, he fails to do so. In fact all three central verses of the song document a failed pilgrimage (of Cohen, of humanity, of God) moving through a tragic canvas of wounded soldiers/failed suitors of Joan of Arc, of the failed marital union “old families had contrived”, of the women who wait for the archetypal figures that men try to fulfil in vain (“some women wait for Jesus...”). In the end we are back where we began “ and all the rain falls down amen on the works of last year’s man”.

I think Cohen was in a bad place when he wrote *Last Year’s Man*. Perhaps he thought he was last year’s man, past his peak, a “has been”. But Cohen is very much this year’s man and next years, In fact, like Blake’s, I believe his work will stand the test of time, will take its place in Blake’s “Great Eternity”, where all things are translucent and shine with an inner light.

In *Last Year’s Man*, as so often, Cohen explores the dark night of the soul. Unlike Blake’s Job, he seems stuck, locked in a cycle of despair. But the song itself is an act of the imagination, of the “Poetic Genius”, and its effect is not depressing but, like all Cohen’s work, ultimately uplifting: the harp sings, the hand moves, the wheel of despondency is broken and the Artist’s work is done.

Notes

All quotes to the Book of Job are from the King James Bible. Quotes from William Blake are from the 2001 digital edition of *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake* edited by David V. Erdman:

<http://www.blakearchive.org/blake/erdman.html>

1. The Book Of Job, 1:1
2. *Ibid.* 1:10 – 11
3. *Ibid.* 2:7
4. *Ibid.* 42:12
5. William Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, Plate 16, from Erdman, p.40
6. William Blake, *The Laocoon* from Erdman p. 274

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