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Judith Wilson

LIFTING "THE VEIL": HENRY O. TANNER'S *THE BANJO LESSON* AND *THE THANKFUL POOR**

HENRY O. TANNER's 1893 painting, *The Banjo Lesson*, marks a turning point in African American art history. It was Tanner's first masterpiece, the first work in which he demonstrated his control of a range of technical skills unmatched by any previous Black artist. For with Tanner we have the first Afro-American suited for greatness in the visual arts not only by talent and by temperament, but also by training. Indeed his study with the eminent American realist, Thomas Eakins, at the period's leading art school, the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, provided him with the most advanced art education then available in the U.S.¹ And subsequently, when a nine-year struggle to survive as an artist in his native land² was ended by a generous pair of patrons who enabled him to go abroad, Tanner gained access to Europe's cultural resources—an experience then considered indispensable, the final step in an American artist's training.³ Thus, Tanner probably was the first U.S. Black fully equipped to succeed as a painter in the western tradition.

But *The Banjo Lesson* was not only a crowning symbol of the century-old Afro-American quest to obtain the skills, the sophistication and the financial support needed to attain real mastery as a fine artist. This canvas was also the site of a profound psychic break or break-through—a declaration of African American self-esteem that anticipated the twin emphases on racial pride and vernacular culture which would come to characterize the work of numbers of Black artists only in the 20th century, beginning with the so-called Harlem Renaissance. Until recently, however, only a handful of authors have shown any recognition of this painting's epochal significance.⁴ How could the ideological import of a canonical work of Afro-American art be underrated or

* The following essay is a much-revised version of a paper originally written for a Fall 1981 graduate seminar in the History of Art Department at Yale. Led by Professor Robert L. Herbert, the seminar focused on the treatment of peasant subject matter by the 19th-century French realist painters J. F. Millet and Gustave Courbet, in order to explore these artists' attitudes toward one of the major social transformations of their day: the shift from an economy based on rural agriculture to one increasingly dominated by urban industrialism. In choosing independent research projects, members of the seminar were permitted to look outside France and beyond the mid-19th century to examine other artists whose involvement with peasant themes could be linked

overlooked for so long? A glance at the initial reception of a pair of key works of mid-19th-century French art—paintings generically related to Tanner's masterpiece—is instructive.⁵

When Jean François Millet's *The Sower* and Gustave Courbet's *The Burial at Ornans* appeared in the 1850-51 Paris Salon, the latter provoked a furor among contemporary critics, while their response to the former was relatively mild. Both canvases displayed the harsh realities of French provincial life with unprecedented candor. But as Marxist art historian T. J. Clark has noted, where Courbet's audience was jarred as much by the innovative style of his image as by its subversive content, a veneer of pastoral convention led most viewers to overlook the radical implications of Millet's art.⁶ "[W]here the tradition survived, the critics saw the tradition more easily than its transformation," Clark concluded.

A similar veil of tradition has concealed the unorthodox nature of Henry O. Tanner's late 19th-century image of Afro-Americans. As we shall see though, Tanner's allegiance to accepted pictorial codes—to an anecdotal mode that could be traced to seventeenth-century Dutch genre painting⁷ and to a scientifically precise, but lyrically inflected realism—is neither the sole nor the most significant factor that has obscured his art's subversive import.

Four years after Henry O. Tanner painted *The Banjo Lesson*, W. E. B. Du Bois outlined a cultural agenda that would provide the chief interpretative frame for Afro-American art through much of our own century.⁸ In order to assume their proper role on the world-historical stage, Du Bois declared, U.S. Blacks must assert themselves culturally, demonstrating "not a servile imitation of Anglo-Saxon culture, but a stalwart originality which shall unswervingly follow Negro ideals."⁹

To this day, many commentators on the work of African American artists remain tangled in the inherent contradictions of this nationalist-oriented program, struggling to separate some fixed set of "Negro ideals" from an "Anglo-Saxon culture" they have conceptualized in equally ahistoric, essentialist terms and expecting "a stalwart originality" to result from pursuit of such Sisyphean efforts.¹⁰

to the French realist example. I decided to focus on Black America's best-known nineteenth-century painter, Henry O. Tanner.

In its present version, the original paper has been altered for the sake of clarity and in light of new data that has come to my attention. The underlying thesis, however, remains unchanged.

In 1981, my principle sources for Tanner's life were Walter Augustus Simon, "Henry O. Tanner—Study of the Development of an American Negro Artist: 1859-1937," unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Fine Arts, New York University, 1961; Marcia M. Mathews, *Henry Ossawa Tanner (1859-1937)*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969; Hyde Collection, *The Art of Henry Ossawa Tanner (1859-1937)*, Exhibition catalog, Glens Falls, N.Y. [1972]; Unsigned, "The Tanner Family," *The Negro History Bulletin*, vol. 10 (April 1947), 147-152, 167; Henry O. Tanner, "The Story of an Artist's Life," *The World's Work*, vol. 18 (June 1909), 11661-11666, and (July 1909), 11769-11775.

I. ASPECTS OF THE ARTIST'S EARLY LIFE AND IDEOLOGICAL FORMATION

Born on the eve of the Civil War, in 1859 in Pittsburgh, Henry O. Tanner was the eldest of seven children of Benjamin Tucker Tanner, a free-born "Pittsburger of three generations,"¹¹ and Sarah Elizabeth Miller. The granddaughter of a Virginia planter and a Black woman who presumably was his slave, the artist's mother had been born in bondage but was emancipated a year later, along with the rest of her family.¹² The Millers subsequently headed North, settling in Pittsburgh in 1846.¹³

At a time when perhaps as few as half of the one-tenth of Black Americans who were free managed to attain literacy,¹⁴ Benjamin Tanner and his bride possessed an unusual amount of formal education, which they endeavored to share with less fortunate members of their race. Having attended Pennsylvania's Avery College, Sarah Miller Tanner conducted a private school in her home.¹⁵ Her husband, an Avery College graduate, had converted to Christianity in 1856 and joined the African Methodist Episcopal Church. He subsequently trained for the ministry at Western Theological Seminary and was ordained the year after his son Henry's birth.¹⁶

Thus, the future painter belonged to a small but crucially placed segment of mid-19th-century Black America. Northern-born and personally a stranger to the "peculiar institution," he is nonetheless apt to have felt strong ties to the Southern, ex-slave majority of his race, thanks to his mother's family history. At the same time, a paternal legacy of longstanding freedom may have contributed an unusual degree of self-confidence and racial pride. And as the scion of educated parents, he was automatically a member of the Black elite, a group that—especially after Emancipation—must have felt tremendous pressure to fill various psychic and social leadership roles.

While it is likely that Henry O. Tanner's convictions stemmed from more than one source, there can be no doubt that his father provided an intimate model of ideological commitment. The intensity of the senior Tanner's feelings about racial injustice can be gauged by the fact that he gave his first-born the middle name "Ossawa." By awarding his son this unusual name, he apparently sought to register—in a discreetly oblique fashion—his approval of the controversial 1856 incident near Osawatomie, Kansas, in which the militant White abolitionist, John Brown, allegedly killed five pro-slavery men.¹⁷

In his own contributions to his people's struggles—both before and after Emancipation—Benjamin Tanner seems to have focused on the intellectual and spiritual arenas, however. In 1861, he founded a school for newly emancipated Blacks in Washington, D.C. Five years later, he headed another freedmen's school, this time in Maryland. Meanwhile, having served as pastor to various congregations in the District of Columbia and Maryland from 1859 to 1866, Tanner established his reputation as "a brilliant ecclesiastical scholar" with the publication of his first book, *An Apology for African Methodism*, in 1867. This, in turn, would lead to his election to the editorship of the A.M.E. Church's Philadelphia-based organ, *The Christian Recorder*, the following year.¹⁸

Dubbed "the greatest social institution of American Negroes" by W. E. B. Du Bois,¹⁹ the A.M.E. Church had stood for Black pride, self-help and self-determination

since its inception. Launched in 1794 with the dedication of Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church, the seeds of the denomination had been planted in Philadelphia in 1787 when a group of free Blacks refused to accede to White demands that they occupy a separate section of a local church. During the nineteenth century, the A.M.E. Church would play a central role in combatting segregation, promoting Black education and developing international ties between people of African descent.²⁰

From the start, the church had put a premium on education, founding its first school in 1798 and taking control of what would become the nation's oldest Black college, Wilberforce University, in 1863. By the turn of the century, the denomination could boast "a college in every Southern state."²¹ In its stress on education, though, the church tended to promote European-derived cultural values, thus revealing an apparent contradiction. For its rhetoric of Black self-esteem was accompanied by revulsion for certain traditional African practices.²² Above all, church leaders were generally inclined to frown upon what they held to be the emotional abandon associated with African-derived styles of worship.

The autobiography of Bishop Daniel Payne, the leading figure in A.M.E. affairs throughout most of the second half of the 19th century and the man who directed much of Benjamin Tanner's pastoral career, contains an especially striking example of this aversion to traditional Black religious practices. Payne's description of the performance of a ring shout by participants in an 1878 "bush meeting" is unabashedly scornful: "After the sermon they formed a ring, and with coats off sung, clapped their hands and stamped their feet in a most ridiculous and heathenish way." Subsequently, he informed the group's leader that this mode worship was "disgraceful to themselves, the race, and the Christian name."²³

Payne's words echo an earlier incident in which members of the A.M.E. Church parent organization, the Philadelphia-based Free African Society, had condemned the revelry of their Boston counterparts as "a shameful practice . . . that enables our enemies to declare that we are not fit for freedom." Apparently Bishop Payne shared what historian Allen B. Ballard calls the Free African Society's "deep-seated antipathy . . . toward dance and song."²⁴

Benjamin Tucker Tanner had received his first pastoral assignment from Bishop Payne, who became a family friend and one of his artist son's first patrons.²⁵ Both Payne's views on Black worship (which Benjamin Tanner is apt to have shared) and the A.M.E. emphasis on education bear directly on the two examples of Henry O. Tanner's art that are the focus of this study. But while his father's church regarded certain Africanisms with a jaundiced eye, Henry O. Tanner is likely to have imbibed a counter-dose of pride in his African heritage from sources both at school and at home.

The Robert Vaux School, from which he graduated, was Philadelphia's "first Black public school [staffed] with Black teachers." Its founder, Jacob White, Jr., had trained at the city's Institute for Colored Youth, the nation's first Black high school. Along with a rigorous program of classics, mathematics and science, the ICY offered an education informed by the presence in antebellum Philadelphia of three groups of highly politicized Blacks—veterans of the Haitian Revolution, the Underground Railroad and the abolition movement. White and other ICY graduates are said to have routinely informed

their pupils about such facets of Black history as "the greatness of Africa and the revolutionary heroism of Toussaint L'Ouverture."²⁶

In addition to the influence of his teachers at the Vaux School, young Tanner had the example of his father's work as an educator of freedmen and a religious leader whose church had a long tradition of social activism.²⁷ After serving as editor of *The Christian Recorder* for sixteen years, Benjamin Tucker Tanner launched *The A.M.E. Church Review*, which he edited until his election to the bishopric in 1888.²⁸ These national organs were key to the far-reaching influence of the A.M.E. Church: *The Recorder*, founded in 1847 as *The Christian Herald* was one of the few Black newspapers to span the antebellum through post-Reconstruction eras; *The Review*, a quarterly journal, "was apparently the only national magazine published by blacks" when it began in 1884.²⁹

Benjamin Tanner's stress on Black solidarity and economic self-reliance has led August Meier to count him among A.M.E. Church leaders with "proclivities toward radicalism."³⁰ In a study of the church's social orientation during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, however, David Wood Wills faults Meier for over-simplifying Tanner's position.³¹ Wills sees Tanner as one of the church's "theological conservatives," deeply opposed to any theory or program involving "what seemed to him infidelity to Biblical truth"—such as evolutionism.³² Yet he also lists Tanner as one of the three leaders of the denomination he considers "most forceful and imaginative" in linking "theological reflection and social criticism."³³

At first glance, Benjamin Tanner's thinking seems rife with contradictions: Although an opponent of post-bellum African emigration schemes, Tanner favored limited colonization in order to accelerate the continent's conversion to Christianity.³⁴ And while he advocated eventual elimination of the ethnic prefix from the A.M.E. Church name, he was quick to deplore the use of Biblical terminology by White scholars that obscured the African identity of certain ancient civilizations.³⁵

In matters of political economy too, Benjamin Tanner's views initially appear inconsistent. Disdainful of T. Thomas Fortune's socio-economic radicalism in the latter's 1884 *Black and White: Land, Labor and Politics in the South*, two years later Tanner himself would pen an editorial entitled "Capital and Labor" in which he lamented capitalist greed and spoke favorably of workers' strikes. By 1887, however, the unions' practice of racial exclusion and what he viewed as their "excessive" demands had soured him on the labor movement.³⁶

Viewed in the context of A.M.E. history, however, the apparently conflicting stances of this Black ideologue and theologian gain coherence. Originally spawned by Philadelphia's Free African Society, from the start the church was committed to a program of racial uplift via industry, thrift and economic cooperation combined with moral and intellectual self-improvement.³⁷ Yet, faced with the racism of their White Methodist brethren, the church's founders chose to create a separate denomination, instead of rejecting Christianity altogether—a choice that suggests the degree to which these Blacks were committed to assimilation at the same time they proudly labeled themselves and their organizations "African" and opted for institutional autonomy. In other words, theirs was a strategic separatism—a dignified and communally productive self-segregation in response to the threatened imposition of a demeaning and inequitable

color bar. They did not embrace separatism as a social ideal, however. Indeed, their foremost 19th-century leader, Daniel Payne, is said to have "removed a minister at Mother Bethel Church who refused to permit a white woman to join the congregation."³⁸

Benjamin Tanner's views on racial matters, then, exhibit a tension between assimilationist and Black nationalist ideals that was prevalent in his denomination from its beginnings through the second half of the 19th century. Indeed, one could argue that this dualistic stance was typical of late 19th-century Black ideology in general—or at least of the thinking of the educated few whose views have mainly been recorded. It is not surprising, therefore, to find Bishop Tanner privately and publically associated with both Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. Du Bois during this period.³⁹

He was, for example, one of a dozen or so Black educators, intellectuals and political strategists, including Washington and Du Bois, who in 1897 founded the American Negro Academy—an organization that aimed to "promote publication of scholarly works," encourage "youths of genius," "establish an archive," aid in "the vindication of the Negro race," and publish an annual "designed to raise the standard of intellectual endeavor among American Negroes."⁴⁰ In its stress on nurturing Black talent and vindicating the race, as well as its emphasis upon intellectual achievement, the Academy's goals seem congruent with the ideals of the A.M.E. Church. And Benjamin Tanner's involvement in an institution with such goals again suggests his son, Henry, was raised in a milieu in which education and social service were presumed to go hand-in-hand.

It is my contention that it was precisely this ideological climate that conditioned the younger Tanner to perform an unprecedented act of Black cultural self-assertion in the creation of his two most famous canvases, *The Banjo Lesson* and *The Thankful Poor*. But within a few years of their execution, these paintings' ideological significance would be obscured by a new train of thought set in motion by W. E. B. Du Bois. In his "The Conservation of Races," a paper delivered to the American Negro Academy in 1897, Du Bois began to articulate a conscious form of Afro-American nationalism that differed markedly from earlier, largely expedient expressions of Black separatism.

"The Conservation of Races" initiates Du Bois' prolonged grappling with the problem of Afro-American cultural identity⁴¹—a project that would lead him to formulate the concept of "double-consciousness" in an essay dated that same year, a revised version of which became the first chapter of his 1903 masterpiece, *The Souls of Black Folk*.⁴²

II. Du BOISIAN DOUBLE-CONSCIOUSNESS AND THE ART OF HENRY O. TANNER

... if in America it is to be proven . . . that not only are Negroes capable of evolving individual men like Toussaint the Saviour, but are a nation stored with wonderful possibilities of culture, then their destiny is not a servile imitation of Anglo-Saxon culture, but a stalwart originality which shall unswervingly follow Negro ideals.

—W. E. B. Du Bois, "The Conservation of Races" (1897)⁴³

When W. E. B. Du Bois proclaimed the African American creative mission was "not a servile imitation of Anglo-Saxon culture, but a stalwart originality which shall unswervingly follow Negro ideals," his words were conditioned by his own immersion in the very culture he urged fellow members of the American Negro Academy to eschew. Indeed, this call for independence from U.S. majority culture, echoed sentiments that were widespread among 19th-century European and Euro-American artists.⁴⁴ The impulse, on the one hand, to create a uniquely "American" art and, on the other, to celebrate "the common man" created a social agenda for 19th-century Euro-American art, the basic assumptions of which Du Bois shared. This is not to say, of course, that White Americans who concentrated on local genre, like William Sidney Mount or George Caleb Bingham, were concerned with promoting Afro-American cultural autonomy. Nor that White Americans like William Morris Hunt, who returned from Europe with peasants on their minds, necessarily saw Blacks as the salt of the American soil.

Du Bois' fusion of cultural nationalist sentiments with a nostalgic populist essentialism becomes clearer when we turn from his remarks in "The Conservation of Races" to their amplification in the revised 1897 essay that constitutes the first chapter of *The Souls of Black Folk*, "Of Our Spiritual Strivings." The essay opens with the author's well-known discussion of "double consciousness," a discussion Du Bois concludes by describing the alleged effects of this psychic split on the African American artist:

The innate love of harmony and beauty that set the ruder souls of his people a-dancing and a-singing raised but confusion and doubt in the soul of the black artist; for the beauty revealed to him was the soul-beauty of a race which his larger audience despised, and he could not articulate the message of another people.⁴⁵

This hypothetical account of late 19th-century Black artists' attitudes toward Black subject matter contrasts markedly with the sentiments of Henry O. Tanner, one of the few late 19th-century Afro-American painters to actually make such "ruder souls" his subjects.⁴⁶ In an undated letter, probably written around 1893, the artist, referring to himself in the third person, explained:

Since his return from Europe he has painted many Negro subjects, he feels drawn to such subjects on account of the newness of the field and because of a desire to represent the serious and pathetic side of life among them . . . To his mind many of the artists who have represented Negro life have only seen the comic, the ludicrous side of it, and have lacked sympathy with and affection for the warm big heart that dwells within such a rough exterior.⁴⁷

Judging by these remarks, Tanner seems not to have been afflicted with the cultural anguish posited by Du Bois. Rather than being daunted by White American disdain for Afro-American life, the artist appears to have embraced the challenge of counteracting White prejudices. The oppositional character of this self-appointed mission is the central point I want to make about *The Banjo Lesson* and *The Thankful Poor*. But it would be unwise to completely discount the possibility that "double consciousness" played a role

in the painter's thinking, given his subsequent abandonment of Black subject matter. As we shall see, the tensions Du Bois described *are* embedded in Tanner's two masterpieces of Black genre. But the degree of their presence suggests much less ambivalence than Du Bois attributed to African American artists.

In "Of Our Spiritual Strivings," Du Bois not only diagnosed his race's spiritual malaise, but also prescribed an antidote: education—specifically the quest for literacy—, he maintained, offered at least a partial solution to the problem of double consciousness. Describing the ex-slave's struggle to seize "the power of the cabalistic letters of the white man" as an arduous journey, he claimed its rigors "changed the child of Emancipation to the youth with dawning self-consciousness, self-realization, self-respect." Eventually, this phenomenological pilgrim: ". . . saw himself, —darkly as through a veil; and . . . [h]e began to have a dim feeling that, to attain his place in the world, he must be himself, and not another."⁴⁸

For Tanner, too, based on the evidence provided by *The Banjo Lesson* and *The Thankful Poor*, education played a central role in shaping Black selfhood. Significantly though, the two men focussed on different approaches to education. Du Bois's model, with its emphasis on "book-learning," is clearly that of a European-derived, institutionalized pedagogy. Tanner, however, illustrates training processes that are domestic, informal, and, one guesses, more closely linked to intragroup—as opposed to externally-imposed—traditions.⁴⁹

III. THE BANJO LESSON AND THE THANKFUL POOR

In summer 1893 Tanner returned to Philadelphia from France in order to renew his funds and complete his recovery from typhoid fever. *The Banjo Lesson* probably was painted at that time, and was first exhibited at a Philadelphia gallery in October 1893.⁵⁰ Until recently, Tanner was thought to have based this composition on sketches he executed during an 1889 stay in North Carolina's Blue Ridge Mountains.⁵¹ Such sketches have never materialized, but a photograph of his models—which may have been shot in North Carolina—has been found.⁵²

The picture focuses upon two figures—a grey-haired man, who is seated, and a young boy, who stands between the older man's spread legs. The child plucks a banjo that looks nearly as tall as he is and seems to partially rest against the seated man's arm and leg. One of the child's legs is bent, as if he were either struggling to keep the instrument in place or perhaps patting a foot in time to the music he is attempting to make. He is assisted in his efforts by the adult, who fingers the banjo's uppermost strings with his left hand, while the child fingers a lower group of strings within his own reach. The child peers down at the instrument, his lips pursed and his brow slightly furrowed in concentration, while the old man cocks his head a bit to the side and down, wearing a look of bemused attention.

It is a quietly affectionate scene, gently orchestrated by the play of shadows that centers on the dark-skinned pair and echoes—in a diagonal ascent—from the triangle of shadows surrounding a pair of vessels at the painting's lower right corner, to the dark cloth (or article of clothing) hanging on a wall at upper left. Both figures are in

Lifting "The Veil"



Henry Ossawa Tanner. *The Banjo Lesson* (1893), oil on canvas, 48^{1/2} x 35^{1/4} in. Hampton University Museum Collection.

cooking facility, nearby. The table setting in the background—with its rumpled cloth that does not entirely cover the tabletop, its bare white pitcher and a chunk of bread—adds to the impression of slender means.

The Thankful Poor was painted in 1894.* The man and boy in the second painting resemble the pair in the first, although here both are seen in profile. The table at which they are seated is covered by a white cloth like the one in *The Banjo Lesson*. The crockery placed on the table also resembles that in the earlier canvas. There are some differences, though. A latticed window with a white curtain covering its lower half can be seen behind the grey-haired man at left. His chair is unlike either of the two chairs in the other picture,⁵³ while the boy here is seated on what looks like a small bench or crate, neither of which appears in the other image. And although the man's dress seems to coincide with that of the man in the first painting, the boy in this picture wears a vest, while the

shirtsleeves. The boy's pants are rolled above his knees. Although the two's clothes look well-worn, the tatters and patches so often seen in either sentimental or derogatory, late 19th-century images of Blacks are conspicuously absent.

Similarly, their surroundings look humble, but don't suggest the most abject forms of poverty: There is a wood plank floor, instead of mere dirt. Instead of unplanned, unpainted timber, the walls are white-washed and plastered. There are even two small pictures of some kind, in frames against the rear wall. But the simplicity of this home is indicated by what appears to be a skillet resting on the floor, which, along with a pile of kindling and the vessels in the foreground, suggests the presence of an open hearth, probably the only

* Unfortunately, the present owners of *The Thankful Poor* would not permit a photographic reproduction of the painting to accompany the present article.

boy in the earlier canvas does not.

The second painting shows man and boy with heads bowed in prayer over a meager repast. The two face one another across a table covered by worn and rumpled linen. The man props his elbows on the table, clasps his hands together and presses a thumb against his forehead. His features are lost in shadow, but the boy's can be seen clearly. The child's eyes are closed and he touches his forehead with the side of one closed hand, while he grasps the table edge with the other, in a gesture that suggests his effort to emulate his elder's devotion is mixed with youthful eagerness to start the meal.

The table setting is quite sparse: a pitcher, two small vessels—one lidded and one with a utensil stuck inside—that probably contain cream and sugar, a platter bearing a small quantity of meat, two rounds of bread that rest directly on the tablecloth, two cups, two plates and two spoons. Aside from the old man's spoke-backed chair and the child's bench-like seat, the curtained window is the only other feature of the room visible. Thus, the information here is highly concentrated, permitting no distractions from the central image of youth and age, poverty and prayer.

The Banjo Lesson and *The Thankful Poor* illustrate an interlocking set of arguments. The former debunks a widespread myth of innate Black musicality by showing the deliberate care with which a Black elder instructs a Black child in playing the banjo—the central instrument of minstrelsy, the chief cultural form with which Blacks were identified and by which they were defined in the popular imagination in the post-Reconstruction era. The latter counters an equally prevalent contemporary perception of Black religiosity as overwhelmingly emotional—and thus, presumably inferior to an allegedly more tranquil, stable and introspective White brand of piety.⁵⁴

Both paintings address their themes on the level of private, rather than public practice, presenting domestic scenes in which the protagonists appear to be family members—possibly grandfather and grandson. Thus, in both instances the focus appears to be on individuals linked by biology and by social intimacy, making them perfect symbols of the competing claims of heredity versus socialization as explanations of Black cultural difference in late 19th-century America.

Henry O. Tanner's views on the subject are conveyed by a grammar of poses and gestures that the artist deploys subtly, yet persuasively. In both scenes, the protagonists' faces are turned down or away from the viewer; their eyes are averted. Man and boy concentrate on their respective activities. In *The Banjo Lesson*, we see the adult straining to hear and guide a child's efforts on the banjo, and the child struggling to master the stringed instrument. In *The Thankful Poor*, we see the child's imperfect emulation of his elder's complete absorption in prayer. Neither image presents anything like the unctious, approval-seeking, vacuous or irrepressibly sensual creatures of antebellum legend or post-bellum propaganda.⁵⁵

Both canvases invest their ordinary, underprivileged, Black subjects with a degree of dignity and self-possession that seems extraordinary for the times in which they were painted. And perhaps most remarkable of all is the artist's emotional poise, his successful avoidance of melodrama, exoticism, cloying sentimentality, excessive moralizing, triteness. But to late 20th-century eyes—which a long line of genuinely demeaning

myths and correspondingly demoralizing images⁵⁶ have conditioned to read "passivity," "impotence," and/or denial of cultural identity into almost any scene in which the activity of Black males falls short of armed rebellion or suggests something less than complete rejection of Euro-American culture—the ideological significance of Tanner's eschewal of the psychic trappings of 19th-century anti-Black stereotypes may not be readily apparent. Thus, we must turn to the work of Henry O. Tanner's predecessors in order to further contextualize his accomplishment.

IV. THE BLACK IMAGE IN 19TH-CENTURY AMERICAN PAINTING PRIOR TO *THE BANJO LESSON* AND *THE THANKFUL POOR*

In the fine arts, 19th-century America produced not one, but two, painted records of its Black population—that is to say, Afro-Americans' vision of themselves and their compatriots' vision of them. Because these accounts differed markedly in quantity, character and circumstances of production, they will be examined separately at first, then compared with one another and finally with Tanner's late 19th-century revision.

Afro-American painting prior to Tanner is distinguished by three facts: 1) the free status of its antebellum-era creators, 2) an apparent dearth of Black images⁵⁷, and 3) a highly skewed representation of social class. These phenomena are not unrelated. Lacking the leisure, the educational background, as well as the frequent exposure to fine art that enabled European aristocrats to become art patrons and connoisseurs, young America's merchants, shippers, industrialists and planters placed no high stakes on painting. Thus, a slave's ability to reproduce a likeness or sketch a scene would not have been valued, while the "more practical" skills of slave potters, carpenters, and seamstresses were both cultivated and rewarded. Hence, we have some surviving examples of slave craft and decorative artwork, but extant works of fine art—especially painting⁵⁸—by Black bondsmen and -women so far remain unknown.

To the extent that the new nation's thrifty and pragmatic citizens supported non-utilitarian painting at all, their overwhelming preference was for portraiture. Among Blacks though, few of even those who were free could afford to commission a likeness of themselves. Thus, portraits of prosperous Whites constitute the bulk of 19th-century images painted by Afro-Americans. The extant oeuvre of the earliest Black artist to whom a substantial body of work can be reliably attributed, Baltimore painter Joshua Johnson, amply demonstrates this. Of the 80-odd surviving, federal-period portraits by Johnson, only two depict Blacks.⁵⁹

The question of class orientation in 19th-century art by African Americans is more complicated. During the second quarter of the 19th century, the American public's almost exclusive focus on portraiture began yielding to a growing interest in landscape and genre. By mid-century, Ohio artist Robert S. Duncanson, son of a free Black or mulatto woman and a Canadian man of Scottish descent, was painting wilderness scenes in the Hudson River School mode, along with portraits of various White abolitionist patrons. Only two Duncanson paintings that are known at present include Black subjects—his c. 1851 *View of Cincinnati, Ohio, from Covington, Kentucky* and his 1853 *Uncle Tom and Little Eva*, the latter a commissioned work based on Harriet Beecher Stowe's controversial anti-slavery novel.⁶⁰

Between Johnson's work in the century's first decades, and Duncanson's activity at mid-century, there is a scattering of portraits of Blacks by such figures as the New Orleans *homme de couleur* Jules Lion, Boston artist William Simpson and Philadelphia's A.B. Wilson. Together with the aforementioned canvases by Johnson and Duncanson, such works comprise a sparse roster of Black faces painted by Afro-Americans prior to the Civil War.

Given the slave status of the Black majority and the marginal economic condition of most antebellum-era free Blacks, it is striking, to say the least, that the fictional house-slave in Duncanson's *Uncle Tom and Little Eva* and the Black couple in his *View of Cincinnati, Ohio, from Covington, Kentucky* are the only figures found among these paintings who appear to be either chattel (in the case of Uncle Tom) or unskilled laborers (in the case of the Covington couple).⁶¹ Slavery and economic oppression were subjects a 19th-century Black artist could hardly approach with equanimity and ones few Whites cared to see depicted unromantically. Here, the dearth of images belonging to certain categories probably indicates intensity of feeling, rather than indifference.

In contrast to Duncanson's Uncle Tom or his Covington couple, Joshua Johnson's federal-era portraits include one that has been tentatively identified as Daniel Coker, a founder of what would become Baltimore's first A.M.E. church, and a second, unknown, but equally distinguished-looking figure.⁶² Similarly, the Black subjects depicted by Lion, Simpson and Wilson are decidedly atypical figures—a member of New Orleans' mulatto elite, for example, or Black church leaders like Jermain Loguen, an upstate New York A.M.E. bishop and former fugitive slave who had become an important Abolitionist orator.⁶³ In keeping with these individuals' "exceptional" character, their poses, dress and surroundings (when indicated) convey extreme dignity and suggest some degree of social elevation.

Thus, works like Johnson's 1805-10 *Daniel Coker*, Wilson's 1848 *Bishop Daniel Payne and Family* or Simpson's 1864 *Bishop Jermain Wesley Loguen* employ various signals of bourgeois respectability—elegant but austere clothing, solemn expressions and static poses—to pay homage to Black moral and political authority figures, while Lion's remarkable *Ashur Moses Nathan and Son*, from c. 1845, pits signs of material prosperity—primarily the subjects' carefully detailed clothing and accessories—against the ethical bankruptcy of a society that forced Whites like Nathan to conceal interracial unions that produced mulatto offspring like the youth with whom he is pictured.⁶⁴

In celebrating African American achievement, advertising African American pride or exposing Euro-American hypocrisy, none of the 19th-century Black creators of these images questioned European-derived cultural norms or submitted African-derived alternatives, however. It is not simply that these artists painted in the prevailing Western styles of their day—an inevitability, given the absence of both an African heritage of portable, illusionistic painting and an African-American economic infrastructure capable of supporting an autonomous painting tradition. Rather, one is struck by *the absence of any representation of cultural difference*. It is as if, prior to Emancipation, Black artists dared not plead their people's cause in terms that were anything but flattering to Whites.

The three-decade gap between slavery's end and the appearance of the next set of

Afro-American images by Afro-American painters—such works as Henry O. Tanner's *The Banjo Lesson* (1893) and *The Thankful Poor* (1894), and Edward Mitchell Bannister's *The Hay Gatherers* (1893)⁶⁵—suggests that a weighty coil of psychic and ideological shackles remained in place long after the last slave got word of her/his freedom. Even as the turn of the century approached and Tanner managed to depict African Americans in ways that announced a radical break with the past, Bannister, an almost equally skilled painter, was unable to bring forth a comparably "emancipated" vision.

A New England-based painter, Bannister, like Duncanson before him, is best-known for his landscapes. *The Hay Gatherers* resembles Duncanson's *View of Cincinnati* . . . in that both works subordinate their human subjects to the surrounding landscape. For Duncanson, *View of Cincinnati* . . ., painted around the same time as his masterly *Blue Hole, Flood Waters, Little Miami River* (1851), apparently was a transitional piece—an awkward blend of the Claudian theatricality he would deploy much more effectively after an 1853 trip to Europe and a topographical objectivity drawn from his experience as a daguerreotypist and diorama painter. Here, unlike the less experimental, but more successful *Blue Hole* . . ., the artist's figures are unsatisfactorily integrated with their setting—a failure that probably contributes to the painting's thematic obscurity.

Bannister, in contrast, so successfully melds his laborers into his moodily atmospheric, American Barbizon-style landscape that they are virtually indistinguishable from it. Despite the physical beauty of the resulting canvas and its evidence of Bannister's technical prowess, the view of Black America communicated by *The Hay Gatherers* seems romantic at best. Represented as essentially elements of nature, Bannister's Black laborers can be seen as either emblems of pastoral nostalgia and longing for a cosmic unity ostensibly lost to modern, urban, industrialized humanity, or as signs of class or racial predisposition to humble, non-cerebral, "traditional" ways of life, in which "tradition" is presumed to be a fixed entity, miraculously immune to the dynamics of history.

It is precisely this latter, quite pernicious association of Blacks with "nature"—and, by extension, with innate tendencies and an inexorable fate—as opposed to "culture"—that is to say, with a socially constructed and, therefore, constantly shifting, changing and to some degree changeable web of conditions and consciousness—that Henry O. Tanner undermines in his Afro-American genre paintings. And in contrast to the majority of his predecessors, Tanner debunks Black stereotypes without confining himself to images of a miniscule Black elite.⁶⁶ But to see why a gifted young African American painter, armed with an acute sense of cultural mission and a relatively advanced ideological formation, would attack the particular set of myths he did at this time, we must now turn to 19th-century White American images of Blacks.

Where Black painters tended to make Black subjects the focus of portraits of specific individuals, Whites were far more apt to depict Blacks as either anonymous figures in group scenes—e.g., the waiters in Henry Sargent's *The Dinner Party* (c. 1820-30), William Sidney Mount's *California News* (1850), or George Caleb Bingham's *The County Election* (I) (1851-2)—or as generic types—Mount's *Banjo Player* (1856), the contented slaves of Eastman Johnson's *Negro Life at the South* (a.k.a. *Old Kentucky*

Home) (1859), or Winslow Homer's *Cotton Pickers* (1876). And where Blacks most often produced images of Afro-American achievement, showing the race's religious and social leaders or members of their families and investing them with the prevailing signs of dignity and prosperity, when White artists described Black Americans their economic and social status precipitously declined. With few exceptions (e.g., Thomas Sully's 1864 portrait of Liberian president Daniel Dashiell Warner or the startlingly prosperous-looking Philadelphia family in Thomas Hovenden's 1888 *Their Pride*), when seen through White eyes, Black America—free or enslaved—became a nation of servants, musicians and rural laborers.

Many of these images do not seem intentionally unflattering. Homer invested the pair of young women in his *Cotton Pickers*, for example, with remarkable charm in one case (the left figure), and a positively subversive air of sullen dignity in the other (the right figure). Clearly impoverished, these Black females nonetheless resist the easy imaginative access implied by such controlling or dismissive labels as " quaint," "pathetic," or "picturesque." Similarly, Mount's *Banjo Player*, far from conforming to the emasculating myths of minstrelsy, is the epitome of "gleaming youth," male vigor and effervescent charm. Spectacularly handsome and somewhat flamboyantly dressed by 19th-century middle-class White standards, he nonetheless looks neither pompous nor servile nor mindlessly sensual. Indeed, the improbable grimace of "darkie" caricatures is replaced by a brilliantly self-confident smile and humorous sidelong glance brimming with lively intelligence.

There were paintings by 19th-century Whites, however, that depicted Blacks with evident disdain as charlatans, cowards, and buffoons—works like John Quidor's 1832 *The Money Diggers*, based on Washington Irving's *Tales of a Traveller*, or Charles Deas' 1836 and Tompkins H. Matteson's 1857 *The Turkey Shoots*, both interpretations of a scene from James Fenimore Cooper's novel, *The Pioneers* (and, as such, reminders that racist stereotypes were widespread not only in visual art and on the minstrel stage, but in 19th-century American literature, as well). Above all, though, whether they meant well or ill, White artists generally pictured Blacks patronizingly—as perpetually good-humored, peripheral or generalized figures, whose painted activities seldom threatened racist beliefs in the innate inferiority of people of African descent. Such portrayals tended to deny Blacks' intellectual or emotional complexity, stripping them of family ties, group loyalties or traditions. At the same time, these images generally negated Black psychic or social autonomy, denying the very possibility of an African American consciousness centered upon itself.⁶⁷

For Tanner, then, White American art offered no mirrors of his own experience—no images that took into account or accounted for the pragmatic separatism espoused by his father and other A.M.E. Church leaders, none that reflected both the pride in African heritage he had learned at the Robert Vaux School and the fluency in Western culture of someone raised in a household headed by a college-educated minister who composed poems with lengthy titles in Latin.⁶⁸ Nor did White images of the economically deprived Black masses ring true to the young Philadelphia artist who would observe that "many of the artists who have represented Negro life have only seen the . . . ludicrous side of it" and declare his own "desire to represent the serious, and pathetic side" instead.

CONCLUSION

With *The Banjo Lesson* and *The Thankful Poor*, Henry O. Tanner lifted what Du Bois would call "the Veil of Race"⁶⁹ to give art audiences an unprecedented "inside look" at Afro-American culture. We have seen that, in focusing upon ordinary, impoverished Blacks, these two paintings significantly depart from most previous images by African American artists. And we have seen that by according his subjects a dignity usually reserved for affluent Whites and "exceptional" people of color⁷⁰, Tanner countered the patronizing or derogatory tendencies of most 19th-century White American portrayals of Blacks.

Despite this marked break with convention, the polemical character of *The Banjo Lesson* and *The Thankful Poor* has been obscured by a profound shift in Afro-American ideology, of which Du Bois' turn-of-the-century writing was both an early symptom and a catalyst. It is a shift that corresponds to the replacement of the pragmatic cultural nationalism of a Benjamin Tucker Tanner with the programmatic nationalism of Du Bois in his "Conservation of Races."

While the latter would subsequently claim that "double consciousness" made Black artists reluctant to celebrate Black vernacular culture,⁷¹ Bishop Tanner's eldest son had, in a c. 1893 letter, indicated an eagerness to paint images that contested prevailing anti-Black stereotypes. By making Black music and Black worship his subjects, Henry O. Tanner took aim at two of the period's most widespread and pernicious assumptions about Blacks: 1. that their obvious musical gifts were innate and, therefore, involuntary and incommensurate with White cultural achievements; 2. that their evident piety, instead of indicating moral elevation signified the opposite condition, being a mere outgrowth of an allegedly "superstitious" African past and a persistent inclination toward emotional excess.

The former subject placed Tanner in direct competition with figures like William Sidney Mount, George Caleb Bingham and Eastman Johnson—the leading White American genre painters of the century—each of whom had linked Blacks to music in ways that now seem idealized, romantic. The latter pitted Tanner's image of a pair of impoverished Black males against images of Black religious leaders—such as G.W. Hobbs' 1785 pastel of A.M.E. Church founder Richard Allen⁷²; Joshua Johnson's 1805-10 portrait of Baltimore Methodist minister and future founder of that city's first Black Methodist church, Daniel Coker⁷³; A.B. Wilson's 1840 portrait of Philadelphia's Bethel A.M.E. pastor John Cornish⁷⁴ and his 1848 *Bishop Daniel Payne and Family*, and William Simpson's 1864 portrait of Syracuse A.M.E. bishop Jermain Loguen—images that inscribed Black dignity and pride in codes of an overwhelmingly bourgeois and Eurocentric character.

In both instances, Tanner revealed a preoccupation with informal, domestic modes of education—what we might more accurately call "enculturation"—that, at first glance, betrays little of the cultural ambivalence Du Bois labels "double consciousness." Yet we may detect a symptom of such identity conflict in Tanner's avoidance of precisely the more energetic, African-derived style of worship that Daniel Payne and other figures in the A.M.E. Church viewed with alarm.

Nonetheless, the magnitude of Tanner's break with the past is made clear by comparison of *The Banjo Lesson* and *The Thankful Poor* with the testimony of a young man destined to succeed Booker T. Washington as president of Tuskegee Institute. In 1885, Robert Russa Moton left behind a childhood of "rural poverty" and entered Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institute, where he is said to have:

... spent his first Sunday night ... listening to the white chaplain deliver an inspiring prayer which was followed by the singing of spirituals ... He was ... deeply disappointed to hear plantation songs sung by educated people in an educational institution: "I had come to school to learn to do things differently ... I objected to exhibiting the religious and emotional side of our people to white folks; for I supposed the latter listened to these songs simply for entertainment and perhaps amusement." Moton was to spend three years at Hampton before he was willing to sing Negro songs in the presence of whites.⁷⁵

In contrast, although Henry O. Tanner was unwilling to "shout," to show his people engaged in such quintessentially African practices, —and unable to see that capturing their spirit (as opposed to their likeness) might require something other than existing European-derived stylistic means⁷⁶—he nevertheless made an unprecedented attempt to "sing Negro songs," to celebrate Afro-American culture at a time and in a nation that did not make it easy for him to do so.

NOTES

¹ Tanner's study with Eakins—who, according to Louise Lippincott, was sufficiently interested in his Black pupil to personally champion the latter's admission to the academy and who is thought to have helped fund the young painter's first trip to Europe—placed him in direct contact with the most advanced and scientifically rigorous art pedagogy to be found in 19th-century America. Lippincott, "Thomas Eakins and the Academy," *In This Academy: The Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, 1805-1976* (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, 1976), 182. The contribution of a "Mr. E_____ of Philadelphia'" to funds for Tanner's first stay in Europe is cited in Mathews, p.41. I am indebted to Dr. Sylvia A. Boone, of the History of Art Department, Yale University, for calling my attention to the struggle to obtain adequate training as a trope in the history of Afro-American art. Boone, personal communication, Fall 1984.

² Indeed Tanner's difficulties began some years prior to his entry into the Academy, which was discouraged by a local White artist with whom he had studied while in high school. After this, his dream of an art career was further derailed by his father's opposition and a brief parentally-arranged stint in a flour business. Following his studies at the Academy, Tanner spent the next seven years in Philadelphia, attempting to establish himself as a commercial illustrator and exhibiting paintings in the annuals at the Pennsylvania Academy and New York's National Academy of Design. When these efforts yielded insufficient results, he moved to Atlanta where he initially operated an unsuccessful photography studio, then taught drawing at Clark College. Mathews, 15-16, 31-32; Lynda Roscoe Hartigan, *Sharing Traditions: Five Black Artists in Nineteenth-Century America* (exhibition catalog), Washington, D.C.: National Museum of American Art, January 15 - April 7, 1985, 102-103.

³ Mathews, 41. Tanner was not the first U.S. Black artist to travel to Europe. But painters like Robert S. Duncanson and Robert Douglass, Jr., who preceded him there, seem to have followed

the earlier, more self-directed practice of "studying" by copying Old Master works at major museums, rather than taking classes under the supervision of prominent contemporary artists in which one not only absorbed the lessons of the master, but also interacted with a peer group. Hartigan, 58-60; James A. Porter, *Modern Negro Art* (New York: Arno Press, 1969), 34.

⁴ Recent assessments include Albert Boime's description of *The Banjo Lesson* as "[c]loser to actuality" than William Sidney Mount's "representations of blacks," which operate in thematic terms that "come straight out of the minstrel tradition." Similarly, Guy C. McElroy observed that Tanner—unlike White artists who made Black musicians a frequent subject of genre scenes—"was careful to distinguish between musical entertainment and education." While recognizing Tanner's "departure from conventional treatments" of Black subject matter, Darrel Sewell fails to appreciate the ideological significance of the artist's innovative approach, ("In choosing the theme or *The Banjo Lesson*," he insists, "Tanner did not break new ground.") Yet Sewell analyzes the artist's formal achievement in greater detail than any previous writer and sheds unprecedented light on Tanner's artistic accomplishment. For example, he notes that, while "[s]omething of the same seriousness and intense observation can be found in Thomas Eakins's watercolor *Negro Boy Dancing*, . . . the rich color keyed to the values of the subjects' skin is unique to Tanner."

Naurice Frank Woods amplifies Sewell's description of Tanner as "the first African-American artist to produce black genre works." For Woods, Tanner "was the first African American to . . . deliver what no previous black artist had dared portray—dignified images of his race in everyday settings." Woods describes *The Banjo Lesson* as "Tanner's direct answer to . . . the stereotyped images of the 'banjo-plucking darkey' so often seen in [19th-century] art." A possible prototype—the c. 1881 canvas, *I' se So Happy*, by Thomas Hovenden, one of Tanner's instructors at the Pennsylvania Academy—is "far from a caricature." But Woods contends, unlike *The Banjo Lesson*, Hovenden's composition contains "no message . . . that speaks directly to the humanity of the black race."

Boime, *The Art of Exclusion: Representing Blacks in the Nineteenth Century* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1990), 101. McElroy, *Facing History: The Black Image in American Art 1710-1940* (exhibition catalog), Washington, D.C.: The Corcoran Gallery of Art, January 13 - March 25, 1990; 102. Sewell, *Henry Ossawa Tanner* (exhibition catalog), Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art, January 20 - April 14, 1991; 119-20. Woods, "Lending Color to Canvas: Henry O. Tanner's African-American Themes," *American Visions*, 6:1 (February 1991): 14, 17.

Previously, *The Banjo Lesson* had been assigned varying degrees of historical significance by Marcia Mathews, then by co-authors Romare Bearden and Harry Henderson, followed by Ellwood Parry and most recently and in greatest detail, Lynda Roscoe Hartigan. Mathews, in her 1969 biography of Tanner, compared *The Banjo Lesson* to Thomas Eakins' *The Pathetic Song* and wrote that, while "[i]t has been called 'sentimental genre' by some critics," like Eakins' work, Tanner's "has a quality the ordinary storytelling picture lacks." The painting assigns the elder of its two figures a "dignity and pathos . . . that has none of the banality of ordinary genre." It "elevates the poor Negro to a higher role than that of the simpleminded darky," she observed. In their text, Bearden and Henderson claimed the painting "refuted the caricatures of Black people in wide circulation at that time" and in a caption, they added that it "portrays the transmission of Black America's musical heritage from one generation to another with dignity." Parry described the canvas tersely, but precisely, as "a sobering antidote to sixty years of minstrel shows in America." Hartigan, who devoted two paragraphs to Tanner's Black genre paintings, mentioned both "family ties" and "heritage transmitted from generation to generation" as themes of *The Banjo Lesson*. She then provided a very brief discussion of what distinguishes Tanner's treatment of Black subjects from previous Black and White approaches to such imagery. To this author's knowledge, Hartigan's two sentences on this topic (which had not yet appeared when I wrote the initial version

of this study) constitute the first published attempt to assess Tanner's accomplishment in thematic terms by placing it in the context of prior American art history. Matthews, 37-38; Romare Bearden and Harry Henderson, *Six Black Masters of American Art* (Garden City, New York: Zenith Books, 1972), 49 and following p. 56; Ellwood Parry, *The Image of the Indian and the Black Man in American Art, 1590-1900* (New York: George Braziller, 1974), 167, and Hartigan, 104.

⁵ Esteemed by his European contemporaries for his Biblical canvases, Tanner also painted several Breton peasant scenes after his arrival in France in 1891. Because they depict African Americans, his two most famous paintings—*The Banjo Lesson* (1893) and *The Thankful Poor* (1894)—, until recently were generally placed in a separate category, "black genre," which obscures historical and stylistic links between this expatriot's images of French rural workers and his representations of their American Black counterparts. It was in pursuit of these connections that I stumbled on evidence of the latter works' polemical character.

For recent attempts to connect Tanner's French peasant and black genre works, see Sewell, 120, and Woods, 16-17.

⁶ T. J. Clark, *The Absolute Bourgeois: Artists and Politics in France, 1848-1851* (Greenwich, CT: New York Graphic Society Ltd., 1973), 95-96.

⁷ Both sixteenth-century Dutch genre painting and eighteenth-century British work that was deeply indebted to Dutch models enjoyed great popularity in nineteenth-century America, influencing the emergence of an indigenous school of genre practiced by such artists as William Sidney Mount and William Caleb Bingham. John Wilmerding, *American Art* (New York: Penguin, 1976), 114. Like its European antecedents, American genre painting served up slices of the daily lives of ordinary people, frequently concentrating on representative 'types.'

⁸ Philip S. Foner, ed., *W. E. B. Du Bois Speaks: Speeches and Addresses, 1890-1919* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1970), 73. Presented to the newly formed American Negro Academy, Du Bois' paper was subsequently published by that organization.

⁹ W. E. B. Du Bois, "The Conservation of Races," in *ibid.*, 79.

¹⁰ And, all too often, obsession with an elusive Black cultural autonomy obscures the degree to which Black artists have registered specific responses to their historical experience as Americans of African descent. It is my contention that this failure to recognize the shifting nature of Black socio-cultural priorities—and, thus, to adequately contextualize Black cultural products—has encouraged persistent misreadings of Henry O. Tanner's art depicting Black subjects. The views I am putting forward here are frequently denounced by people of color as stemming from certain currently fashionable White theorists—i.e., the various European post-structuralists and their American satellites—and, therefore, inherently suspect. While I do not wish to deny my own debts to the Lacan-Derrida-Foucault-etc. school, I am struck by the tendency of both friends and foes of "new theory" to ignore the role of Frantz Fanon in laying much of the groundwork for current critiques of cultural essentialism. In this regard, see the final chapter of his *Black Skin White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, 1967), 223-32.

¹¹ Tanner, "The Story of an Artist's Life," 11662.

¹² Unsigned, "The Tanner Family," 148.

¹³ Mathews, 6.

¹⁴ E. Franklin Frazier, cited in *ibid.*, 38.

¹⁵ Rae Alexander-Minter, "The Tanner Family: A Grandniece's Chronicle." *Henry Ossawa Tanner* (exhibition catalog), Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art, January 20 - April 14, 1991; 23. Unsigned, "The Tanner Family," 148.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 147; Alexander-Minter, 24.

¹⁷ Simon, 50.

¹⁸ Alexander-Minter, 25-26.

Lifting "The Veil"

49

¹⁹ W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Autobiography of W. E. B. Du Bois* (New York: International Publishers, 1968), 187.

²⁰ Richard R. Wright, *Bishops of the A.M.E. Church* (Nashville: A.M.E. Sunday School Union, 1963), 23; John Hope Franklin, *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of Negro Americans*, 3rd edition (New York: Vintage, 1969), 162-63; Allen B. Ballard, *One More Day's Journey: The Story of a Family and a People* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1984), 39-40; 44; 46-47.

²¹ Wright, 13-19.

²² Ballard, 45.

²³ Daniel Alexander Payne, *Recollections of Seventy Years* [orig. 1886], cited in Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 68.

²⁴ Ballard, 42.

²⁵ Mathews, 4, 32.

²⁶ Ballard, 55-58.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 47.

²⁸ Since social action can be ideologically ambiguous, we are fortunate to have detailed evidence of the elder Tanner's convictions in his polemical writing which spanned a two-decade-long journalistic career, as well as his subsequent production of an assortment of essays and pamphlets.

²⁹ David Wood Wills, "Aspects of Social Thought in the African Methodist Episcopal Church 1884-1910," (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Harvard University, Department of Religion, February 1975), 66. I am grateful to Dr. Rae Alexander-Minter, who not only drew my attention to Wills' thesis, but also generously shared her extensive knowledge of her family's history and provided invaluable aid in advising me on a number of factual points. Dr. Alexander-Minter, personal communication, March 25, 1988.

³⁰ August Meier, *Negro Thought in America, 1880-1915* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1963), 218.

³¹ Wills, 51.

³² *Ibid.*, 125, 94.

³³ *Ibid.*, 125, 123.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 196, n. 5.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 196, n.4; 131.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 206-207, 214-215.

³⁷ Ballard, 39-40.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 45-46. Ballard also notes Payne's disapproval of the political nationalism of Martin Delany.

³⁹ As a corrective to my original emphasis of what Meier called Bishop Tanner's "proclivities toward radicalism," Rae Alexander-Minter has stressed the bishop's political savvy and noted that the Tanner and Booker T. Washington families maintained close ties for a number of years. Dr. Alexander-Minter, personal communication, March 21, 1988.

⁴⁰ The organization lasted until 1924. Herbert Aptheker (ed.), *The Correspondence of W. E. B. Du Bois*, Vol. II (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1976), 281, n1; Alfred A. Moss, Jr., *The American Negro Academy: Voices of the Talented Tenth* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1981).

⁴¹ Anthony Appiah, for example, traces Du Bois' concern with cultural identity under the guise of racial difference from his 1897 "Conservation of Races" through his 1940 autobiography *Dusk of Dawn*. Appiah, "The Uncompleted Argument: Du Bois and the Illusion of Race," "Race," *Writing, and Difference*, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 23-35.

⁴² "Of Our Spiritual Strivings," the famous first chapter of *The Souls of Black Folk*, was based on an essay entitled "Strivings of the Negro People" that appeared in *Atlantic Monthly* in 1897. Robert B. Stepto, *From Behind the Veil* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1979), 53-54, 196.

⁴³ Du Bois in Foner, 79.

⁴⁴ In examining the popularity of peasant subject matter among expatriate American painters in Europe during the late 19th century, Michael Quick has noted that such material was "sought out" by European artists as well and linked this transcontinental phenomenon to "the increasing nationalism of the period." While it is true that the late 19th-century Americans who went abroad and painted Europe's peasants, not their own agricultural workers, were internationalists, back home certain strains of art with strong nationalist implications continued to thrive—for example, Bierstadt and Moran's glorifications of the western landscape, Frederic Remington's operatic images of the American struggle to wrest all valuable territory from the Indians, and the characteristic regional scenes of Eastman Johnson and Winslow Homer. Michael Quick, "Introduction," *American Expatriate Painters of the Late 19th Century* (exhibition catalog), Dayton, OH: The Dayton Art Institute, 1976, 30; Matthew Baigell, *A Concise History of American Painting and Sculpture* (New York: Harper & Row, 1984), 126-38.

⁴⁵ W. E. Burghardt Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Greenwich, CT: Fawcett Publications, 1961), 18.

⁴⁶ The current record of Afro-American activity in the visual arts during the 19th-century is so fragmentary that it is perilous to do more than speculate about the prevalence of particular types of subject matter. Of the artists for whom a substantial amount of work can be discussed at present, however, Duncanson, Tanner, and Edward M. Bannister are the only painters known to this author who produced images of non-elite Blacks during the second half of the century. Duncanson shows a rustic black couple in his *View of Cincinnati* and paints the slave Tom in his 1853 *Uncle Tom and Little Eva*. Bannister, on the other hand, depicted New England Black laborers in his 1893 *The Hay Gatherers*; and his 1869 *Newspaper Boy* may represent a Black youth. Thus, it seems likely that Tanner was almost alone, among Black artists, in his pursuit of such subject matter at the time. See above, 40-43.

⁴⁷ Parry, 165, 167, 177, notes 27, 28.

⁴⁸ Du Bois, *Souls*.

⁴⁹ Guy McElroy's observation that "[i]mages of men teaching were not at all common in the American genre tradition," underscores the particularity of Tanner's approach. McElroy, 102.

Although he fails to discuss the specific character of Tanner's treatment of the pedagogical theme (i.e. its ideological ties to the doctrines of racial uplift via group self-help espoused by the A.M.E. Church and black leaders like Booker T. Washington and DuBois), Albert Boime has significantly enlarged the historical framework in which this strategic maneuver must be seen. In a chapter devoted to the subject, Boime shows that the question of black mental and moral competency, a central theme of nineteenth-century debates concerning slavery and integration, is a leitmotif of the era's popular and high art representations of African Americans. Boime, 79-124.

Naurice Frank Woods provides a tantalizing glimpse of another important and previously neglected source of inspiration for the appearance of education as a theme in Tanner's art. By spending his summers "living and working among the French peasants," Woods notes, Tanner—"[l]ike many young artists studying in Paris" at the time—was "following a tradition established . . . by Jean-François Millet" and other members of the Barbizon School. "Millet's sensitive studies of the simple everyday lives of the Barbizon peasants included several teaching themes, notably 'The Knitting Lesson,' c. 1854, 'The Reading Lesson,' c. 1860, and 'The Sewing Lesson,' 1874." Woods, 16. *Ibid.*, 19, 20.

⁵⁰ Sewell, 116, 118.

⁵¹ Mathews, p. 37.

Lifting "The Veil"

51

⁵² Sewell, 119. In 1981, I surmised that *The Banjo Lesson* was based on a photographic source, because of the painting's unusual perspective—i.e. its steeply raked floor and simultaneous high-angled view of the sitters, the tabletop, etc., a contradictory blend of viewing angles that is characteristic of images produced by old-fashioned view cameras—and a compositional style reminiscent of photographic cropping. I am grateful to Dr. Kim Sichel, whose report on the work of the French photographer, Atget, for Prof. Robert L. Herbert's fall 1981 graduate seminar made me aware of the peculiar perspectival effect of view camera photography. I am also indebted to Alvia Wardlaw, from whom I learned in 1988 that Rae Alexander-Minter had discovered a photograph of Tanner's sitters for *The Banjo Lesson*, which Dr. Alexander-Minter subsequently was kind enough to show me. Judith Wilson, "'Claiming An Identity They Taught Me to Despise': Two Paintings by Henry O. Tanner and the Search for Cultural Symbols in 19th-Century American Art," unpublished seminar paper, Yale University, fall 1981, 36-37. Wardlaw, personal communication, Houston, TX, February 12, 1988. Author's meeting with Dr. Alexander-Minter, New York, NY, March 24, 1988.

Mathews mentions Tanner's photographic activity in North Carolina—citing the artist's own account of photographing local scenery. Woods cites a lost work, which an 1890 newspaper reports as depicting "an old colored man taking his little cotton to market on a rattletrap ox-cart." Sewell sees this missing canvas as evidence that Tanner's interest in Black genre dated from his Atlanta period—which includes his summer's stay in North Carolina. Mathews, 37. Woods, cited in Sewell, *op. cit.*

If it was his stay in the rural South that inspired Tanner's Black genre paintings, then this creative shift parallels DuBois's re-orientation in *Souls*. As Robert Stepto has pointed out, *Souls* is unique among African American narratives of its time in describing a journey—not north "to freedom"—but south, to the cradle of U.S. Black cultural experience and the land on which the majority of Blacks still labored in the early 20th century. Stepto, 67.

⁵³ A close squint at the legs of all three chairs indicates this.

⁵⁴ A mid-century White churchman's comments on the behavior of Blacks during a revival meeting at a Chattanooga Presbyterian church are typical of accounts written throughout the 19th century. "Considering the mere excitement manifested in these disorderly ways, I could but ask: What religion is there in this?" the author writes. Then he scornfully adds, "Some allowance, of course must be made for the *excitability* of the Negro temperament." (italics in text) In 1894, Richard Rudolph Michaux reported that, after touring the South, "[a] prominent Methodist" minister concluded, ". . . [T]he negro has taken to religion as a matter of amusement, in place of his former employment of banjo playing, singing and dancing'." Needless to say, the true source of these clergymen's discomfort was neither some innate racially-determined behavioral tendency nor a desire to pursue secular pleasures under the guise of sacred rites. Instead both White prelates witnessed, yet failed to recognize, products of a cultural heritage in which modes of worship largely foreign to mainstream middle-class Protestantism were not only permitted, but privileged, and in which the boundaries between "sacred and secular" were virtually nonexistent. As Dena Epstein has pointed out, such religious practices as "general participation in the singing (and dancing), wide dependence on short musical units and on antiphonal . . . techniques . . ., improvisation, clapping, and bodily movement," which frequently "horrified genteel Protestants in the United States, were characteristic of African cultures."

That 19th-century Blacks could be as unenlightened in this regard as their White Christian counterparts is demonstrated by the incident cited by Ballard, in which members of Philadelphia's Free African Society condemned a Boston chapter's dancing and singing, pronouncing it "a shameful practice that we, as a people, are particularly guilty of." Later, the Philadelphia Black Episcopalian priest, William Douglass, exhibited a similar Eurocentric bias in claiming his own denomination was unsuitable for the Black masses, because they needed a religion that "appealed

'chiefly to the feelings and affectations . . . which are always strongest among undisciplined minds'."

Given this widespread myopia about the significance of Black religious departures from Euro-American norms, it seems likely that Henry O. Tanner shared his contemporaries' inability to appreciate the cultural authenticity of ecstatic Black worship practices. Letter from Rev. R.Q. Mallard to Mrs. Mary S. Mallard, Chattanooga, May 18 [1859], quoted in Dena J. Epstein, *Sinful Tunes and Spirituals: Black Folk Music to the Civil War* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1977), 205; Michaux, *Sketches of Life in North Carolina*. . . in Epstein, *ibid.*, 218; Epstein, *ibid.*, 206, 219; Ballard, 42, 44.

⁵⁵ Caroline L. Mastin gives a parallel, but more extensive list of stereotypes associated with Blacks in her catalog for an exhibition of 19th-century graphics—cartoons, handbills, broadsides and sheet music covers—depicting Blacks. Mastin, "The Negro—Victim of Stereotype and Prejudice," "Am I Not a Man and a Brother?": *American Nineteenth Century Prints: A Media of Prejudice* Wellesley, MA: Wellesley College Museum, May 2 - June 14, 1970; 14.

⁵⁶ While negative stereotypes of Blacks were prevalent in 19th-century literature, music, and theater, as well as in the visual arts, it seems likely that the volume of oppressive of images greatly increased during the 20th century, thanks to the development and proliferation of various mass media, marketing and production techniques that previously were either nonexistent or considerably less developed. For example, the vast majority of the 206 items—ranging from a 1910 "Nigger Hair" brand tobacco tin, through the menu for a 1940s Pacific Northwest restaurant chain called "The Coon Chicken Inn," to a 1976 "Black Power" erotic toy—listed in the catalog for an exhibition of the Janette Faulkner Collection of racist curios date from the present century. *Ethnic Notions: Black Images in the White Mind*, Berkeley, CA: Berkeley Art Center, September 12 - November 4, 1982.

⁵⁷ I say "apparent dearth" because there are many gaps in the current record of 19th-century Black artists' production. Two recent "discoveries"—Dr. Marilynn Richardson's verification that a statue owned by a Chicago-area historical society was Edmonia Lewis' long lost *Death of Cleopatra* (c. 1872-76) and research begun by Dorothy Archibald in the late 1970s and extended by Helen Fusscas since the mid-80s which resulted in a 1987 show of 68 canvases by the late 19th-century, Connecticut-based still-life painter Charles Ethan Porter—suggest the degree to which statements based on the very limited store of extant work by Afro-Americans from the last century must be provisional at best.

⁵⁸ Given the inutility of fine art and the absence of an African tradition of portable, illusionistic painting, the lack of slave-made works on canvas is not surprising. What is startling though and underlines the degree to which African creativity was thwarted by North America bondage is the fact that we have only one surviving piece of slave sculpture—a medium at which large numbers of Africans had excelled in their homelands—an eleven-inch, late 18th-century, wrought iron figure found during the excavation of a Virginia smithy and slave quarters. For a discussion of this iron work and an illustration, see John Michael Vlach, *The Afro-American Tradition in the Decorative Arts* (exhibition catalog), Cleveland, Cleveland Museum of Art, February 1 - April 2, 1978, 108-10.

⁵⁹ There are at least two images of Blacks that may predate Johnson's portraits—a 1773 engraving of slave poet Phyllis Wheatley that may have been executed by Scipio Moorhead, a slave painter to whom Wheatley dedicated one of the poems in the collection in which the image serves as a frontispiece, and a 1785 pastel of Richard Allen that may be the work of G.W. Hobbs, which was given to art historian James A. Porter by Henry O. Tanner. However, neither work can be attributed with complete certainty to an Afro-American artist, nor do we have further examples by either of the two Black artists with whom they are generally associated. James A. Porter, *ibid.*, 18, 28. For

information about Johnson's two Black portraits, see Carolyn J. Weekley *et al.*, *Joshua Johnson: Freeman and Early American Portrait Painter* (Colonial Williamsburg, VA and Baltimore: Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Folk Art Center and Maryland Historical Society, 1987), cat. nos. 39 and 40, illustrated on 133-4.

⁶⁰ Hartigan, 54; illns., pp. 56, fig. 12 and 57, fig. 13.

⁶¹ I am puzzled by Hartigan's reading of Duncanson's *View of Cincinnati* . . . (1851) as "an image of cultural separatism" in which the "rural simplicity" of the Kentucky Black farm family is juxtaposed with "the distant city, symbol of American progress," given the following historical facts: Kentucky was a slave state; Ohio, a free state, was a frequent and well-known destination of runaway slaves. As attested by a pair of first-person accounts in John Blassingame's *Slave Testimony*, the Covington area was a convenient site for escape because of its proximity to Ohio. Thus, it seems unlikely that Duncanson, a free Black artist with strong ties to Cincinnati's leading Abolitionists, would choose this location and make Black Kentuckians his principal subjects if he meant only to contrast the Blue Grass State's rustic charms with Cincinnati's urban life. Yet, the depicted situation remains unclear; the visual evidence does not allow us to decide the exact nature or significance of the conversation between the Black man and the two White children at the center of the scene. The painting begs for further historical research. Hartigan, 54. Blassingame (ed.), *Slave Testimony: Two Centuries of Letters, Speeches, Interviews, and Autobiographies* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1977), 518-19, 525-27.

⁶² The subject of the latter portrait was previously identified as "a cleric" on basis of his shirt's neckband, but we now know this style of neckwear was not confined to religious figures. It appears, for instance, in Johnson's portrait of *Benjamin Yoe and His Son, Benjamin Franklin Yoe* (1807-8). Weekley, *et al.*, 133, 140.

⁶³ Jules Lion's *Ashur Moses Nathan and Son* (c. 1845) is reproduced in Regenia A. Perry, *Selections of Nineteenth-Century Afro-American Art* (exhibition catalog), New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, June 19 - August 1, 1976, cover. William Simpson's *Jermain Loguen* (1864) can be seen in Fine, where it is dated 1835, a date Lynn Moody Igoe disputes because the artist would only have been sixteen or seventeen years old at the time. Elsa Honig Fine, *The Afro-American Artist: A Search for Identity* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1973), 35. Igoe, *250 Years of Afro-American Art: An Annotated Bibliography* (New York: R.R. Bowker Co., 1981), 1102. A.B. Wilson's *Bishop Daniel Payne and Family* (1848) and M.A. Traubel's lithograph of Wilson's *John Cornish* (1840) are both illustrated in Fine, 36-37.

I have omitted the so-called *Self-Portrait* (1839) by Julien Hudson, which both Perry and Fine reproduce, in light of a recent article in which Patricia Brady demonstrates "there is . . . no documentation or logical argument that indicates . . . this is a self-portrait" and, similarly, at present there is no reliable evidence that Hudson was of African descent. Perry, fig. 7, unpag. Fine, 30. Brady, "Black Artists in Antebellum New Orleans," *Louisiana History*, 32:1 (Winter 1991): 5-28. My thanks to Theresa Leininger for informing me of Dr. Brady's work.

⁶⁴ I have omitted Wilson's portrait of John Cornish because the actual canvas is no longer extant.

⁶⁵ I have excluded Bannister's undated portrait of his part Black, part Narragansett Indian wife, Christiana Carteaux, from this list of post-bellum works, because of the possibility that it does not post-date the Civil War. Whether or not it was painted prior to 1865, the Carteaux portrait can be placed in the ranks of "achievement images"—i.e., images of Blacks who attained an exceptional degree of self-determination and social status, and frequently devoted themselves to some form of public service to less fortunate members of the race. Carteaux, the successful owner of several hairdressing salons in Boston and Providence, is known to have "lobbied for equal pay for Black soldiers during the Civil War" and established a nursing home for elderly Black women. Hartigan, 72 and 74-5; the painting is illustrated on p. 71, fig. 28. I know of no illustration of Bannister's *The*

Hay Gatherers. A color slide of the painting is available, however, from Rosenthal Art Slides in Chicago.

⁶⁶ Indeed, the only Tanner canvases I would place in the ranks of the dominant 19th-century Afro-American mode—bourgeois portraiture or “achievement images”—are his 1897 portraits of his father and mother, and his 1917 posthumous portrait of Booker T. Washington. For illustrations of his *Bishop Benjamin Tucker Tanner* and *The Artist's Mother*, see Fine, op. cit., 68, 67. For his portrait of Washington, see Sewell, cat. no. 86, p. 257.

⁶⁷ It is striking that, for example, even in Eastman Johnsons' *Negro Life at the South*, a work designed to give the viewer the sensation of spying on the leisure pursuits of slaves who are unaware of being watched, a White intruder—the young mistress in her elaborate gown making a cautious entrance through a rude portal—has been inserted, as if to reassure White audiences of their own omnipresence.

⁶⁸ See, for example, Benjamin Tucker Tanner's “Non Enim Possumus Aliquid Adversus Veritatem” in the April 1885 *A.M.E. Church Review*, Vol. I, 367.

⁶⁹ Du Bois, *Souls*, 67.

⁷⁰ Such dignified White images of “exceptional” people of color include Nathaniel Jocelyn's *Cinque* and Charles Bird King's portraits of various Native American leaders.

⁷¹ Du Bois, *Souls*, 18.

⁷² The Hobbs pastel of Allen may have been known to Tanner at the time of his painting *The Thankful Poor*. The late 18th-century portrait of the A.M.E. Church founder was given to the artist by his father. Porter, 28.

⁷³ Historian Leroy Graham describes Coker's activities and Carolyn Weekley discusses the evidence that Coker is the sitter in Weekley, *et al.*, 41, 42, 133, 136.

⁷⁴ Cornish was the pastor of Philadelphia's Bethel A.M.E. Fine, 37.

⁷⁵ Lawrence W. Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought From Slavery To Freedom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 162.

⁷⁶ Only in the 20th century, with the example of European modernism's appropriation of formal characteristics derived from African sculpture, on one hand, and the influence of jazz as a successful model of Afro-American aesthetic “creolization,” on the other, would U.S. Black artists begin to depart from traditional Western stylistic models.