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Spiritual Insight in the Works of Henry O. Tanner

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Introduction: An Artistic Encounter

In a first encounter with a work of art, there is a sense in which it stands on its own, independent of its history and origins. We encounter it as if it exists *out there* in the world, without the artist standing nearby to offer explanation or justification. In this manner, it remains subjective and malleable, changing subtly as it interacts with each viewer's perspective, context, and history. It was in this fashion, independent and cut off from its source, that I first encountered the splendid painting *The Annunciation* by Henry Ossawa Tanner (1859–1937).

I was particularly drawn to the expression and body language of young Mary, as Tanner has rendered her, in the very moment of receiving the angel's wonderful and terrible message, "You will conceive and will give birth to a son" (Luke 1:31, NIV). The delicate combination of fear and courage in Tanner's Mary has deepened my own Advent reflections every year since I first encountered it. I have also been moved to share this work with my congregation in hopes of strengthening their faith with Tanner's fresh take on a familiar Bible story. Such is the potency of a piece of art that is left to *speak for itself*. Yet this power also comes at a price.

To strip a work of art from its history from the hands that formed it and the life that led to its creation is to see it only imperfectly, that is, from a limited perspective. One is left with the subjective effect of the work but robbed of its substance. When the history and life of the artist are revealed, the work may lose some of the evocative power of an initial encounter, yet it also

takes on new depth and significance, or rather, the inherent depth and significance within are revealed. This was my experience when I learned about the life of the exceptional nineteenth-century American artist Henry Ossawa Tanner. Encountering Tanner's history and some of his other paintings, including *The Banjo Lesson*, *The Raising of Lazarus*, and *Daniel in the Lion's Den*, gave me a new appreciation for this international artist and the spiritual power of his work. It is my belief that Tanner's work has the potential to greatly enrich the Christian spiritual journey through his fresh interpretations of biblical scenes, but also for his complex portrayal of the human subjects of his work. It is my contention that the emotional nuance and sensitivity of Tanner's work has potential to deepen our understanding not only of the stories, but of ourselves as well.

The Early Life of Henry O. Tanner

Henry Ossawa Tanner was born in 1859 to parents Benjamin Tucker Tanner and Sarah Miller Tanner. As most parents do, they named their son with utmost care, choosing his middle name, Ossawa, as a nod to abolitionist John Brown and his defiant anti-slavery actions taken at Osawatomie, Kansas in 1856.[1] Henry's parentage and even his name embedded him in a centuries long struggle against racism and prejudice Black Americans continued to face in the years following the abolition of slavery in the US. This was a struggle that Henry would continue to face even as his artistic skill became increasingly apparent and as he sought to distinguish himself as an artist in his own right.

Henry's father Benjamin Tanner was a well-known preacher in the African Methodist Episcopalian (AME) church and a man of considerable intelligence and dignity. He developed a reputation as an advocate for racial justice one hundred years before the Civil Rights movement. The words of Benjamin Tanner from his journal exemplify his frustration regarding the double standard to which coloured people were regularly subjected:

1. Woods, *Henry Ossawa Tanner*, x.

> If the colored people would only do right is the cry from the parlor to the kitchen, from the Senate Hall to the country squire shanty. "Colored people won't do right." Right, what do they mean by right, is it to see while yet their eyes have been put out, to love labor while yet they are taught none but the meanest work—to love their country, while yet it brands them the most infamous on earth. To love their race while yet from infancy they are taught to believe their natural inferiority. If colored people would do right. Oh yes, to do that "right" we would not be men.[2]

This maddening labyrinth of stereotypes and unjust laws created the backdrop for Henry Tanner's early life and would have a significant impact on his career as an artist.[3]

Tanner later recalled the exact moment he realized that he wanted to become an artist. As an adult he recounted one day as an adolescent boy where he observed an artist painting a landscape out of doors. Though the thought of pursuing art had not previously crossed his mind, Tanner became so fascinated watching the artist work that he knew at that moment that he had found his life's vocation. He said,

> It was this simple event that, as it were, set me on fire. Like many children, I had drawn upon my slate to the loss of my lessons, or all over the fences to the detriment of the landscape; but never had it crossed my mind that I should be an artist, nor had I even wished to be. But, after seeing this artist at work for an hour, it was decided on the spot, by me at least, that I would be one, and I assure you it was no ordinary one I had in mind.[4]

His decision made, the young Tanner set out in search of a teacher. But here too he encountered the ever-present burden of racial prejudice.[5] Eventually, Tanner succeeded in obtaining admission to the Philadelphia Academy of Fine Arts (PAFA) where he grew in skill, and his talent became more readily apparent. Yet even among his artistic peers, Tanner could not escape the sting of racist notions and the inability of some of his class-

2. Woods, *Henry Ossawa Tanner*, 10.
3. Woods, *Henry Ossawa Tanner*, 6
4. Woods, *Henry Ossawa Tanner*, 17.
5. Woods, *Henry Ossawa Tanner*, 3.

mates to tolerate being superseded in their skills by a Black classmate. In later years, Tanner would recount the pain he experienced as a result of the persistent racism at PAFA including one unpleasant incident in which Tanner was tied to his easel.[6] Though every bit as talented as his White peers, the ubiquitous stigma and prejudice Tanner faced in America became too much, eventually leading him to pursue his career in Paris, where he did not face the same barriers to recognition and respect within his field that he encountered at home.

American Racism and International Acclaim

Tanner thrived in Paris and for the most part, seemed to enjoy his life and work unencumbered by the barriers imposed at home. Tanner had long made his desire known to be taken seriously as an artist, on his own terms. Reflecting on the relief he experienced in Paris following many difficult experiences in America, Tanner commented, "In Paris, no one regards me curiously. I am simply an American artist. Nobody knows or cares what was the complexion of my forebearers. I live and work there on terms of equality."[7] It was also in Paris where Tanner's work obtained a level of recognition that had eluded him in the US. It was here that he achieved honourable mention at the prestigious salon in 1896 for *Daniel in the Lion's Den* and then a third-place medal a year later for *The Resurrection of Lazarus*.[8]

Tanner's relationship with his racial identity is an item of much interest to many who engage with his work, even to this day. Despite his desire that he be evaluated solely on the basis of his skill and his work, Tanner, a light-skinned Black man, was often the subject of intense debate as fans and critics alike sought to locate him in arbitrary racial categories. To this day, when Tanner's work is mentioned, one finds discussions not only of his racial location but also of his views of this location. Some argue that when Tanner grew tired of the constant prejudice and

6. "On our Cover," 259.
7. Woods, "Henry Ossawa Tanner's Negotiation," 890.
8. Woods, "Henry Ossawa Tanner's Negotiation," 896.

harassment, he tried to distance himself from his racial identity. Yet Tanner scholar Naurice Woods rejects this view, asserting that the words and actions of Tanner which have been so interpreted by others, express less a denial of ethnic heritage than a level of exasperation with arbitrary race classifications which reinforced prejudice and failed to get to the heart of the matter, Tanner's considerable artistic acumen.[9]

Tanner's choice of subject matter has also not escaped the issue of race. While there was a time early in his career when Tanner depicted scenes of Black domestic life such as *The Banjo Lesson* and *The Grateful Poor*, he made a decisive shift upon his relocation to Paris and began depicting biblical scenes instead.[10] While this shift in focus may have been disappointing to some, particularly from his own ethnic community,[11] it was not such a divergence from Tanner's roots as it may seem. Tanner was, after all, a preacher's son, and his shift toward biblical scenes was an exploration of another part of his identity as he depicted visually and powerfully the same stories he had heard in his father's sermons all his life. Taken as a whole, Tanner's body of work explores complex themes including race, faith, and human emotion, and as such, can provide valuable resources for the Christian journey. The remaining sections of this paper will reflect on four of Tanner's paintings, their subjects, themes, style, and how each might serve as resources for theological reflection.

The Banjo Lesson*: Black Dignity and Generational Learning*

The Banjo Lesson is one of the Tanner paintings which audiences seem to find most captivating, partially because it is one of the very few he created depicting Black domestic life. Throughout his career, Tanner expressed great frustration at his inability to escape the issue of race in his work. While he experienced some reprieve during his time in Paris, back home, Tanner's

9. Woods, "Henry Ossawa Tanner's Negotiation," 888.
10. Boime, "Subversion of Genre," 415.
11. Boime, "Subversion of Genre," 415.

work was constantly qualified by the introduction of artificial race categories. Sometimes this conversation of Tanner's ethnic heritage came from the White journalists or art critics, but other times, it was members of the Black community who pinned on Tanner their hopes to break free from stereotypes imposed by the broader White society.[12]

The Banjo Lesson
Henry Ossawa Tanner, 1893 (Oil on canvas)

The Banjo Lesson depicts a small boy seated on the knee of an elderly Black man, perhaps his grandfather, as the older man carefully shows the young boy how to make the chords. The scene is tender and simple yet subversive in its own way as it pushes against the stereotypes of the day. Even in reconstructionist America, the nation was very far from recognizing the full humanity of its Black citizens. Many prejudices and caricatures of

12. "On our Cover," 261.

the Black person existed, among them was the image of Black person minstrel: naturally jolly and imbued with innate musical ability that was more instinct than skill. As Tanner portrays them, both the boy and the old man are focused on their task, paying careful attention to the placement of the boy's fingers on the strings as he is helped by the older man to form the notes. The scene radiates the focus and attentive teaching of a master and his student.

The Banjo Lesson was exactly the type of image that many Civil Rights activists were hoping that Tanner would continue to produce, since they provided a viable alternative to and polemic against many of the racist depictions of Blacks in art at the time.[13] However, this was not to be. Having relocated to Paris, Tanner began and continued to paint primarily biblical scenes. The reason for this is unknown. Perhaps this shift represents just another period of Tanner's artistic development and shifting of interests, the likes of which he had undergone before.[14] Perhaps, as some have suggested, Tanner moved away from portraits of Black domestic life because there was simply no market for them in Paris, and he was as bound by the need to put food on the table as any artist. Whatever the reason, *The Banjo Lesson* remains one of a few gems we now have by which to admire this side of such a talented artist. Although this piece does not depict a biblical story or explicitly religious theme, *The Banjo Lesson* offers viewers the opportunities to reflect on spiritual realities of human existence.

When one observes this piece, it is the humanity of the older man and the small boy which grab the viewer's attention. Tanner painted his subjects with immense sympathy, accurately and portraying the tender and powerful relationship that can exist between grandparents and grandchildren and the value of passing on family skills and wisdom to the next generation. Reflecting on this piece can help the viewer call to mind the centrality of relationships in the formation of human identity, a truth perhaps even more urgent in our individualistic western context.

13. "On our Cover," 261.
14. "On our Cover," 261.

The truth is that we are who we are in the context of relationships, and we know what we know because at some point, someone taught it to us. Scripture calls us to give due respect to the familial relationships in which we are embedded, honouring our parents (Exod 20:12) and treating elders with respect (1 Tim 5:1). In its own day, *The Banjo Lesson* served as a needed reminder of the shared humanity of all people. It still serves us in this way, even as it draws our attention to the power of human relationships with its potent reminder that to love and to be loved really is what life is all about.

The Resurrection of Lazarus*: Encountering the Divine*

Though criticized by some, Tanner's artistic shift toward biblical scenes left a significant impression on many in the art world and beyond. Tanner's biblical paintings are well known for the emotional complexity displayed by his subjects. Although not a title he took upon himself, Tanner has been called a visual mystic by some for the powerful ability of his work to help viewers encounter the stories, and perhaps even God in new and unique ways.[15]

Among his biblical masterpieces, *The Resurrection of Lazarus*, currently housed at the Museé D'Orsay in Paris, earned him considerable recognition and acclaim when it was first purchased by the French government for the Musée du Luxembourg in 1897.[16] Among its other merits, *The Resurrection of Lazarus* demonstrates Tanner's skill at portraying the complexity and nuance of human emotion. The scene is familiar for those who know the Bible, depicting the narrative from John 11 where Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead. The story itself is rife with tension and emotional complexity, which Tanner captures extraordinarily well. The figures in the background portray a variety of reactions to what has just transpired from fear, exhibited by the figure covering their face, to wonder like the woman beside Jesus who looks intently in his direction. The man in the

15. Baker, "Henry Ossawa Tanner," 32.
16. "On our Cover," 161.

background seems to be expressing praise to God for what he has just witnessed with hands raised up in praise, while the figures further in the background simply watch in silent astonishment.

The Resurrection of Lazarus
Henry Ossawa Tanner, 1896 (Oil on canvas)

Both Jesus and Lazarus have expressions that are more difficult to read. Jesus appears calm, almost relaxed as he stands over Lazarus's grave, hands outstretched. Lazarus, for his part, seems mostly confused. He is reminiscent of a person who has awoken abruptly from sleeping and is not yet entirely cognizant or aware of what is happening. He seems to exist somewhere between death and life, though his left hand, fingers pushing up against the ground, with an active bend in the wrist, as well as his posture, a clear movement from laying down to sitting up, makes it clear to the viewer that that his trajectory is firmly in the direction of life.

The Resurrection of Lazarus has moved art lovers for over a hundred years with its engaging portrayal of this beloved story. Yet it also offers great potential as a resource for theological reflection within the Christian community even beyond its obvious

aesthetic appeal. Catherine Abell observes that representational art works possess three kinds of content: explicit representational content, conveyed content (related to all that is implicit in the work), and expressive content, which is concerned primarily with the portrayal of mental states.[17] It is Tanner's mastery of both the conveyed and expressive content of *The Resurrection of Lazarus* that contribute to its impact.

The expressive content in *The Resurrection of Lazarus* is evident in the wide range of emotions which this painting contains in its figures. Taken together, these varied responses seem to capture something of the ambivalence human beings experience toward the work of God. The Lord says through the prophet Isaiah "my thoughts are not your thoughts" (Isa 55:8, NIV). Indeed, the dissonance between how God acts and how human beings experience those actions is often pronounced. Even in the case of raising a man from the dead, an event that would seem unequivocally positive, human beings have a limited ability to absorb the new reality. The varied responses of the people in this painting show this clearly. And yet, importantly, all these people with all their reactions, all they understand or fail to understand about what they have seen, all find their place in the presence of Jesus. As a resource for theological reflection *The Resurrection of Lazarus* is an invitation to *come as you are*.

Whether we are ready or not, full of faith or not, we are invited by Tanner in this painting to simply come and see what God has done. This invitation is at the very heart of the Christian gospel. God is ever doing something powerful and human beings are invited, as the shepherds were, to simply go and bear witness. This is a message the world desperately needs to hear and sometimes it is preached most powerfully without any words at all.

The Annunciation*: Expressionism and Emotional Complexity*

Among the masterpieces of Henry Ossawa Tanner, *The Annunciation*, painted in 1898 stands out as a stark example of the artist's use of detail, subtlety, and understatement to great effect.

17. Abell, "Expression in the Representational Arts," 23.

This scene depicts the virgin Mary on the day she is visited by the angel Gabriel to receive news that would ultimately impact not only her own life, but all human history. Art lovers and critics alike have remarked on Tanner's expert ability to portray the complexity of this moment for Mary.

The Annunciation
Henry Ossawa Tanner, 1898 (Oil on canvas)

In an exhibition of the painting at the Worchester Art Museum in February 2019, curator Erin Corrales-Diaz remarked on the uniqueness of Tanner's interpretation of Mary in this moment among the scores of other portrayals of this scene in Western art. Unlike many other paintings which depict the virgin as stately, ethereal, and even somewhat stoic as she receives the angel's words, Tanner has cast her as an awkward teenager, displaying an obvious youth and naivete along with a delicate mix of curiosity and anxiety.[18] Tanner had spent time in the Holy Land and the evidence of this also shows up in the painting.

18. Sullivan, "Forgotten Pioneer," para. 12.

Mary's garments as well as the tapestries and rug which can be seen in her bedroom are all consistent with the types of fabric Tanner had encountered in his travels, adding to the painting's authenticity.

Another unique feature of Tanner's version of this scene comes from his portrayal of the angel Gabriel, not—as he is often depicted—with a human appearance augmented by halo and wings but as a streak of bright white light to the left of the piece. Corrales-Diaz notes, "in the late 19th century, electricity was seen as 'miraculous and spectacular' . . . which may be why Tanner portrayed this divine force radiating like a lightning bolt."[19] Whatever the motivation for this artistic choice, the effects are striking.

Using the lens of expression theory, we would understand the presence of Gabriel to be part of the conveyed content of the work, his presence implicit rather than explicit. This artistic choice makes his presence in the painting more impactful in modern times. It is exceedingly difficult to portray angels or other divine encounters in ways that do not tip them over the edge into the trite or the absurd, as a winged and haloed figure is bound to do. The flash of light and how it reflects off the room as well as Mary's face reveals that something significant is happening, even as the details of the divine messenger remain obscured. As with *The Resurrection of Lazarus*, it is Tanner's great skill in capturing human emotion that seems to recommend *The Annunciation* not only as a great painting, but as a resource for theological reflection which could be of great value to the Christian church.

Mary's face in particular gives us pause. She is clearly afraid, whether of the angel himself or of the message he brings we cannot be certain, but having read and familiarized ourselves with the story, we know her famous response, "I am the Lord's servant, may it be to me as you have said" (Luke 1:38, NIV). There is much to be gained from meditating on Mary's example that fear and courage are not mutually exclusive. Certainly, there are

19. Sullivan, "Forgotten Pioneer," para. 17.

other ways to express this idea, sermons, for instance. But in the same way we search the faces and body language of others to discern such subtle cues as interest, discomfort, consent, or love, so Tanner's Mary preaches to us many eloquent sermons through her physical response to the divine: full of bravery that will move the world, even while she remains very much afraid.

Daniel in the Lion's Den*: Two Sides to Every Story*

Although Henry O. Tanner produced many works that would be well used as resources for the spiritual life, the last we shall consider for the purposes of this paper is his enigmatic piece *Daniel in the Lion's Den.* In "On our Cover," *The Journal of Nineteenth Century Americanists* observes that while Tanner's art went through several phases over the course of his career, including animals, shipwrecks, landscapes, scenes of Black domestic life and finally biblical scenes, lions remained an enduring interest and show up repeatedly throughout.[20]

Daniel in the Lion's Den
Henry Ossawa Tanner, 1907–1918 (Oil on Canvas)

20. "On our Cover," 161.

Daniel in the Lion's Den has an interesting history. The original painting was painted in 1896 but was lost, with the later version having been created in 1918.[21] Some art historians have supposed that Tanner's Daniel, originally painted during the Dreyfus Affair, was intended to symbolize the French government's unfair treatment of Dreyfus, and further, to emphasize the similarities between the racism which the French government was exhibiting in their dealings with Dreyfus and its American cousin which caused Tanner to relocate in order to pursue his vocation in peace.[22] Whether Tanner intended this or not, his interpretation of the story in this impressionistic piece was certainly unusual.

The biblical account is fraught with tension. Having been duped by his advisors, King Darius finds himself with no choice but to throw Daniel, his favourite staff member, into the lion's den. The narrator of the book of Daniel draws out the scene to maximize the feeling of unease. Darius cannot eat that night, nor does he desire any entertainment and through the long night, he cannot sleep (Dan 6:16–18). Tanner's interpretation of Daniel's experience is striking in contrast to how the scene is often portrayed. The narrator places great emphasis on the fear experienced by King Darius, and as readers we share his fear. Yet the text makes no mention that Daniel was afraid. Tanner's Daniel does not seem afraid, and what is perhaps even more noteworthy, the lions do not seem even remotely interested in eating him.[23] Instead, they seem to walk about his feet, showing only mild interest as if they were a collection of stray cats in some back alley and not a den of (presumably) hungry lions whose express purpose was to devour enemies of the state.

Through the lens of expressionism,[24] it is intriguing to consider the conveyed content of Tanner's *Daniel in the Lion's Den.* What is explicit in the piece are the actors in the scene: Daniel

21. "On our Cover," 161.

22. "On our Cover," 161.

23. "On our Cover," 162.

24. Expressionism is an aesthetic theory in which art is primarily concerned with the expression of emotion.

and a pack of hungry lions, all of whom have found themselves placed in this situation by others for the purpose of achieving an outcome desired by the others, that is, that Daniel gets eaten. Implicit is the unwillingness of any of the actors to play their assigned roles: the lions refuse to attack Daniel and Daniel rejects the terror he is supposed to feel in favour of a detached calm. *The Journal of Nineteenth Century Americanists* supposes that audiences might consider this stoicism on the face of Daniel as representative of the attitude Tanner himself demonstrated throughout his artistic career.[25] Though cast in many roles by others from the degrading role of *negro* through the lens of American White supremacy, to the role of exemplar and race champion from some in his own community, Tanner remained intent on expressing his own vision as an artist and allowing his work to speak for itself, beyond any of the roles into which others would prefer to cast him.

This piece too offers rich spiritual insight to any who would stop and pay attention. Christians would do well to consider Tanner's unorthodox interpretation of this well-known story and allow it to help them encounter the text with fresh eyes. In a similar way that the Ignatian exercises[26] invite people to place themselves inside a biblical text by conjuring the sights, smells and sounds even casting themselves as characters in the story, so this painting offers a similar invitation to employ the imagination as we experience this text. Are we Daniel, calm, maybe even a little bit bored as we wait for Darius and the others to discover the truth? Are we the officials, giddy with the thought that by morning our rival will be out of the picture? Are we Darius, tormented by his own naivete and weak will which has put Daniel in this situation?

Tanner's *Daniel in the Lion's Den* reminds us to think twice about the stories we have *heard*, whether from the Bible or elsewhere. The story as you have heard it is not necessarily the whole story, or even the story as it really happened. There is much information we do not have access to. This was true for all

25. "On our Cover," 163.
26. St. Ignatius, *Spiritual Exercises*.

awaiting Daniel's fate, it was true for White Americans in the nineteenth century who had constructed for themselves a narrative about who could do what, and it is true for us as too. As we live our days on Earth and in the presence of God, we must recognize that, even at our best, we are working with limited information. We best remain humble.

Our Multifaceted Humanity: Tanner's Work as a Resource for the Spiritual Life

The son of a prominent preacher and gifted artist who focused on biblical scenes, many have sought to cast Henry Ossawa Tanner as attempting to achieve with his brush what his father, Benjamin Tucker Tanner achieved through his sermons. Indeed, this was one of many ill-fitting labels thrust upon Tanner throughout his artistic career as various others sought to define the artist for their own purposes. "Visual Preacher" may not have been a title Tanner was willing to own, yet Tanner's paintings are undoubtedly filled with treasures which the patient and observant viewer will discover.

With his nuanced portrayal of human emotion and his fresh interpretation of some of our best-known Bible stories, Tanner's work invites us to consider our multifaceted humanity, including its hidden and difficult dimensions, and encourages us to bring these untidy and subversive parts of ourselves into dialogue with the Divine. He who resisted the labels so many were keen to pin on to him invites us to hear old stories in new ways, and this is precisely the sort of attentiveness Jesus himself encourages us to cultivate as we seek engagement with God in the context of our daily lives.

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