

Michael Milburn

Inverted Worlds

Not long ago, viewing the Howard Hodgkin exhibit at the Yale Center for British Art, I was drawn repeatedly to the painting *Walking on Water*. Titles are important in Hodgkin's work, which the exhibit brochure describes as "nominally abstract." In otherwise inscrutable paintings such as *On the Rocks*, *Clarendon Road*, *Torso*, and *Fog*, the titles provide clues to subject matter; looking at *Walking on Water*, for example, I might never have identified water, much less evidence of walking, on my own. What struck me first about this painting, attracting my eye across the gallery before I had read the title, had more to do with color than with form. Using thick brush strokes of oil paint on a 10" × 10" wooden square, Hodgkin depicts two rectangular horizontal shapes, a broad red one above a narrower yellow one, overlapping in slivers of color. The four-inch-wide wooden frame is painted in thick white strokes that do not always reach its edges, so that an uneven rim of bare wood remains.

I approached *Walking on Water* and stood in front of it for several minutes, then moved off to look at other paintings, then returned to stand in front of it again, repeating this sequence several times. What I was trying to do was recapture the impression of the painting I had formed before learning the title, but I couldn't—it was impossible now not to search for the image of someone walking or someone who had walked on water. Gradually, an area a third of the way up the picture where yellow splintered into red began to resemble the surface of water in sunlight, though the deep red seemed more suggestive of a late evening sky than of an ocean, lake, or sea. Similarly, a faint vertical line running down the center might have been a water walker's path, though it bore no sign of footsteps and was not wide enough to accommodate a person unless he or she was on a tightrope.

By trying to decipher the painting in this way, I was doing what I suppose most people do when they look at art, seeking a narrative or at least enough clues to one that I could begin to assemble a story out of what I was seeing. With all art, from the representational to the abstract, one tends to look for correspondences to what one knows; even before learning the title of *Walking on Water*, I had tried to find something recognizable in it. Often the degree to which works of art resist or reward such a search determines the degree of our satisfaction with them. I was intrigued as well as frustrated by the refusal of *Walking on Water* to reveal itself fully, and found just enough connection between the title and the painting to keep me looking.

In a profile of Hodgkin published in *The New Yorker*, Anthony Lane wrote that the artist “is pleased when the precision of his references gets through.” When Lane asked him if he consciously strove for ambiguity, however, Hodgkin replied, “Oh, yes . . . The eye is always trickable.” In this regard, the fact that *Walking on Water* both contradicts and confirms its title makes it exactly the kind of painting I like. It’s neither so abstract that I must be content with admiring its composition while haphazardly connecting this element of design to my experience and emotions, nor so literal that I’m limited to appraising the artist’s verisimilitude. I myself prefer art that wavers between abstraction and realism, or even pits them against each other. In Francis Bacon’s *Study After Velazquez’s Portrait of Pope Innocent X*, for example, one recognizes the titular subject by his pose and garments, but his face has been elongated and his mouth is open in a scream.

In seeking narrative in art, we don’t insist on complete coherence or confirmation of something in particular that the artist wants to express; art this obvious is usually mediocre. But we do want to feel that our interpretation is not entirely subjective and that it bears some relation to what the artist generally intended. The more abstract the art, the less certain we are that our reading of it resembles the artist’s or anyone else’s. Titles of purely abstract paintings either offer no help—as with Mark Rothko’s #21 and *Magenta, Red, and Orange*—or increase our perplexity, as when Hodgkin calls a superimposition of several oval shapes *When in Rome*. The risk of attaching an explicit title to a quasi-abstract painting like *Walking on Water* is that it will both steer the viewer away from certain routes of interpretation and confound a literal reading. Of course, this is probably just what Hodgkin has in mind to do.

I often feel cheated when a title imposes a specific meaning on a work of art. For example, as I flipped through a magazine recently the opening lines of a poem caught my eye: “No remembering now / When the apple sapling was blown / Almost out of the ground. / No telling how, / With all the other trees around, / It alone was struck.” After finishing the poem—about a tree that has survived years of strong winds, observed by an indistinct “he”—I looked up at its title, “After the Diagnosis.” This information, which the poet, Christian Wiman, had not even hinted at in his text, had the effect of diminishing the impact and the mystery of the poem for me; I would rather have worked toward it on my own than have it compel my reading. I felt the same way about *Walking on Water*, at first. With his title, Hodgkin seemed to be warning, “You should see this, and if you don’t, you’re missing something.” Fortunately, his image was elusive enough to make the title helpful rather than overbearing; he had left plenty of interpreting for me to do. Without the title I might even have classified the painting as pure abstraction and felt less motivated to keep returning to it.

After several viewings, I moved to a nearby table to look up the painting in the exhibition catalogue. A security guard who had been standing nearby came up beside me. “That painting’s upside down in there,” he said, pointing at the book. I looked at him in surprise and flipped through the catalogue to the color plate reproduction of *Walking on Water*. Sure enough, the image was inverted—with the yellow at the top and the red at the bottom. Before I had a chance to reflect on the mistake, I noticed that the reproduction made much more sense as an image of walking on water, to the

point where I'd have recognized its subject even if it had been untitled.

Located at the bottom of the picture, the red area resembled water reflecting a shimmering sunrise or sunset at the top. Horizontal brush strokes across the red contained streaks of brown that made them look like ripples. Whereas these brownish strokes had seemed static when the red area was at the top of the picture, now they gave it fluidity. They also combined with the red to produce a color and texture characteristic of deep water in a foreground leading into a flood of yellow light. Emanating from the top of the frame, this light beckoned visually as well as spiritually—the phrase “walk into the light” occurred to me the moment I looked at the reproduction. Finally, the line bisecting the image, which had previously seemed like a self-conscious finger stroke or brush stroke, now resolved into a path that began in the red and rose into the yellow, giving the impression of light parting around it.

A flame-red path parting the waters before vanishing into a blaze of yellow: the painting as reproduced in the book had suddenly stopped resisting me and made sense as both seascape and allegory. I was no longer even bothered by the suggestiveness of the title because its information was redundant. As I closed the book, several questions still nagged at me, but none had to do with the image I had just seen. I had “solved” the picture in that overall perception, and if I were to return to it, which I wasn't particularly motivated to do, it would be more to admire it than to investigate it further. There may have been more to discover in terms of the organization and texture, but not in relation to meaning or, more importantly, the implications of my own response.

Looking at the hung painting, I had found possible correspondences to the title that I hadn't anticipated. Appraising the reproduction, on the other hand, was more akin to that most elementary of artistic processes, connecting the dots. My question now was whether the guard was wrong—could the picture really be reproduced correctly and hung on the wall incorrectly? I headed for the museum gift shop to check other reproductions of *Walking on Water*. On my way out, I picked up the exhibit brochure and found the painting printed as it had been in the catalogue—yellow at the top, red at the bottom.

The two monographs on Hodgkin's work in the museum shop repeated the mistake. Or was it a mistake? It had begun to seem less likely that four different art editors could have committed such a glaring oversight than that a careless gallery worker might have hung the picture upside-down without a curator noticing. At the same time, the editors had probably based their layouts on previous reproductions of the painting and so could have repeated an initial error. And given that the frame of *Walking on Water* was an integral part of the painting, wouldn't its hanging apparatus or screw holes have indicated which way was up?

I was sure that the mystery could be solved by a little detective work but was now becoming fascinated by the aesthetic issues it raised. I wondered if there were works of art in other genres—literature, film, music, dance—which one might accept and even appreciate in a similar inverted state. With abstract styles such as free jazz or modern dance, an inexperienced audience might not notice a transposition of parts, but an expert probably would. Yet none of the art experts who must have viewed *Walking*

on Water in reproduction or during its two months at Yale seemed to have caught the error; the only acknowledgment at the museum was the guard's alert to me. And even then I couldn't tell for certain which version was upside-down. Did this reflect poorly on the painting, its viewers, or Hodgkin's particular style, a hybrid of abstraction and illustration that produces what he calls "representational pictures of emotional situations"? (Interestingly, several Hodgkin paintings in addition to *When in Rome* are composed solely of geometric shapes and have no apparent correspondence to their titles, making them, to my eye, purely abstract.)

At home, I found the name of the exhibit's curator on the museum website and e-mailed her assistant reporting what I had learned. I expected to hear either that the error in the reproductions was well known or that the painting had indeed been hung incorrectly. With regard to the latter possibility, I couldn't believe that with the exhibit flyer and catalogue both at odds with the painting on the wall, someone wouldn't have noticed the error earlier. At the same time, *Walking on Water* made so much more sense in its reproduced form that I would have been astonished if that orientation did not turn out to be correct. Complicating this expectation was the fact that my satisfaction at "solving" the painting in its reproduced form had been fading. Now part of me hoped the artist would literally turn my neat interpretation on its head. I wanted the hung version, the one that resisted me, to be correct.

Here is the museum's reply:

Dear Mr. Milburn,

Thank you for your e-mail regarding the Howard Hodgkin painting *Walking on Water*.

The painting in the gallery is hung correctly. I know this because the artist, Howard Hodgkin, approved the hang before opening on January 31st.

I have investigated further about the publications in question. They have all been reproduced incorrectly, meaning the painting is upside-down in the various publications as well as ours and the small brochure. We have alerted those publishers about this error in case they need to reprint the catalogues, but as of today this particular painting is upside-down in all publications in our shop, including our latest one.

My first feeling upon reading this was relief; a challenge that had invigorated me had been renewed rather than resolved. Much of the pleasure I derive from art comes from trying to make literal and personal sense of it, even if this effort is accompanied by frustration. I had felt frustrated with the hung version of *Walking on Water*, its ambiguousness, its contradictions, its resistance to conforming clearly to its title. Still, I kept returning to it, and when answers suddenly came in the form of the misprinted reproduction, my satisfaction was fleeting. I even wondered whether Hodgkin had originally painted *Walking on Water* in its more logical orientation and then inverted it himself.

The same delight in resistance governs my appreciation of poetry. I often enjoy straightforward and accessible poems, but am rarely compelled to return to them. In the following poem, for example, I find the story and its telling charming, but after one or two readings these elements have largely exhausted their appeal. Here is "In California" by Margaret Levine:

I must have been about six.
We had just arrived from Canada.
Every day I missed Paulette
and Larry the frog.
I wanted my ant farm back.
All I had was the blue elephant
and a few marbles.
On the other side of the hill
near our house, I knew
I would find Prince Edward Island again.
It was getting cold.
I had a cap gun and a doughnut with me.

This poem's counterpart in painting might be a work that depicts its subject with pleasing accuracy and freshness, though without a great deal of subtlety or expressiveness. Of course, these are all complex terms when applied to art. A Cézanne still life and a Rembrandt self-portrait are accurate and at the same time highly expressive. In both, the viewer contemplates the rendering of a physical form as well as sensing what the artist is trying to express through it. Yet as much as I admire these kinds of paintings, their realism often limits them for me, leaving me too little to figure out. (Referring to the Old Master paintings housed in New York City's Frick collection, Anthony Lane observes, "You could hang a Hodgkin in the Frick, but it would be like hosting a tea party and inviting a tiger.")

When I look at purely abstract art, the freedom to project my emotions and experiences onto it is so unbounded and there's so little possibility of conclusive confirmation that I have understood the artist's intent that I walk away feeling slightly unsatisfied, even stupid. It could be argued that pure abstraction permits a more direct mirroring of emotions precisely because there is no narrative to be discerned. Moreover, the shapes and colors employed by artists such as Rothko, Jackson Pollock, and Franz Kline evoke quite specific moods. Two of Rothko's untitled paintings, one composed of a light blue square atop a pink rectangle and the other of a dark purple square set between two dark brown rectangles, could not be more different in tone and feeling. After recognizing this obvious characteristic, however, the viewer is on his or her own in interpreting the paintings. I understand the appeal of this degree of independence, but am still inclined to share Francis Bacon's view of abstract art:

most people, especially artists, have large areas of undisciplined emotion, and I think that abstract artists believe that in these [non-representational] marks they are catching all these sorts of emotions. But I think that, caught that way, they are too weak to convey anything.

Poems are susceptible to this kind of weakness, too. John Ashbery, for example, writes beautiful lines that the reader is invited to admire, identify with, and assemble into an interpretation, but the relentless swerves of meaning and subject in these disjunctive phrases keep them from achieving any cumulative sense.

You say, not like this,
like this, but too much wells up—
the patient outline of the maples' faces,
the brook that ran too far,
into some intelligence or other.

Amber and vanilla are all that we know,
how can it be so? Whose little tootsie
are you, once? Did the elephant
walk silently past your house, one
night when you were out?

—from "All That Now"

Reading Ashbery, I constantly feel on the verge of getting my bearings when an incongruous detail reminds me that there are no bearings or even an identifiable destination. Perhaps making this point and eliciting a reader's delight or impatience with it is the poet's objective. Indeed, Ashbery has said, "To create a work of art that the critic cannot even begin to talk about ought to be the artist's chief concern."

Ashbery's own affinity for the visual arts is well-known. He served as an art editor and critic during the 1950s and '60s, and two dozen of his collages, some dating back to his college years, were exhibited in New York City in the fall of 2008. He has acknowledged that he sees his collages, his art criticism, and his poetry, as very much interrelated. One reviewer of the collage exhibit noted that "As is often true in Mr. Ashbery's poetry, there is a hint of a narrative, though what the story might be is hard to say. And the artist, famously tight-lipped about meaning in his poems, doesn't offer explications."

My enjoyment of Ashbery's poetry tends to vary according to the extent of that hint of narrative. While I admit that it's a relief to encounter the occasional (relatively) straightforward poem such as "At North Farm," the one I admire most in Ashbery's oeuvre is "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror," published in 1979. To my mind, this long poem achieves the same balance of representation and abstraction that Hodgkin sought in *Walking on Water*, consistently rewarding my hunger for resolution without ever fully satisfying it. In much of his work since "Self-Portrait" Ashbery seems to have gone further in the direction of abstraction, even randomness. In 1999, he said, "The importance of meaning that's beyond expression in words is what I've always been attracted to."

One drawback to this aesthetic has been that the organization of Ashbery's more recent poems often seems arbitrary, making them effectively indistinguishable from one another.

You could have lived in a drawer
for many years, imprisoned, a ward of the state. Now you are free
to call the shots pretty much as they come.
Now I want you to go out there
and enjoy yourself, and yes, enjoy your philosophy of life, too.
It will do. It's not
perfect, but it will do
until something better comes along.

Other oaths, other options will follow
in the wake of spring.

If I were you I'd get an unlisted number,
then think about growing up, just a little.

In presenting this passage I have created a situation analogous to the one I encountered in trying to grasp the logic of the disposition of elements in *Walking on Water*—that is, I have sampled and reordered lines and stanzas from several different Ashbery poems. But where the inversion of compositional elements in *Walking on Water* affected its coherence, these lines don't strike me as noticeably less coherent in their ordering than those from "All That Now." Much of Ashbery's poetry, as Bacon said of purely abstract painting, "is only really interested in the beauty of its patterns or its shapes." Rearranging such a work is like transposing sections of a drip painting by Jackson Pollock—this violates the artist's vision, but one was only guessing at that vision anyway, so all that's lost is something that the artist chose to withhold or never finally arrived at. While abstract artists invite a response to their art, they don't seem to be particular about the specifics of that response. In contrast, artists like Hodgkin and Bacon may leave much to interpretation, but they provide some guidance—in their images and their titles—and it's that interplay between viewer and artist that is a source of pleasure for me.

Another literary counterpart to *Walking on Water* might be Hart Crane's poem "Legend," which aspires to more than "the beauty of its patterns or its shapes" even as it resists easy interpretation. Here is the poem:

As silent as a mirror is believed
Realities plunge in silence by . . .

I am not ready for repentance;
Nor to match regrets. For the moth
Bends no more than the still
Imploring flame. And tremorous
In the white falling flakes
Kisses are,—
The only worth all granting.

It is to be learned—
This cleaving and this burning,
But only by the one who
Spends out himself again.

Twice and twice
(Again the smoking souvenir,
Bleeding eidolon!) and yet again.
Until the bright logic is won
Unwhispering as a mirror
Is believed.

Then, drop by caustic drop, a perfect cry
Shall string some constant harmony,—
Relentless caper for all those who step
The legend of their youth into the noon.

For all their elusiveness, the connections among these images give the impression of corresponding to a general intent on Crane's part. The changing pronouns resolve into a single perspective, and the mirror makes the speaker's self-absorption concrete. An underpinning of yearning—for romance lost or anticipated ("And tremorous / In the white falling flakes / Kisses are,— / The only worth all granting"), or for innocence lost or cherished ("I am not ready for repentance; / Nor to match regrets")—gives the lines a momentum and coherence that many of Ashbery's lack. One may not be oriented by a straightforward plot or a single comprehensive statement, but as Robert Lowell said of Crane's work, one is drawn by "the power of the journey . . . its sincerity and splendor."

In the end, my encounter with *Walking on Water* taught me that my judgment of art depends not just upon a work's accessibility but upon its context, too. I first heard of Hodgkin from an enthusiastic review of the Yale exhibit in *The New York Times*. Even if I had not read the review, I would have gone to see the show on the assumption that a painter with a solo exhibit at Yale must be worthwhile. My esteem for the museum made it inconceivable that it might display a painting incorrectly. Yet from the moment that the guard informed me of the error until I heard back from the curator's assistant, neither Hodgkin's nor Yale's prestige could help me distinguish an object intended and accepted as art from a random construction of paint and wood. This obliged me to recognize that I was less accustomed to identifying art on my own than to responding, however indirectly, to someone else's appraisal.

Initially, that's why I thought the reproduction must be correct: it matched Hodgkin's title in a way that I assumed the artist had intended and critics had approved, while offering me an effortless alternative to the more demanding painting on the wall. Only later did I realize that the emotions provoked by the hung painting were more appropriate to the kind of artistry I admire, one that neither hides its implications in pure abstraction nor offers itself without resistance. Asked how he knew when a work was done, Hodgkin replied, "When the original feeling comes back as a painting." For me, the inverse was true: I recognized his painting as art when it came back as feeling.