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Reading American Art

Edited by Marianne Doezema and
Elizabeth Milroy

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12 Winslow Homer in His Art

Jules D. Prown

A work of art is a historical event. It is something that happened in the past. But unlike other historical events, a work of art continues to exist in the present; it can be reexperienced. As a surviving historical event, a work of art is primary evidence of both its time and place and the individual artist who created it. This suggests that by interpreting a work of art as a statement from the past we can learn something about both the culture and the individual artist who brought the work into being. This raises the old issue of intentionality—we can interpret a picture, but is our interpretation what the artist *intended* to say, or are we *misinterpreting*, misreading it, imposing our own ideas upon a mute, defenseless object? My contention is that a work of art consists of intended and unintended statements and is of interest both in what it intends to say and in what is conveyed unconsciously by its deeper structures. The problem is one of cultural perspective, the danger of imposing late twentieth-century values on an object created in another time and place. I believe that this problem can, to some extent, be put into perspective by adhering to a close analytical reading of the image, moving from objective description to deductions derived from empathetic engagement with the object, to creative speculation and interpretation in which our late twentieth-century perspective can become a scholarly advantage, permitting insights without distorting the objective data gathered earlier.[1]

In the case of artists who are closely attuned to their own cultures, works of art can be expressions of broad cultural belief. With an artist as idiosyncratic as Winslow Homer (1836–1910), the work of art seems more an expression of personal belief, of an individual psyche. As a result, a close analysis of Homer's works tends to be less cultural art history and more intellectual and psycho art history than might be the case with other artists. Interpreting the content of works of art is standard art historical procedure. But, obviously, since most art historians, including myself, are not qualified psychoanalysts, psycho art history is highly speculative. Art historians *are*, however, skilled in reading visual evidence. Thus it is preferable to speculate in this direction, with plenty of caveats and a clear awareness of the dangers of overreading, than not to venture any interpretation at all.

The underlying argument of this essay, which focuses on Homer's painting *Life Line* (fig. 12.1), is that:

- Winslow Homer is deeply invested in his art, consciously *and* unconsciously;
- explication of the conscious or intentional elements in his works leads to an understanding of his philosophical stance, the substantial beliefs that inform his art;
- a reading of the unconscious elements leads to an understanding of Homer's psychological makeup; and, in the end,
- Homer's psychological makeup, which contained elements of which he was almost certainly not aware, contributed powerfully to the imagery through which his credo, his philosophy, was expressed.

When it was first exhibited at the National Academy of Design in 1884, *Life Line* was widely admired. Dating from a period in which Homer had become increasingly reclusive, the painting synthesizes a number of persistent, underlying themes that run through his early works and anticipates his late mythic images. In 1881 Homer settled in England, spending almost two years in the small fishing village of Cullercoats on the northeastern coast. On his return to America late in 1882, Homer, who had previously lived in New York, settled in a small studio in Prout's Neck, Maine, which served as his home for the rest of his life. In the summer of 1883 he visited Atlantic City, where he witnessed a demonstration of a breeches buoy. The breeches buoy in the painting results from that trip to Atlantic City; the cliffs in the background of the painting are at Prout's Neck.

Life Line represents a woman and a man dangling above a rough sea in a breeches buoy between a ship foundering on the rocks and a rocky shore. From a pulley riding on a hawser, four ropes are attached to a lifesaver from which suspended canvas breeches hold the man in a seated position. The woman sits on the front edge of the buoy, as if on the man's lap, but in fact separated from him by the lifesaver. His arms encircle her waist, as he is encircled by the lifesaver. The man's face is completely obscured by a fluttering scarf. On the left, the ship's sails flap in the gale, a rope lies limp in the water. On the right, tiny figures scurry along the top of the cliff; the rope beneath the hawser is taut.

Figure 12.1 Winslow Homer, *Life Line*, 1884. Oil on canvas, 28¾ × 44⅝ inches. Philadelphia Museum of Art, The George W. Elkins Collection.

A number of lines, especially diagonal, converge to form wedge shapes pointing to the center of the composition: the lines of the thick hawser and the thinner pull line meeting at the pulley; the ropes passing in front of the two figures; the intersection of woman's arm and torso; and the crossing of the trough of water rising from the lower left, the cresting waves on the left and right, and the top of the rocky cliff that descends from the upper right-hand corner. The composition is bisected by a vertical axis from the pulley through the rope to the woman's hand. Spatially, the left-hand side of the composition is open into the distance; recession on the right side is blocked by the cliff.

Color and value contrasts, as well as the converging lines, direct the viewer's eye to the center of the composition—not to the figures at first, but to the pulley above their heads, a small, dark triangle silhouetted against a white spume of spray. Our eye is subsequently attracted to the figures by the red scarf, the only brilliant area of color in a picture otherwise dominated by muted tones: mostly greens, occasionally touched with or moving into blue, and a few areas of brown and flesh color.

It can be inferred that the hawser on which the pulley rides is connected on the right side to the shore and on the left to the ship. On the shore, rescuers have detected the ship in distress, secured a breeches buoy to it, and are engaged in the rescue. We can deduce that the buoy is traveling from ship to shore

(left to right) by the drops of water hanging from the hawser to the right of the pulley, while to the left the hawser has been wrung dry by the pulley's passage; the taut pull line to the right, implying the presence of people on the shore; and the man's orientation, which is revealed by the configuration of his hat. The direction is also suggested visually by the shoreward swing of the central group and the drift of the red scarf.

The figures on shore rush around—anonymous, but there—not themselves immediately threatened, but engaged in the work of saving others. We do not know if there are people on the ship, but it is possible that someone assisted the girl into the lap of the rescuer. If there are people aboard the ship, they are, like the figures ashore, anonymous. Altogether, there is a cooperative enterprise of faceless people—those on the shore who sent out the buoy and haul the figures to safety, those who may remain on the boat and can retrieve the apparatus, and the man in the saddle whose face is obscured by the scarf. Only the woman's face can be seen and that is blank, expressionless, reflecting her numbed consciousness.

The two passengers have just been drenched by the breaking wave on the right, and will soon be doused again by the wave gathering on the left. One senses the effort of the pull from left to right as the people on shore haul against the weight of the breeches buoy, an interplay of force and resistance implied by the undertow that draws back beneath the breaking wave and past the man's right leg to gather itself into a new wave on the left. There is also a strong downward tug of gravity on the central figures suggested by the sag of the hawser, the suction of the water enveloping the man's leg, and the fall of the woman's right arm toward the water. The pulley is the focal point where these lateral and downward forces converge. Various lines and ropes indicate the intersecting forces, but equally important are the attachments and clasps that make the rescue work, that allow the pull to the right to overcome resistance and gravity: the hawser is anchored to ship and shore; the pulley sits on the hawser; the pull lines are tied to the eye of the pulley; a single clamp holds the pulley and the breeches buoy together; the man's body is supported by the breeches; his arms are wrapped around the woman's body. Every element depends on another; if a single part gives way, all is lost. Indeed, everything relies on the weakest link, and that probably is the human link: the man's hands clasped together supporting the woman's weight.

The same theme of interdependence marks several of Homer's early works, such as *Snap the Whip* (fig. 12.2). A frieze of boys with hands linked stretches across the picture surface and recedes into pictorial space, echoing the diagonal recession of the landscape. Several sturdy boys anchor the whip, intermediate figures run to build up speed, and two boys at the end of the chain tumble in the direction of the vanishing point toward two young girls, one of whom holds a

Figure 12.2 Winslow Homer, *Snap the Whip*, 1872. Oil on canvas, 22 × 36 inches. The Butler Institute of American Art, Youngstown, Ohio.

hoop. The object of the game, unlike *Life Line*, is to break connections. The field is dotted with wild flowers, but also with stones. The exhilaration of running and falling is spiced by the danger of the stones. The boys at play explore the physical world—centrifugal force, gravity, the limits of speed, the hurt of rocks. The game is only possible through cooperation, individuals joining together to achieve a desired result. There is joy in joining together, but there is also the thrill of breaking away, of flying off on one's own. The boys learn through experience and, symbolically in the game, those snapped from the whip are flung out of community, a playful "dry run" at growing up and going off on their own.

Community in Homer's iconography is, under normal circumstances, an aspect of the world of children. The reverse of the theme of interdependence, more frequently sounded in Homer's work, is that of isolation. Grown-ups, having left childhood behind, are dispossessed of fellowship; they are condemned to aloneness as part of the adult condition. Adults are isolated, even when in the company of others, as in *Eagle Head, Massachusetts* (also known as *High Tide*, 1870, Metropolitan Museum of Art), where the figures face in different directions like points on a compass. In *The Country School* (fig. 12.3) the composition is divided laterally into adult and children's zones at the window sill line. The teacher is isolated in the upper realm of the windows through which is glimpsed the outside world, which seems to divert her attention; the children's zone is subdivided on either side of the central axis of the teacher's body into boy and girl zones.

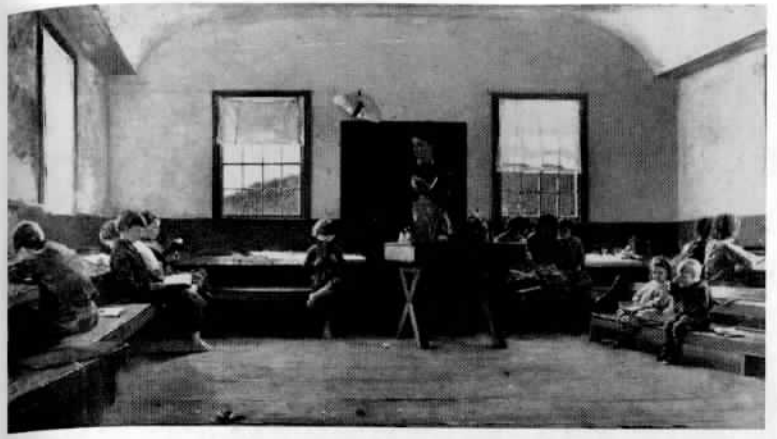

Figure 12.3 Winslow Homer, *The Country School*, 1871. Oil on canvas, 21⅞ × 38⅛ inches. St. Louis Art Museum, St. Louis, Mo., museum purchase.

Breezing Up (fig. 12.4) is a rare image in which an adult enjoys community by being privileged to join in the play, to recapture the joys and companionship of boyhood, the world of *Snap the Whip*. Even though there is no eye contact, as there is none in *Snap the Whip*, the man and three boys are linked together in the shared activity of harnessing the elements and controlling the forces of nature for their mutual pleasure. Wind fills the sail that the man in the red shirt holds fast with a line, controlling the powerful thrust and channeling it into the forward motion of the boat. The oldest boy in the stern similarly holds the rudder firm against the rush of the water to steer the boat, and all the figures lean the weight of their bodies against the heeling of the boat. They go as far as they dare in pressing sail and rudder against wind and water without capsizing the boat. The aim is to control the elements to achieve maximum speed and exhilaration, and it can only be done, as in *Snap the Whip*, through group effort, through community.

Another note struck in *Life Line* that recurs through Homer's work, like interdependence and isolation, is that of transition, of being in passage. In *The Morning Bell* (fig. 12.5) the isolated girl in red moves toward a dilapidated mill with broken windows on the left, away from a group of women whispering behind her back. She traverses a boardwalk with a flimsy handrail and a jerry-built support tacked to a pine tree above a muddy mill pond. The walkway leads toward an unknown brown area off to the left that seems less pleasant than the green realm filled with flowers in the right foreground. The metallic lunch pail in the girl's hand and the bell-like configuration of her skirt, with her feet forming a

Figure 12.4 Winslow Homer, *Breezing Up (A Fair Wind)*, 1876. Oil on canvas, 24⅛ × 38⅛ inches. Copyright 1997 Board of Trustees, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., gift of the W. L. and May T. Mellon Foundation.

clapper, suggest an association with the swinging bell (beyond the ridge of the mill) whose peal must fill the air; her hat and the vertical line that passes through it from the rickety ramp in the foreground point toward a tiny bird flying above the forest. Her body moves toward the mill, but her thoughts seem to go off in another direction, seeking freedom, like the sound of the bell or the flight of the bird.

Word play suggests that *The Morning Bell* may be about a belle—a young girl—in mourning, which, even if only subconsciously, enhances a tone of sadness. She is in passage along a path like the balance on a transit beam; it is as if at some point the ramp will tip toward the mill. The composition is like *The See Saw* (ca. 1870, Canajoharie Library and Art Gallery, Canajoharie, New York), but there the world is the child's world of community and play. Tilting this way and that, there is danger, but it is controlled, a playful exploration, as in *Snap the Whip* and *Breezing Up*, of the realities of the physical world. It is playing in preparation for life. The boy will become a man, and in *The Morning Bell* the girl has become a woman. (As my colleague Bryan Wolf has suggested, *The Morning Bell* is about rites of passage and the uneasy aspects of growing up.)

In *Life Line* these themes of passage, interdependence or community, and isolation are addressed. The man and woman in transit are alone together, far removed from the tiny figures on the shore and from any who might remain on the ship. Their isolation is heightened by the veils of spray rising around them.

Figure 12.5 Winslow Homer, *The Morning Bell*, c. 1872. Oil on canvas, 24 × 38¼ inches. Yale University Art Gallery, bequest of Stephen Carlton Clark, B.A. 1903.

Moreover, despite the intertwining of their bodies, in certain ways each figure is alone. The man looks away toward the shore, his view of the woman obscured by the scarf. She swoons, her eyes closed; she cannot see him either. Even physical contact is obstructed by the lifesaver that separates them. And yet, despite their peril, despite their isolation, despite their limited perceptions, the clasped couple exudes an unexpected aura of sensuality and perhaps even a sense of physical pleasure as they rock to and fro together on their dangerous passage.[2]

Compositionally, the picture is divided like *The Country School* into two zones, here marked by gender rather than age, passive and slack to the left of the pulley, active and taut to the right, echoing the respective situations of the woman and man. To the left, the ship is helpless, battered by the wind and waves against the rocks, its loose sails and ropes fluttering; the retrieval line, descending in a graceful S-curve from the pulley, lies unused in the water; the water itself is a bland slate-green sheet; the woman's body hangs limp. To the right, the small figures on the cliff are active; the pulley is reeled in along the hawser by the taut pull line; the man in the breeches buoy holds fast to the insensate woman and kicks out his left leg to balance her weight; the water bubbles as the breakers hit the shore in front of the projecting cliffs. The man is tense, his body working in concert with the ropes, the pulley, and the breeches buoy to support the woman's weight and overcome the adversary forces of nature.

Although the woman is inert, semiconscious, lacking control over her own

body, she has some effect on the man, if only pictorially. Echoing the billowing sail of the helpless ship and the torn lower part of her dress that flutters beneath his left leg, the red scarf tied to the rope to signal the location of the breeches buoy seems to emanate from her bosom, indeed from the general area of her heart, crossing his face and obscuring it from view. The interplay of her open arms and closed legs with his enclosing arms and open legs unites the figures physically into a single fleshy unit. We see her face and also the full, almost voluptuous form of her body beneath the water-soaked dress. We do not see his face; he is anonymous. She is clamped in his grasp, her torso in his arms, her legs hanging down beneath his legs. Given the evident pull of gravity, he must feel the weight and perhaps even the warmth of her body, despite the intervening buoy. Gravity pulls her down between his legs; his left leg falls over her shredded dress that blows beneath it, echoing the encirclement of his arms around her body.

There are suggestive sexual elements present—vague in the case of the horizontal rock form thrusting out from shore between the rope and the hawser, or the explosion of the vertical spume from the valley of the waves that crash against the rocks, but quite explicit in the flash of her flesh between his legs as her skirt is slightly hitched up the downward slide of her body, or the exposed flesh of his clasped hands between her arm and torso, with his thumb thrust into her armpit.

The man is conscious of the woman, but concentrates on his work. She seems unconscious, yet her left hand firmly grasps the rope of the breeches buoy. Is she in fact completely insensate or does she feel the warmth and strength of the man, the support and rocking motion of the breeches buoy?

The primary movement in *Life Line* is lateral, along the plane established by the path of the pulley. There is, however, a strong intersecting movement into pictorial space suggested by the trough of the wave. It leads at the far end, behind the pulley, to the rising wraithlike cloud of spray where the wave smashes against the rocks. The action that takes place between us and the column of vapor is literally intermediary—we pass through it in the foreground to get to the background. This stimulates the kind of empathetic identification with the figures in which I have already indulged. Homer was the first to empathize, and it is difficult to avoid the suspicion that if we were to unveil the face hidden by the red scarf, we would find Winslow Homer. Sublimating his deep-seated desires, Winslow Homer, a lonesome man, a compulsive painter of women by the sea, seems to project in *Life Line* a fantasy in which he becomes intimately involved, literally wrapped up, with a woman, but in an altruistic, indeed heroic way. She is helpless and vulnerable, but he is a gentleman. In the same way, one

suspects that Homer identified with the similarly anonymous male in his *Croquet Scene* of 1866 (Art Institute of Chicago). Hidden by a circular brimmed hat and kneeling Sir Walter Raleigh–like before an elegant lady in red, the gentleman holds together two balls that are about to be thwacked by the lady's mallet. This image and its quite explicit sexual innuendoes have been sensitively explored by David Park Curry in *Winslow Homer: The Croquet Game*.[3]

In *Life Line* Homer seems to indulge in a schoolboy's fantasy that conflates heroism, damsel saving, and sex, a fantasy marked by a large measure of frustration. The hero is bound in by ropes, and the life buoy is an effective chastity belt; he can make contact only indirectly. If he jabs his thumb into her armpit, it is a venial pleasure as symptomatic of his frustration as of his desires. The scarf that hides his face seems to signify frustration at his inability to participate openly and fully, and perhaps a certain anxiety associated with women or sex as well. Homer suggests that the woman, too, may have her own sexual fantasy. Reflective of the compositional passivity of her half of the picture, her fantasy has overtones, however slight, of rape or violence forced upon her by an anonymous lover/ravager/savior. Despite her apparent swoon, she is not completely unconscious; she is grasping the rope, even suggestively, with her left hand. The latent sexuality of the scene is reinforced by the movement of the pulley slipping over the turgid hawser.

Sexuality is indirect in *Life Line*, rather "Victorian." Art historically, there is a tradition of the sexual imagery of the swing—all of that to-ing and fro-ing, that pleasurable rocking motion. Depictions of such prurient activity range from indirect titillation in scenes by Fragonard or Lancret,[4] with pull ropes on the swings being used like the pull lines in *Life Line*, to outright eroticism in the amorous illustrations of Thomas Rowlandson, where the suggestive backward and forward motion of the swing is significantly associated with the shoreline,[5] invoking the similar, metaphorically suggestive backward and forward motion of waves and undertow. *Life Line* is in the tradition of swing imagery and shares in its sexual implications.

The man and woman are between the ship and the shore; they are also between us and the spray in the background. First Homer then the viewer empathize with the figures who sway before our eyes in a perilous coupling. The interdependence we have noted within the composition in fact extends forward to include us. The figures in the picture have many sensations, which we experience empathetically, but they cannot see. The woman's eyes are closed; his appear blindfolded; at least he cannot see her—the blind Homer. But we can see the clear outline of her body, the bare flesh of her knee, his thumb in her armpit. They have sensations of touch, hearing, smell, and taste, which we can

experience only empathetically, but they cannot see. Only the viewer has sight and is required to complete the picture, to have all senses operating, to see the significance of what is happening.

The red scarf that glows dramatically against the drab, lifeless context of water, rock, and sky can be read as a flag of danger, an appropriate signal for the center of the picture. But red as a representation of blood is also a sign of life, of warmth and passion, a symbol of sensate living beings struggling against an inorganic natural threat. The couple dangles somewhere between a conscious world of danger and a subconscious world of sexuality. The evident theme of *Life Line* is the power of nature to threaten and extinguish life and the ability of individual human beings to pool their strength, experience, courage, intelligence, and ingenuity (in the form of the breeches buoy) to secure safety through cooperative effort. Homer's adult human beings are adrift in the universe; they are islands unto themselves. They represent the human predicament. The natural world in which they find themselves is neither benign nor malign—it is morally neutral. But when nature threatens man, the opportunity arises to connect with other people, to meet the challenge. This connectedness which, in Homer's paintings, children enjoy naturally in their engagement with the natural world through play but which adults have lost, can be retrieved by engaging the natural world in the face of danger. Danger in the adult world is more threatening than stones in a field or a capsized boat, more ominous. The note of danger is struck in *Life Line* not only by our reading of the situation but indirectly, viscerally, by such elements as the pulley silhouetted against the white vapor, its dark shape resembling a skull, with holes as eyes. Quite literally, everything depends on (or from) the pulley, and the pulley suggests death. But danger provides the opportunity for human beings to act in concert. In *Life Line* the woman needs the man, and they both need the people on shore in order for their lives to be saved.

When humans cooperate to save lives in a confrontation with nature, they establish their humanity. The humanism of interdependence is underlined by the exchange of human feelings, including sexual attraction. The act of saving is a human act. *Life Line* is about lifesaving, but it is also about a loftier kind of saving, about Salvation. In saving lives the rescuers effect physical salvation, and, by implication, perhaps spiritual salvation as well. The column of spume visually connects the sea with the sky, as the clasp connects the pulley with the breeches buoy. In the clasp, the force is a downward thrust to be contained; in the vapor, movement is upward and the connection is a passage, not a clasp. The rising cloud represents the transubstantiation of water into vapor, of liquid into gas, of sea into sky, of matter into spirit. The philosophical statement inherent in *Life Line* is that human effort to overcome the life-extinguishing threat of an indifferent universe, to save lives, represents a kind of salvation that is analogous to

Figure 12.6 Winslow Homer, *The Gulf Stream*, 1899. Oil on canvas, 28⅛ × 49⅛ inches. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Catharine Lorillard Wolfe Fund, 1906.

Figure 12.7 Winslow Homer, *The Fog Warning*, 1885. Oil on canvas, 30 × 48 inches. Courtesy of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Otis Norcross Fund.

Figure 12.8 Winslow Homer, *Undertow*, 1886. Oil on canvas, 29 13/16 × 47⅞ inches. Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, Williamstown, Mass.

the form of salvation linking heaven and earth suggested by the rising spume. We, the viewers, add sight and bear witness to the human drama unfolding before us. We gain an understanding of the physical world and our relationship to it as vulnerable and mutually dependent human beings. But we also pass beyond the figures to the spray: literally, like the man in the breeches buoy, and figuratively, like the vapor cloud, we too have our feet in the water but our heads in the sky. We the viewers connect the material with the ethereal and are in passage from this world to the next. Homer's message is that salvation lies not in ignoring the natural world but in coming to grips with it as directly as possible.

In Homer's later paintings, darker in mood, there is less expression of the optimism of community and more emphasis on the loneliness of the human condition. And when a human connection is not available, as is the condition of the black in *The Gulf Stream* (fig. 12.6), all is lost. *The Gulf Stream* echoes the composition of the earlier *Breezing Up:* a boat points diagonally toward the left, but here no wind fills the sail; the mast is snapped and there is no sail; no rudder controls the direction of the boat, the rudder is gone; and there is no community, even of boys. Nature is in control here—water, waterspout, and sharks. The lack of eye contact that had simply injected a disconcerting and only slightly ominous note in Homer's early paintings becomes here disastrous missed vision as a boat on the horizon sails in one direction while the lone figure looks off in the other. This is a grim conclusion to imagery that began optimistically with

Figure 12.9 Winslow Homer, *West Point, Prout's Neck*, 1900. Oil on canvas, 30⅛ × 48⅛ inches. Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, Williamstown, Mass.

Figure 12.10 Winslow Homer, *A Light on the Sea*, 1897. Oil on canvas, 28¼ × 48¼ inches. Corcoran Gallery of Art, museum purchase, Gallery Fund.

Breezing Up in the mid 1870s and continued more seriously but still affirmatively with *The Fog Warning* (fig. 12.7) in the mid-1880s. Here, the fisherman is alone in his similarly placed dory. The fog is rolling toward him, but he has firm control of the oars and his boat, and as he looks over his shoulder he makes visual contact with his mother ship—community and safety are there.

There may seem to be a disparity between the small, personal, psychosexual expressions manifest in a painting like *Life Line* and Homer's larger expressions of philosophical or religious belief. But these aspects of his work seem intimately connected. Homer was an inveterate painter of women by the edge of the sea. He seems to have identified women with the sea in some deeply felt, mythic way. In *Undertow* (fig. 12.8), another image of connectedness and salvation, his women are hardly mermaids; they may not emerge from the sea exactly like Venus: they are cast up by the sea like the girl in his early wood engraving *The Wreck of the Atlantic* (*Harper's Weekly*, April 26, 1873). Homer's women seem to emanate from the sea like the spray from waves crashing on rocks. The sexual implications of the motion of the waves, and that conjunction of water and rock of which the two halves of *Life Line* stand as a virtual emblem—soft and slack on the female side, taut and active on the male—are echoed in *Undertow*, where the soft curves of the sculptural female bodies contrast with the angularity and the oddly military pose of the almost marching and saluting muscled figure on the left who is hauling his catch from the sea while a wave crashes into foam behind him. There are sexual implications here, as there are in *Life Line*, where, as wave crashes against rock, the explosion of the spray behind the two figures is almost ejaculatory. For Homer this imagery seems not carnal but a dramatic moment of epiphany, a celebration of the life force.

Repeatedly, Homer produced images in which a woman or women are prominently placed in the foreground in juxtaposition with the sea and, increasingly in later works such as *West Point, Prout's Neck* (fig. 12.9), there are complementary images of the sea in which the same prominent compositional role in the foreground is played by the rising spume. Ultimately they become fused, as in *A Light on the Sea* (fig. 12.10): the women take on the sinuous form of rising spume, and the spume, a symbol of transubstantiation, of matter become spirit, seems to become an abstract incarnation of the female principle. There is a complex conflation of women, water, sexuality, and salvation in Homer's late works.

I have tried to suggest here some of the larger implications of Homer's art, but these are only suggestions, not proofs. It seems certain that Homer's paintings are informed by a deep investment of the artists' own psychological makeup in the creation of imagery that embodies larger statements about the nature of the human condition, including ruminations on themes of isolation and community, life and death, matter and spirit, and the transitions that connect or mark a passage from one state to the other. A close reading of the paintings suggests these meanings, but it also suggests that much work remains to be done in order to explicate the deeper meanings of Winslow Homer's art.

Notes

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My thoughts about Winslow Homer have been sharpened over the years through discussions in seminars with students and colleagues. I am especially indebted to David Lubin and Bryan Wolf.

1. For a more extended discussion of this procedure and the theory behind it, see Jules D. Prown, "Mind in Matter: An Introduction to Material Culture Theory and Practice," *Winterthur Portfolio* 17, no. 1 (Spring 1982): 1–19.

2. The sensuality of the image was noted even at the time of the painting's first exhibition. A critic in the *New York Times* wrote on April 5, 1884. "She is a buxom lassie. . . . Mr. Homer . . . has done the very unusual thing of uniting cleverness of conception and good composition with a sensuousness, a feeling for physical beauty in the woman's form." Quoted in Gordon Hendricks, *The Life and Works of Winslow Homer* (New York, 1979), 175–77.

3. David Park Curry, *Winslow Homer: The Croquet Game* (New Haven, 1984).

4. See Donald Posner, "The Swinging Women of Watteau and Fragonard," *Art Bulletin* 64 (March 1982): 75–88.

5. Gert Schiff, Introduction, *The Amorous Illustrations of Thomas Rowlandson* (n.p., 1969), pl. 17.