

THINKING LIKE AN ICEBERG

OLIVIER REMAUD



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Thinking Like an Iceberg

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Translated by Stephen Muecke

polity

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The frozen ocean itself still turns in its winter sleep like a dragon.

— Barry Lopez, *Arctic Dreams*

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The Issue

Icebergs have been considered secondary characters for a long time now. They made the headlines when ships sank after hitting them. Then they disappeared into the fog and no one paid them any more attention.

In the pages that follow, they take centre stage. Their very substance breathes. They pitch and roll over themselves like whales. They house tiny life forms and take part in human affairs. Today, they are melting along with the glaciers and the sea ice.

Icebergs are central to both the little stories and the big issues.

This book invites you to discover worlds rich in secret affinities and inevitable paradoxes.

There are so many ways to see wildlife with new eyes.

Prologue

They are Coming!

The morning was dark. Fog was suspended over our heads. Pancakes of ice floated near the ice edge. The sea seemed sluggish.

Then a discreet sun lit up the horizon.

Three points appeared in the distance. A thin silhouette emerged from the fog. I could not immediately identify the shape, but it was becoming more and more curved. No whale has these spurs on its back; my nomadic brothers are larger.

The clouds began to glow.

A ship was approaching us.

It was making slow progress. Like a lost penguin, it took small steps sideways. When it anchored in our vicinity, I saw them stirring. They were huddled together on the forecastle, jumping up and down in a strange dance. They were pointing at me. Their faces were long, their beards shaggy, and they smelt strong. They looked like ghosts. I could only make out the males. Some smiled, others opened their mouths but no words came out. With their hands on the main mast, some were kneeling and bowing their heads. They crossed themselves as they stood up.

A man emerged from a cabin at the back of the ship. He climbed the stairs leading to the deck. A group followed him. Drumbeats echoed in the silence of the ocean. When the music stopped, he was announced by one of his companions.

Captain James Cook looked at the assembled crew and then addressed his sailors. His clear voice carried a long way. He told them that they had sailed far and wide, so far across the ocean at this latitude that they could no longer expect to see any more dry land, except near the pole, a place inaccessible by sea. They had reached their goal and would not advance an inch further south. They would turn back to the north. No regrets or sadness. He prided himself on having fulfilled his mission of completing his quest for an Antarctic continent. He seemed relieved.

As soon as the captain's speech was over, a midshipman rushed to the bow. He climbed over the halyards and managed to pull himself up onto the bowsprit. There, balancing himself, he twirled his hat and shouted, 'Ne plus ultra!' Cook called the young Vancouver back to order, urging him not to take pride in being the first to reach the end of the world. Screaming thus in Latin that they would go 'no further!' made him unsteady over the dark waters. He could fall into oblivion with the slightest gust of wind. The crew burst out laughing. With a smile on his face, the reckless hopeful returned to the bridge like a good boy. Then they turned their backs on me and went back to their tasks, some disappearing into the bowels of the ship while others climbed up to the sails.

Those three words echoed in the sky. I remember it with pride.

Call me 'The Impassable'.

I am the one who stopped Cook on his second voyage around the world, the happy surprise that cut short his labours at 71° 10' latitude south and 106° 54' longitude west.

I am one of the icebergs on which the Resolution, a three-masted ship of four hundred and sixty-two tons, would have

crashed if the fog had not cleared. On that day, 30 January 1774, they saw me in all my imposing, menacing volume.

My comrades from Greenland are slender. I am flat and massive. I blocked the way without giving them the chance of going around me. In any case, there is only ice behind me, an infinity in which they would have become lost. I saved them from a fatal destiny.

Thanks to me, an entire era thought that no one before the captain had gone so far south, that he was the sole person, the only one, the incredible one to have achieved this feat. What can I say about the snow petrels that have been landing on my ridges for centuries? I am familiar with these small white birds with black beaks and legs. They are attracted by the tiny algae that cling to my submerged sides.

Cook and his sailors kept their distance. Except for the times when they took picks and boarded fragments of iceberg from longboats. They climbed over them, dug them up and extracted blocks of ice which they left in the sun on the deck of the big ship to melt so they could drink their water.

We were much more than their tired eyes could count, not ninety-seven but thousands, an ice field as far as the eye could see.

We were a whole population.

1

Through the Looking Glass

A painter and a priest are standing at the rail of a steamer, the *Merlin*, on the way to the coast of the island of Newfoundland. They had left the port of Halifax, Nova Scotia, in the middle of June 1859 and are making their way to one of their destinations, Saint John. Having reached the foot of Cabot Tower, they meander north of the Avalon peninsula, between the Gulf of St Lawrence and Fogo Island, an area where strangely shaped blocks from Greenland are drifting. After about ten days, they embark on a chartered schooner called *Integrity* and sail towards the Labrador Sea. A rowboat is waiting on deck between the gangways that connect the forecastle and the stern. This will be their way to approach the giants.

Thus begins a chase that lasts several weeks.

A game of hide and seek

They are iceberg hunters.

They are armed with a battery of brushes and pens. Their satchels are overflowing with notebooks and drawing boards. Pairs of telescopic-handled theatre binoculars sit atop crates of paintings. Frederic Edwin Church intends to capture the volumes and colours of icebergs in oil studies and pencil sketches. He has a large work in mind. Louis Legrand Noble, on the other hand, is keeping a chronicle of their expedition. He wants to write a truthful account of it. The two friends play cards with other passengers. They reminisce, discuss the colour of the water and squint at the

sky to judge the weather. They wait for the moment when they can see the faces of the 'islands of ice', as Captain Cook called them, up close. They are on the lookout, as eager as trappers, for an unusual catch. They are on guard, day and night, sleep poorly and flinch at the slightest sign. The swell makes their stomachs groan.

They made inquiries before leaving. They know that icebergs are a sailor's nightmare.

For the past ten years or so, the northern latitudes have been the focus of attention. HMS *Erebus* and HMS *Terror*, the two warships that Sir John Franklin commanded in 1845 in an attempt to open the Northwest Passage, have been lost. Jane Griffin, otherwise known as Lady Franklin, moves heaven and earth to find her husband. She convinces the British Admiralty to mount several search expeditions. Other governments quickly follow suit. The physician and explorer Elisha Kent Kane publishes two first-person accounts of the campaigns organised by the American businessman and philanthropist Henry Grinnell. His descriptions of desolate Arctic landscapes provided a stock of images that inspired an entire generation.¹

Everyone wants to know what happened to Franklin. Significant economic and political interests come into play. Curiosity becomes bankable. Public opinion is intoxicated. A nation's reputation depends on this desire to know. But the research stalls. Until the mystery suddenly becomes clearer. In the spring of 1859, Francis Leopold McClintock, a regular member of the Royal Navy, and his officers collect evidence from an Inuit tribe on King William Island. They add more evidence and eventually find scraps of clothing, guns, bodies, a cairn, a small tent and a tin box on the ground with a clear message: the two ships had been icebound on 12 September 1846 and Franklin had given up the ghost on 11 June 1847. After this fatal winter, the

survivors had decided, on 22 April 1848, to set out on a journey over the ice pack in an attempt to reach more hospitable lands. No one returned.²

Apart from a few minor scares, Church and Noble's journey goes off without a hitch. The skies are clear, the sea is friendly. One fine day, the deckhand calls out: 'Icebergs! Icebergs!' Relief and euphoria: their goal is in sight. The passengers move towards the bow. Two elegant masses of unequal size emerge. The ship is slowly approaching the bigger one. The companions' eyes widen. But a thick fog starts to spread. Clouds fall over the sea like a stage curtain. They cover the horizon and the show comes to an end. Having their final act taken away, the travellers are disappointed, almost offended.

During a stopover on land, fishermen explain to them that iceberg hunters must be patient. It is always a game of hide and seek. In this game, the roles are unequal and the rules are constantly changing. Icebergs know the winds and currents better than humans. They are mischievous and do not let themselves be caught. They disappear as suddenly as they reappear. If you get too close, they run away or get angry. They are more intelligent than their pursuers.

The icebergs have made a pact of friendship with the fog. No one can break it. When the clouds transpire, water droplets become ice crystals that pile up on top of each other. Then these crystals return to the clouds as they evaporate. In the meantime, the blocks take advantage of the moments when the air becomes thick with moisture to escape from view. Icebergs and mists unite the sky and the sea. Their relationship is mutual. Each partner benefits. By way of encouraging them to turn back, the fishermen tell our two dilettantes a secret worthy of the best pirate stories: 'No jackal is more loyal to its lion, no pilot fish to its shark, than the fog to its berg.'³ A chill runs down

Church and Noble's spines: they understand that, in such reciprocal living pairs, the iceberg is the predator. Mists follow it everywhere. They are inseparable.

At the beginning of July 1859, a group of thirteen icebergs encircles the schooner. The painter and the narrator are ecstatic. They will finally be able to examine them closely. The boat is lowered. With the necessary care. When icebergs roll over, they take everything with them in their chaotic movements and cause panic around them. Sections of ice can collapse and crush the boat. The captain on board orders the rowers to keep a respectable distance.

For several minutes they make their way through the floating masses, taking advantage of a clearing in the sky and a calm sea. They hear all kinds of creaking noises. Intrigued, they turn around this group, whispering incomprehensible words. The reverend fills in his notebooks. He describes the electric murmur of the wind, the sounds of the water carving the walls, the countless plays of light. The show reinforces his conviction that nature is not monochrome but 'polychrome'. Church, for his part, paints one gouache after another with a precision that belies the low swell.

Icebergs are multifaceted. They are always changing their appearance. So much so that Noble has the feeling that he's seeing more than one iceberg when he walks along one of them. The first two bergs of a few days earlier had already captivated him. His imagination had been fired: he had seen the tent of a nomadic people in the thinnest iceberg and the vault of a greenish marble mosque in the thickest. It was as if there were secret correspondences between deserts of ice and deserts of sand. Then the masses disappeared in silence. The narrator had not even heard a sound as they fled.⁴

Among the icebergs, Noble experiences a kind of joyful stupor, like a deep empathy with another being. It is the joy of the 'Indian' faced with a deer, the unprecedented happiness of finally finding a 'wild' world. He no longer knows which metaphor to choose. One after another, he makes out Chinese buildings, a Colosseum, the silhouette of a Greek Parthenon, a cathedral in the early Gothic style, and the ruins of an alabaster city. Icebergs are great imitators. They recapitulate the history of world architecture with disconcerting ease. The Arctic Ocean becomes an open-air art gallery, a sanctuary of human creativity. Icebergs also summarise geological history. They evoke natural landforms located in the four corners of the globe. Sometimes they resemble 'miniature alpine mountains', sometimes the eternal snows of an Andean massif that the ocean has submerged. At this point in the story, Noble assures his readers that he and his painter friend share the views of the famous geographer and naturalist Alexander von Humboldt. Humboldt had just died in Berlin. He had spent his life establishing that the 'cosmos' is unified in all its parts.

This episode with the group of icebergs changes the fate of our narrator. Nothing is really the same any more. The rest of the journey is a chaos of images. The more he crosses paths with other behemoths, the more Noble forges new ones to illustrate the encounters: a warship with pointed cannons and a sharp bow, ivory carvings, clouds depicting the faces of poets, philosophers or polar bears. He describes caves, niches, balconies and escarpments. He guesses that the icebergs cast a melancholy gaze on the ship's passengers. He is saddened by the way some are obviously fragile. Meanwhile, on deck, Church finishes his preparatory oil studies. Then, in his cabin, he pencils a few sketches on the pages of a small notebook and carefully arranges his boxes.

Framing icebergs

Two years after their return, the painter unveils an impressive work to the New York public: *The North*. The painting is 1.64 m by 2.85 m. It is April 1861, opinion was positive, but not unanimous: too much emptiness, no signs of humans. Church reworked his large canvas. He decided, on the spur of the moment, to show it in Europe. In June 1863, an evening for the launching was organised in London. A number of prominent people attended, including Lady Franklin and Sir Francis Leopold McClintock. Observers in the British capital could see a broken mast, still with its masthead, pointing to a boulder on the right. Church added the detail in the final version. No doubt to evoke the tragic sinking of the Franklin and as a reply to his critics. All around the icebergs there is the same veiled Arctic glow. The painter renamed his work with the title it still bears: *The Icebergs*.

What reading can we give this painting?

A text printed on a sheet of paper was distributed when it was presented, in 1862, at the Athenaeum in Boston. In it, the artist explains his choice of perspective. He addresses the audience:

The spectator is supposed to be standing on the ice, in a bay of the berg. The several masses are parts of one immense iceberg. Imagine an amphitheatre, upon the lower steps of which you stand, and see the icy foreground at your feet, and gaze upon the surrounding masses, all uniting in one beneath the surface of the sea. To the left is steep, overhanging, precipitous ice; to the right is a part of the upper surface of the berg. To that succeeds a inner gorge, running up between alpine peaks. In front is the main portion of the berg, exhibiting ice architecture in its vaster proportions. Thus the beholder has around him the manifold forms of the huge Greenland glacier after it has been launched upon the deep, and subjected, for a time, to the action of the elements - waves and currents, sunshine and storm.



Figure 1 Frederic Edwin Church, *The Icebergs* (1861-3), Dallas Museum of Art

Church trains the viewer's eye by detailing aspects of the scene. He believes that the audience needs this. For at least two reasons. On the one hand, the iceberg is a spontaneously pictorial object. But the variety of its lines must be shown. Otherwise, the viewer risks becoming bored with so much uniformity. On the other hand, the beauty of the iceberg is intriguing. The proportions of the iceberg throw Archimedes' principle into doubt. The mass seems very heavy. And yet it floats! It is so light, almost airy. How can the combination of weight and weightlessness be represented?

The painter has observed the bergs closely. He knows that their plasticity is a challenge. Their straight lines intertwine and their curves overlap. The icebergs constantly alternate foregrounds and backgrounds. They compose volumes that seem eternal. Then they dissolve into the air and the ocean. The massive ice cubes metamorphose into small balls of volatile flakes.

Church wants to control these ambivalences. He directs the gaze into a well-defined space. Better still, he plays with the frame, making the ice occupy three sides of the painting. He freezes the icebergs in their materiality and makes a stationary image from an inanimate, hieratic world that is ice in every direction, except for on high, where it opens onto a horizon tinted with the sun of a peaceful late afternoon. This framing of ice by ice, saving one side for the source of the light, has only one purpose: to make the spectators understand that the real texture of icebergs is that of light. In the eyes of the painter, it is light that reshapes the forms.

A boulder can be seen on the right-hand side of the painting. This is not an aesthetic whim. The art historian Timothy Mitchell has shown that Church was taking a stand in a scientific controversy between Louis Agassiz and