

THINKING LIKE AN ICEBERG. By OLIVIER REMAUD.

Translated by Stephen Muecke. Cambridge, United Kingdom: Polity Press, 2022 (English edition). ISBN 978-1-5095-5147-7. 182 p., b&w illus., bib., notes. Softbound. Cdn\$22.95. Also available in ebook format.

I am an orphan, abandoned at birth. I was left for dead when my parents broke up, and still bear the cracks and scars of fracture. After the noisy commotion, however, I rose once more to see another day, bolstered by my lightweight constitution. It was hard at first to find the right way up, but after some initial wobbles I managed to keep my balance and, at least for the time being, I've found my drift. Beneath, in the dark depths, I am old beyond my time, puckered and encrusted with the growths of advancing years, but above my skin is as smooth and pale as a newborn babe's, glistening in the white light. My shroud is the luminous mist; my cradle the watery depths. I am a giant from afar; a toddler close-up. But I'll never stop shrinking, and one day I shall vanish forever. What am I?

The answer, which gradually unfolds as we read this book, is an iceberg. The author, philosopher Olivier Remaud, wants us to think like one, in the same spirit that the father of environmentalism Aldo Leopold, in his *A Sand County Almanac* of 1949, exhorted his readers to "think like a mountain" (Leopold, 2020:123). The mountain, for Leopold, has been around long enough to know that nothing exists in isolation; that every inhabitant of its slopes owes its existence to a delicate balance in its relations with each and every other. Far from a bald massif of rock, the mountain is an entire ecosystem. Likewise, Remaud argues, we would be deceived to think of the berg as an inert block of ice, frozen solid, alone under the polar sky. For it is also an ecosystem in itself; above all, in its underwater reaches it furnishes a rich and variegated environment for the marine life that swirls and fastens all around it.

To think like an iceberg, then, is on one level to dispel the myth of Arctic solitude. It is a myth to which western travellers, steeped in images of the sublime, are especially prone. Adrift on an ocean of icebergs, as if in a hall of mirrors, they are inclined to see in their pristine surfaces only endless reflections of themselves. Yet in truth, as Remaud shows, there are no mirrors, nor does nature lie concealed on the other side. It is rather all around us, and we are suspended in its web. It is one thing, however, to follow Leopold's example, by adopting in our thought and behaviour, a perspective towards the iceberg as an entire system of relations. It is quite another to attribute to this entirety a kind of sentient awareness, with thoughts and feelings of its own. This is to take matters to another level altogether.

Indigenous peoples of the circumpolar North have long warned that icebergs and glaciers, just like whales and bears, are powerful, sentient beings which should be treated with the utmost respect, lest they visit disaster on the humans fated to dwell alongside them. Remaud tells the story, for example, of a party of hunters who decided to land on an iceberg in order to quench their thirst from its

fresh meltwater. They clambered to the top and drank. Then one of them began to urinate. In vain did his companions endeavour to stop him. In one fell swoop, the berg split open and capsized, sweeping its human cargo into the waves. The moral is that to know how to comport yourself on an iceberg, you need to think like one, and that means intuiting what the berg itself is thinking.

This is certainly how it seems to polar photographer Camille Seaman, on whose remarkable series *The Last Iceberg*, Remaud comments at length. In Seaman's eyes, icebergs are distant relatives, perhaps even ancestors. And why not? We humans, after all, are composed mainly of water, just as icebergs are. We're largely made of the same stuff, and equally packed with microbes. Thus, icebergs have as much of a right to be treated as living beings as we do. Like humans, they are born and die; they react to what affects them; they share the same fate as us, breathe the same air and circulate the same water. Remaud himself, no stranger to metaphorical excess, assembles these commonalities, uniting humans and nonhumans, into "a kind of immense, wild magic square" (p. 69). No matter what beings we are talking about, he insists, "the law of life is identical" (p. 69).

But could this be to presume too much? Do icebergs not prove, to the contrary, that life doesn't always follow the same law? For a start, their birth is unlike anything that occurs in the world of humans, or of other animals for that matter. What parent would be as careless of its young as the glacier of its calf? The glacier knows nothing of the labours of begetting, merely casting off its offspring in the spasms of its own bodily disintegration. Moreover, the law of life, for humans as indeed for other animals, requires that today's children will become tomorrow's parents, as generation follows generation. But icebergs have no descendants and cannot be ancestors. Their destiny is not to grow and solidify but to melt away. Their life, in effect, plays the incremental development of the organism in reverse, while in death their final moments enact what for organic life, proceeding in the opposite direction, marks a point of origin. To think like an iceberg, then, would be to align thought with the timeline not of continuous generation but of perpetual perishing.

What would happen if we were to run all of life backwards, on the model of the iceberg? Animal lineages, leaving no descendants, would go extinct. On land, the trunks of trees would gradually thin, rivers would either dry up or run towards their source, and glaciers would retreat, eventually to melt away altogether. Is this not what we witness today, as the planet warms? Far from growing older, our world seems to be undergoing a process of juvenescence, becoming younger all the time. The ancient glacier, holding in its solid ice the precipitations of millennia, used to creak and groan under its own weight in its sluggish descent towards the sea, resisting with all its might the force of gravity that drags it down. But now it is dying in reverse, not in the production of offspring but in pulling itself up, soon to become as it was when it first

began to form, so long ago. Today, fresh spring waters race down the valleys the ice had once gouged out.

This is not happening for the first time. Around 15,000 years ago, the planet warmed abruptly causing a massive reduction in planetary ice cover, and setting in train the epoch of balmy temperatures that geologists call the Holocene—an epoch which has remained relatively stable until recent times (Lamont-Doherty Earth Observatory, 2003). Human populations of the Old World, whose hunting grounds were on and around the ice sheets, must have faced disruption to their ways of life not dissimilar to those experienced by Indigenous peoples of the circumpolar North today. Sea-levels rose, fauna went extinct, land formerly under ice was buried in sludge. Yet what different stories we moderns tell, of melting then and melting now! In our story of then, melting marks the birth of human culture and civilisation, even history itself, rooted in the fertile soils and well-watered landscapes left behind by the retreating ice. But in our story of now, at least in its more apocalyptic versions, it is civilisation itself that stands to be overwhelmed as rising sea-levels and insufferable heat place swathes of land beyond the bounds of practical habitation.

Yet my mind keeps returning to the story of the hunting party, drowned by a vengeful berg. Would it distinguish spilled urine, I wonder, from spilled words? We are all too aware that other people mind what we write about them, and that this calls for courtesy and tact. Is it the same with icebergs? Could we insult a berg in print and get away with it? The ultimate test, I suppose, would be to visit an iceberg with this book in your hands, and to read it out, whether in the French original or in this excellent English translation by Stephen Muecke. Even if, like me, you have never actually set eyes on an iceberg, and have no immediate occasion to do so, it is an experiment well worth trying, albeit in the imagination.

Remaud's respect for icebergs is such that speaking his words would pose little risk to your person. But would the berg even hear them? It has no ears, after all. And without ears, it would be as deaf to your voice as it would once have been to the commotion of its own birth. It would never have heard anything to match the "thundering uproar" that the Scottish-American naturalist John Muir recorded in his notebooks (2018:15), on his visits to coastal Alaska in the late nineteenth century, every time a berg was born from its parental glacier. Remaud wonders whether these explosive sounds, echoing through the landscape, were the oldest ever heard. But they can be no older than those with ears to hear. And if the berg were merely a floating object, then indeed it would hear nothing.

But for you, stationed on the ice, almost blinded by the intensity of the light, and assailed by sounds of cracking, clanking, and hammering, the iceberg is far more than that. It is rather felt as an enveloping presence that overwhelms all your senses—of sight, hearing, and touch; even of taste if you drink its water. You don't so much sense it as sense with it. Swept up thus into the berg's presence, your own

voice, as it reads the text, becomes the berg's as well. It is as though the berg, having taken possession of your eyes, ears, and voice, were reading to itself. You are there, listening. And the more you listen, the more you discover that you are not, after all, alone in the world but deeply and poetically immersed in its intimate immensity.

REFERENCES

- Lamont-Doherty Earth Observatory. 2003. Abrupt climate change.
<https://ocp.ldeo.columbia.edu/res/div/ocp/arch/examples.shtml>
- Leopold, A. 2020 [1949]. *A sand county almanac: And sketches here and there*. London: Oxford University Press.
- Muir, J. 2018 [ca. 1895]. *Alaska notes, summer of 1880, 1880*. John Muir Notebooks.
<https://scholarlycommons.pacific.edu/jm-notebooks/15/>
- Seaman., C. 2008. *The last iceberg*. Text by Hawken, P. Portland, Oregon: Photolucida.

Tim Ingold
 Department of Anthropology
 School of Social Science
 University of Aberdeen
 Aberdeen AB24 3QY
 Scotland, UK
tim.ingold@abdn.ac.uk