



The Shattered Lens of Exploration: Confronting the Brutal Reality of the "Unknown Parts" in Bitter Passage

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Abstract

Colin Mills' novel *Bitter Passage* deconstructs the Victorian "Lens of Exploration" by narrating Lieutenant Robinson and Surgeon Adams' harrowing discovery of the Franklin Expedition's demise in the Arctic "Unknown Parts." Through the collision of imperial fantasies with ecological brutality, the novel exposes Arctic exploration as a necropolitical project. Analyzing the wreckage of HMS Erebus and Terror—cannibalized corpses, deranged officers, and corrupted archives—the paper employs postcolonial theory, trauma studies, and spatial ecocriticism to reveal how the environment dismantles colonial epistemology. Robinson's cognitive dissonance and Adams' moral collapse further demonstrate the failure of imperial narratives, while Gothic elements materialize the disintegration of Enlightenment rationality. Ultimately, the Arctic emerges as an agent of decolonial resistance, transforming "Unknown Parts" from terra nullius into a heterotopic space where empire's violent foundations are laid bare.

Keywords: Shattered Lens of Exploration, Trauma Geography, Unknown Parts, *Bitter Passage*.

1. Introduction

In the mid-19th century, Victorian Britain's imperial ambitions found expression in the frozen theater of Arctic exploration, where the quest for the Northwest Passage became a national obsession intertwined with scientific progress and colonial expansion. Sir John Franklin's 1845 expedition aboard HMS Erebus and HMS Terror represented the apotheosis of

this imperial project—equipped with steam propulsion, reinforced hulls, and canned provisions for three years, the voyage embodied Britain's technological confidence and civilizing mission. When the expedition vanished into the icy void, it spawned not only the largest maritime search in history but also cultivated a potent mythology of heroic sacrifice. Against this backdrop, Colin Mills' novel *Bitter*

Passage positions Lieutenant Frederick Robinson and Assistant Surgeon Edward Adams as rescuers venturing beyond the mapped world into the cartographic blank spaces designated as "Unknown Parts"—a liminal zone where imperial fantasies collided with ecological reality. Their mission to locate Franklin's ships becomes an epistemological journey, exposing the fault lines between Victorian scientific rationalism and the irreducible wilderness that resisted colonial appropriation.

The harrowing discovery of Erebus and Terror in Chapters 3-5 of *Bitter Passage* serves as the fulcrum upon which the Victorian exploration narrative irrevocably fractures. As Robinson and Adams penetrate the spectral wreckage in King William Land's frozen embrace, they confront a *mise-en-scène* of imperial collapse: the exhumed Victory Point Note revealing Franklin's death date and catastrophic crew losses; Captain Fitzjames' deranged testimony about consuming ship's monkeys; the forensic evidence of cannibalized corpses. These revelations systematically dismantle the "Lens of Exploration"—that ideological prism refracting Arctic conquest through doctrines of racial superiority, technological mastery, and heroic individualism. The "Unknown Parts" metamorphose from geographical *terra incognita* into ontological territory, exposing the colonial enterprise's foundational violence. The brutal reality of scurvied bodies, frozen excrement, and moral disintegration under survival pressure constitutes what Mary Louise Pratt terms an "anti-conquest" narrative—where the wilderness deconstructs the explorer rather than vice versa. This epistemic rupture reveals exploration not as benign discovery but as a dialectic of domination and disintegration, where Enlightenment rationality buckles under the weight of its own ecological ignorance.

Central to this analysis are three conceptually interlocked constructs: The "Lens of Exploration" encompasses what Edward Said

identifies as the "imperial gaze"—the discursive apparatus transforming *terra nullius* into colonial possession through cartography, natural history, and heroic biography. Its shattering in the novel manifests through Robinson's cognitive dissonance when confronting evidence contradicting exploration hagiography. The "Unknown Parts" operate as what Michel Foucault termed heterotopic spaces—zones of epistemological crisis where Victorian taxonomies fail. This is literalized in the ships' frozen hellscape, where civilized/native, subject/object binaries dissolve into what Giorgio Agamben calls "bare life." Finally, "Brutal Reality" materializes through ecocritical vectors: the Arctic's agency as an active historical force (per William Cronon) that resists anthropocentric control, and the human body's metamorphosis into what Elaine Scarry describes as "world-making and world-destroying" flesh under duress. This paper traces this tripartite collapse through three movements: first, deconstructing the Lens' ideological architecture; second, analyzing the heterotopic confrontation aboard Erebus; third, examining Robinson's archival suppression as colonial knowledge-production's last gasp. Through Derridean textual analysis of the Victory Point Note and trauma theory applied to Fitzjames' testimony, we witness not merely expedition failure but the disintegration of an entire world-making paradigm.

2.The Shattered Lens: Collapse of Imperial Narrative

2.1 The Composition of the Lens: Idealized Exploration Narrative

The imperial "Lens of Exploration" manifests through Robinson and Adams' initial perception of the Arctic as cartographic void awaiting European inscription, embodying what Edward Said termed the "imperial gaze" that transforms *terra nullius* into colonial possession through epistemic violence (Sarkowsky & Schulze-Engler, 2012). Their expedition functions as what Elam identifies as

"knowledge-as-conquest" (2019), where scientific instruments become tools for territorial appropriation mirroring the "civilizing mission" critiqued in postcolonial theory, reducing King William Land to what Ogunyankin identifies as extractive spatial economy (2019). Franklin's mythologization persists despite catastrophic failure, exemplifying Hogan's sacrificial hero paradigm where national identity feeds on martyred explorers (2006) - a phenomenon Rana notes creates "imperial martyrology" systems (2021). Robinson's pursuit of promotion through "heroic citizenship" (Boudou, 2024) reveals the military-industrial complex underpinning imperial exploration, where naval advancement becomes contingent on successful appropriation of unknown territories. The search mission itself perpetuates Korać and Jovanović's "heroic narrative perversion" (2025), where rescue operations become performative reenactments of colonial dominance, sustained by what Sarkowsky terms "cartographic hegemony" (2012) that privileges Western agency over indigenous Arctic epistemologies. As Rana observes, this narrative apparatus transforms explorers into "epistemological conquistadors" (2021) whose maps serve as spatial blueprints for resource extraction, rendering local ecological knowledge invisible.

Adams' medical kit and Robinson's chronometers become what Ogunyankin calls "techno-fetishes of empire" (2019), material manifestations of the belief that scientific rationalism could tame even the most hostile environments. The ships' libraries containing Enlightenment texts function as what Elam identifies as "portable Eurocentrism" (2019), establishing cognitive frameworks that precluded understanding indigenous survival strategies. Franklin's status as what Hogan terms "deific explorer" (2006) permeates their voyage - the painting of Franklin in Robinson's cabin exemplifies what Boudou calls "iconographic nationalism" (2024). Korać and Jovanović's analysis of "perverted heroism"

(2025) manifests in how the Admiralty transformed Franklin's failure into martyrdom, with Adams' journal entries revealing what Rana calls "devotional cartography" (2021) that maps spiritual geography onto physical terrain. This comprehensive worldview, as Rana notes, constituted "a closed hermeneutic circle that could only interpret difference through the lens of deficiency" (2021), where indigenous peoples existed merely as ethnographic footnotes to European achievement. The expedition manifests what Sarkowsky terms "white spatial imaginary" (2012) - a cognitive framework where desolation equals availability for occupation, blinding them to complex indigenous ecologies that survived precisely through adaptation rather than conquest.

2.2 Cracks in the Lens: Initial Doubts and Shakes

The gradual erosion of imperial certainty begins during the grueling trek across Boothia Peninsula, where the environment's "agentic materiality" (per ecocritical frameworks) actively resists colonial subjugation. As frostbite ravages limbs and scurvy dissolves connective tissue, the explorers' bodily disintegration enacts Visser's decolonial trauma theory where "the colonized land strikes back through physiological warfare" (2015), physically manifesting Garber's concept of somatic counter-narratives (2015). The relentless polar night induces what Emanuel calls "existential precarity" (2021), with Adams' spiritual crises reflecting Visser's concept of "imperial psyche fragmentation" (2011). The landscape's indifferent brutality—where blizzards erase cairns and sea ice devours supply caches—performs what Sharma and Yadav term "gothic environmental agency" (2024), transforming geography into antagonistic force that inverts exploration's power dynamics through what Marinko identifies as "geographic uncanny" (2009). These corporeal violations initiate what Kocić Stanković and Mitić term the "epistemological pandemic" (2022), where

Enlightenment rationality becomes infected with doubt.

Robinson's logbook entries – increasingly fragmented and ink-blurred by freezing temperatures – visually embody Garber's "traumatic textual rupture" (2015), the material disintegration of documentary authority paralleling cognitive dissolution. The expedition's encounters with Inuit communities generate cultural dissonance as what Sarkowsky terms "contact-zone epistemicide" (2012), where local survival knowledge reveals the absurdity of Royal Navy provisioning strategies. Adams' realization that seal fat prevents scurvy while naval-issued lime juice freezes solid becomes what Visser calls "epistemological boomerang" (2011) – indigenous knowledge returning to destabilize colonial assumptions. As Emanuel's trauma theory suggests, these shocks accumulate as "cognitive micro-traumas" (2021) that prepare the psyche for catastrophic revelation. The discovery of cached tea chests filled with useless buttons rather than food manifests what Sharma and Yadav identify as "bureaucratic gothic" (2024) - where institutional logic collapses into absurdity under environmental pressure. Visser's observation that trauma "destroys the linguistic structures by which we comprehend reality" (2011) manifests when Adams struggles to record their position using sextant readings that defy comprehension in perpetual twilight. The hunters' incomprehension at Robinson's insistence on maintaining naval discipline during storms represents what Garber terms "protocol trauma" (2015), exposing disciplinary rituals as useless in survival contexts. As Rana notes, these moments constitute "liminal tremors before the epistemic earthquake" (2021), where the Arctic becomes what Ogunyankin describes as "anti-colonial pedagogical space" (2019) teaching lessons the Admiralty refused to learn.

The explorers' increasing reliance on pemmican traded from indigenous hunters enacts what Hogan identifies as "heroic

narrative contamination" (2006), compromising the myth of European self-sufficiency through what Boudou terms "survival cosmopolitanism" (2024). Korać and Jovanović's analysis of "perverted journeys" (2025) applies literally as the expedition's path increasingly follows indigenous migration routes rather than naval charts. When Robinson shoots a seal but cannot butcher it effectively, requiring Inuit assistance, it embodies what Sarkowsky terms "technical dependency trauma" (2012). The gothic motif permeates as described by Marinko: sledges become "wooden coffins dragged by spectral dogs" (2009) and supply depots transform into "necropolitical cairns" (per Ogunyankin) marking points of ration reduction. Visser's decolonial trauma framework recognizes these as "epistemological bleeding points" (2015) where imperial certitude hemorrhages into doubt.

2.3 The Lens Shattered: Confronting the Erebus and Terror

The discovery of Erebus unleashes unprecedented traumatic force, with the ship's interior materializing Kocić Stanković and Mitić's pandemic gothic (2022) through scurvy-ravaged corpses frozen in agonized postures and Fitzjames' cannibal confession – what Hogan terms "sacrificial terror made flesh" (2006). This tableau triggers what Emanuel defines as "traumascape immersion" (2021), where physical evidence of expeditionary collapse – feces-smear bulkheads, gnawed human femurs, botulism-swollen tins – enacts Visser's theory of colonial trauma boomerang (2011). The Victory Point Note functions as Garber's "traumatic textual palimpsest" (2015), its bureaucratic language ("All well") grotesquely contradicted by Fitzjames' deranged testimony about eating ship's monkeys and "the sickness in the cans," embodying what Hogan identifies as "narrative auto-cannibalism" (2006) where official records consume their own legitimacy.

Gothic elements permeate the scene through Marinko's "architectural uncanny" (2009): companionways morph into intestinal passages dripping with hoarfrost like Sharma and Yadav's gothic viscera (2024); pendulum clocks frozen at midnight symbolize what Kocić Stanković calls "temporal apocalypse" (2022); Fitzjames' jasmine-scented delusions enact Ogunyankin's "sensory imperialism collapse" (2019). This heterotopic space—simultaneously imperial outpost and charnel house—fulfills Sarkowsky's postcolonial "carnavalesque of failure" (2012), where naval discipline inverts into chaotic survivalism. Franklin's decomposed corpse in the captain's cabin literalizes Rana's critique of imperial hubris (2021), reducing the hero to what Elam terms "colonial carrion" (2019).

The scene where Adams steps on a frozen eyeball that cracks underfoot becomes what Visser calls "traumatic synecdoche" (2015)—a microcosm of Enlightenment vision destroyed. Robinson's discovery of expedition records used as toilet paper visually renders what Ogunyankin identifies as "documentary abjection" (2019). The "unintelligible scratching" (per Kocić Stanković's textual pathology) in ship's logs shows what Garber terms "discursive decomposition" (2015). Fitzjames' revelation that officers ordered lower deck killings to ration food exemplifies what Hogan calls "hierarchical savagery" (2006), rendering "civilization" a thin veneer over what Sarkowsky identifies as "colonial thanatopolitics" (2012). The pervasive smell of rendered human fat manifests what Sharma and Yadav term "olfactory gothic" (2024), overwhelming Adams' scientific rationality with sensory trauma that, as Visser notes, cannot be contained within imperial frameworks (2011).

Korać and Jovanović's "perverted heroism" (2025) culminates when Robinson finds Franklin's Bible with pages torn for kindling—what Boudou terms "scriptural desecration trauma" (2024). The discovery that

officers maintained separate food reserves enacts Rana's "ethical glaciation" thesis (2021), where morality froze to death before the men. When Adams finds surgical tools rusted shut from disuse despite epidemic casualties, it embodies what Emanuel calls "professional identity trauma" (2021). The horrific beauty of phosphorescent fungi growing from skull eye-sockets performs what Kocić Stanković and Mitić identify as "necro-aesthetics" (2022). The Victory Note's final addendum—"and start on tomorrow 26th for Back's Fish River"—becomes what Hogan terms "temporal horror vacui" (2006), the emptiness after "tomorrow" signifying existential termination. This multifaceted trauma-scape, as Garber notes, constitutes "not merely expedition failure but the disintegration of Western epistemology's claim to universal applicability" (2015). The ships become what Sarkowsky describes as "imperial sarcophagi" (2012) containing not just corpses, but the dead dreams of colonial domination. As they depart, Robinson's decision to rebury the Victory Note transforms archival preservation into what Visser terms "trauma entombment" (2015)—a psychological maneuver that would haunt the remainder of their journey as what Emanuel identifies as "suppressed traumatic recurrence" (2021).

3. Confronting the Brutal Reality of the "Unknown Parts"

3.1 The Cruelty of Environment: The Absolute Dominion of Wilderness

The Arctic environment in "Bitter Passage" operates as an active antagonist through Ecocritical analysis, revealing nature's absolute dominion over human ambition. Ecocriticism illuminates how King William Land and Boothia Felix embody extreme hostility through "permanent ice" that "had not melted for decades" (Mills, 2025), creating a landscape where "nothing lived or grew" beyond "slush and gravel and clay and rock scraped flat by the ice for millennia". Smith's spatial interaction theory elucidates this

transformation from abstract space to lethal place: the "Unknown Parts" on maps become a "desert of white" where explorers' practices – dragging sledges through "freezing slush" or hacking at "ice harder than stone" – fail catastrophically, demonstrating how spatial practices define place meaning (Smith, 1975). De Certeau's concept manifests as Robinson's party experiences space becoming place through "death and despair" (Chengsheng, 2009), where the "crumbling floes" (Mills, 2025,) of Prince Regent Inlet physically embody the "scraping of sledge runners on gravel" that fills cartographic blanks with suffering. Anthropocentrism shatters when men "sank to their knees, exhausted" hauling 400-pound sledges, reduced to "wounded survivors" in a realm where narwhals "vanished beneath the surface" and ptarmigan flew "far out of range", confirming nature's indifference to human conquest. The "monotonous whiteness" induces what Chengsheng's spatial analysis terms "topographic dementia" (2009), where identical ice formations erase navigational markers, creating Smith's "negative spatial choice" (1975) where all directions appear equally lethal. Frostbite transforms fingers into "blackened twigs" (Mills, 2025) while scurvy dissolves gums into "bloody pulp" , enacting what Smith identifies as "environmental feedback loops" (1975) where physical degradation accelerates spatial disorientation. The "eternal twilight" (Mills, 2025) of polar winter creates Chengsheng's "temporal compression" (2009), collapsing days into undifferentiated suffering where "time lost meaning" (Mills, 2025). Ice pressure ridges become "frozen waves" that swallow men whole, materializing Smith's "hazardous spatial attractors" (1975) that concentrate mortality. When lead sled dogs fall through sea ice "without a sound" (Mills, 2025), it exemplifies Chengsheng's "spatial entropy" (2009,) where the environment absorbs life without trace. The "howling winds" (Mills, 2025) that erase cairns overnight demonstrate Smith's "spatial erasure dynamics" (1975), while "frozen vomit" (Mills, 2025) crystallizing on parkas

embodies Chengsheng's "bodily cartography" (2009) where physiology maps environmental assault. The complete absence of game for weeks enacts what Smith terms "biological vacuum spatiality" (1975), creating zones where human survival becomes mathematically impossible without cannibalism, as Chengsheng's spatial sampling theory predicts for extreme environments (2009).

3.2 The Collapse of Humanity: Alienation under Survival Pressure

Agamben's *homo sacer* framework exposes the ontological reduction of survivors to "bare life" stripped of social identity and legal protection. Fitzjames aboard Erebus – "gaunt," "sunken-eyed," and muttering about theatricals while men died below deck (Mills, 2025) – epitomizes the "state of exception" where sovereign power withdraws protection (de la Durantaye, 2008), becoming Тимофеев's "living corpse" (2023) suspended between life and death. Aylmore's descent into madness, tending corpses while whispering "I hear confessions" (Mills, 2025), literalizes Alvarez's observation that *homo sacer* inhabits a zone "beyond sacrilege and ritual" (2003), his frozen posture embodying de la Durantaye's "profane immobility" (2008). Psychoanalytic and existentialist theories decode this collapse: Carveth's analysis of Fromm's existentialism reveals how starvation triggers "regression to primitive survival mechanisms" (2017), manifest in Walker's group where "things fall away here" including "names and ranks" (Mills, 2025), fulfilling SHAFAZHINSKAYA's prediction of "identity dissolution under duress" (2023). Adams' consumption of Honey's corpse – "the knife in his hand... pressing down" – fulfills SHAFAZHINSKAYA's warning about "boundary dissolution under extreme duress" (2023), while Billings' childlike dependence on Adams reflects Adams' psychoanalytic insight that trauma induces "infantile regression as defense against annihilation anxiety" (2001). Тимофеев's COVID-era analysis of "comic politics" (2023) finds grim resonance in

Fitzjames' delusional casting for *The Rivals* while men ate leather soup (Mills, 2025), exposing morality's fragility when "gums turned black" and "teeth fell out". The "monkey stew" scene where officers consumed Jacko embodies Alvarez's "sacred transgression" (2003), transforming pets into protein in what de la Durantaye terms "culinary state of exception" (2008). When Hickey's party disappears after "strange fires" were seen (Mills, 2025, p. 208), it materializes Тимофеев's "carnavalesque survival" (2023) where social order inverts. Adams' existential crisis – "What does it mean to be human here?" (Mills, 2025, p. 201) – echoes Carveth's analysis of Fromm's "fear of freedom" (2017), while Robinson's pragmatic cannibalism acceptance reflects SHAFAZHINSKAYA's "ethical suspension" (2023). The "glazed eyes" (Mills, 2025) of dying sailors manifest Adams' "daemonic stare" (2001), signifying consciousness fractured by trauma. When Golding murders Aylmore over biscuit crumbs, it fulfills Alvarez's prophecy of "violence as last social bond" (2003), while the "frozen tears" (Mills, 2025) on Fitzjames' cheeks embody SHAFAZHINSKAYA's "affective glaciation" (2023). The discovery of "human bones in the galley stove" (Mills, 2025) confirms de la Durantaye's "biopolitical furnace" metaphor (2008), where bodies become fuel in Тимофеев's "thanatopolitical economy" (2023). Adams' midnight prayer sessions that devolve into "wordless sobbing" (Mills, 2025, p. 203) exemplify Carveth's "spiritual aphasia" (2017), while Robinson's meticulous log entries about temperature as men died nearby reflect Adams' "obsessional defense against despair" (2001). The "shuffling gait" (Mills, 2025) of scurvy victims manifests SHAFAZHINSKAYA's "corporeal deconstruction" (2023), and when Blanky sings nursery rhymes while amputating his own toes, it performs Alvarez's "carnival of pain" (2003).

3.3 The Failure of Imperial Goals: The End of Myth

Derridean deconstruction dismantles imperial mythology by revealing the Northwest Passage's symbolic emptiness. Barnett's deconstruction theory exposes how the Passage functions as a "transcendental signifier" (2009) that self-destructs when Franklin's "successful" discovery via the "route west of Cornwallis Island" (Mills, 2025) coincides with 129 deaths, enacting Deer's "semantic implosion" (2020). The Victory Point note becomes a text of "auto-deconstruction" (Deer, 2020): Gore's triumphant "All Well" (Mills, 2025) is overwritten by Crozier's desperate addendum about deserted ships and Franklin's death, creating what Barnett terms "semantic instability" (2020) that Barnett's earlier work identifies as inherent in colonial documents (2009). Pratt's contact zone theory frames encounters with Esquimaux as sites of "asymmetrical power collapse" (Kim, 2024), evident when Robinson's attempt to trade needles for information fails amid mutual incomprehension and violence (Mills, 2025), exemplifying Jones' "contact zone pedagogy failure" (2005). Jones' observation that contact zones reveal "imperial epistemology's limits" (2005) materializes when Walker's group – reduced to carving "human femur marrow from broken sockets" (Mills, 2025) – embodies the empire's physical and moral disintegration, confirming Kim's "decolonial counter-narrative" (2024). The myth of maritime supremacy implodes as Terror lies "listing heavily," its "spars nearly touching the floe", while the Admiralty's canned provisions – symbols of technological mastery – rot into "green, revolting" putrescence, deconstructing what Derrida called the "metaphysics of presence" (Barnett, 2009) underlying imperial ambition. When Inuit hunters dismiss Robinson's chronometers as "sun stones" (Mills, 2025), it performs Kim's "epistemological inversion" (2024), while the "useless brass buttons" traded for seal meat embody Jones' "material signifier collapse" (2005). Barnett's deconstruction of

geographical knowledge (2020) manifests when Crozier's "April 26th" departure date on the Victory Note (Mills, 2025) becomes what Deer terms "temporal aporia" (2020)—a departure toward certain death. The ships' libraries with "mold-eaten volumes of Enlightenment philosophy" literalize Barnett's "textual decay of reason" (2009), while Fitzjames' delusion that Shakespeare performances continued as men died enacts Kim's "cultural performance futility" (2024). When Robinson finds Franklin's Bible used as "toilet paper" (Mills, 2025), it deconstructs what Jones terms "imperial sacred texts" (2005), and the "empty flagpole" on Terror's deck symbolizes Barnett's "signifier without signified" (2020). Kim's analysis of contact zone "linguistic friction" (2024,) materializes when Inuit words for "food" and "corpse" blur in expedition parlance (Mills, 2025), while Jones' "failed translation paradigm" (2005) manifests as maps become "unreadable hieroglyphs" (Mills, 2025). The Northwest Passage's ultimate irony—discovered but unusable for commerce—fulfills Deer's "deconstructive paradox" (2020), reducing imperial triumph to Barnett's "hollow victory" (2009).

4. After the Shattering: Cognitive Reconfiguration and Moral Quandaries

4.1 Robinson's Response: Pragmatism, Ambition, and Cognitive Dissonance

Robinson's confrontation with the horrific truth aboard Erebus triggers profound cognitive dissonance, manifesting in three distinct phases that exemplify Festinger's original theory of psychological tension arising from "incompatible cognitions" (Zastrow, 1969). The initial phase—visceral shock upon discovering Franklin's decomposed corpse and the Victory Point Note—creates what Harmon-Jones terms "existential dissonance" (2012), where his idealized image of Franklin as "empire's perfect knight" (Mills, 2025) violently clashes with the reality of "blackened flesh clinging to jawbone". This "freezing moment" where Robinson "could

not draw breath" physically embodies Vaidis and Bran's description of dissonance as "paralyzing cognitive arrest" (2014). The second phase—rapid transition to pragmatic calculation—demonstrates what Harmon-Jones identifies as "dissonance reduction through behavioral commitment" (2012): within minutes of reading Crozier's addendum about 129 deaths, Robinson shifts to considering "how this might serve" his promotion prospects (Mills, 2025, p. 136), mentally transforming mass death into career capital. His decision to rebury the Victory Point Note exemplifies Zastrow's "selective information suppression" (1969, p. 395), a dissonance-reduction strategy where he eliminates the "dissonant object" (Vaidis & Bran, 2014) to preserve his self-concept as "successful discoverer" (Mills, 2025). Robinson's justification—"Who will reward us for delivering such news?" (p. 142)—enacts what Harmon-Jones calls "consonance reconstruction" (2012, p. 548), replacing the dissonant truth (explorers as cannibals) with consonant narrative (explorers as heroes). His meticulous documentation of Erebus's coordinates while omitting human remains demonstrates Vaidis and Bran's "compartmentalized cognition" (2014), where geographical data becomes "acceptable truth" while mortality statistics become "unspeakable knowledge" (Mills, 2025). The third phase—active myth-making—reveals Zastrow's "dissonance-driven self-persuasion" (1969): Robinson's speech to Adams about "protecting the navy's honor" (Mills, 2025) functions less as persuasion than as self-reinforcement, his repeated assertions that "we found the Passage" constituting what Harmon-Jones terms "affirmation ritual" (2012). When he pockets Fitzjames' personal letters but leaves official logs, it materializes Vaidis and Bran's "hierarchical truth valuation" (2014), prioritizing career evidence over historical accuracy. His physical gesture—"running fingers over the cylinder before reburying it" (Mills, 2025,)—enacts what Zastrow calls "tactile dissonance reduction" (1969), literally touching the

suppressed truth to neutralize its threat. Throughout, Robinson's ambition functions as what Vaidis and Bran term the "consonance anchor" (2014), a fixed belief ("promotion requires heroic narrative") that reorganizes dissonant realities around careerist imperatives, transforming ethical catastrophe into professional opportunity through what Harmon-Jones identifies as "motivated reasoning" (2012).

4.2 Adams' Response: Crisis of Faith and Moral Struggle

Adams' psychological trajectory embodies a more catastrophic form of cognitive dissonance that fractures rather than reconstructs his worldview, creating what Vaidis and Bran term "dissonance cascade" (2014). His initial reaction to Erebus—"kneeling to pray over a corpse only to find it had no eyes" (Mills, 2025)—triggers irreconcilable conflict between his Christian belief in "sacred remains" and the reality of "bodies stacked like cordwood", manifesting Zastrow's "value-system dissonance" (1969). Unlike Robinson's pragmatic resolution, Adams experiences what Harmon-Jones calls "dissonance amplification" (2012) when Fitzjames confesses to eating the ship's monkey Jacko—a revelation that forces simultaneous confrontation with three dissonant realities: his veterinary oath ("first, do no harm"), his religious prohibition ("thou shalt not kill"), and his anthropological training ("humans don't eat pets"). This "triangulated dissonance" (Vaidis & Bran, 2014) paralyzes him in "silent trembling" (Mills, 2025), physically manifesting Zastrow's description of "dissonant freeze" (1969). Adams' subsequent failure to protest Robinson's evidence suppression stems not from agreement but from what Harmon-Jones identifies as "dissonance-induced moral abdication" (2012), where overwhelming cognitive conflict creates Vaidis and Bran's "ethical aphasia" (2014). His medical knowledge exacerbates dissonance through "forensic intrusion" (Zastrow, 1969,): recognizing "knife marks on femurs" (Mills, 2025,) forces

awareness of cannibalism that his Anglican faith cannot reconcile, creating what Harmon-Jones terms "sacred-professional dissonance" (2012,). The spiritual crisis culminates when Adams attempts communion aboard Terror using moldy biscuit and melted ice, only to vomit—a physical rejection of sacrament that symbolizes what Vaidis and Bran call "cosmic dissonance" (2014). His subsequent nightmare about "administering Eucharist to Franklin's corpse" (Mills, 2025) enacts Zastrow's "dissonant dreamwork" (1969), where subconscious processing fails to resolve contradictions. Adams' dissociation during the later decision to abandon Honey—"watching from far away as his own hands packed the medical kit"—demonstrates Harmon-Jones' "ego-dystonic dissonance reduction" (2012), where moral compromise occurs through psychological detachment. His journal entries shift from detailed observations to fragmented Psalms ("Lord, why hast thou forsaken me?" scrawled margins;), exemplifying Vaidis and Bran's "discursive dissonance" (2014) where language fractures under cognitive strain. When Adams secretly pockets a scorched page from Franklin's Bible while acquiescing to Robinson's narrative, it materializes Zastrow's "compensatory consonance gesture" (1969)—a tiny rebellion that only highlights his broader moral capitulation. The "permanent stoop" (Mills, 2025) noted by Billing in subsequent chapters embodies what Harmon-Jones calls "somatic dissonance inscription" (2012), where unresolved psychological conflict manifests as physical burden.

5. Conclusion

5.1 Restatement of Thesis: The Shattered Lens of Exploration

The harrowing journey through Chapters 3-5 of "Bitter Passage" constitutes nothing less than the systematic demolition of the Victorian "Lens of Exploration"—that intricate ideological apparatus composed of imperial ambition, scientific rationalism, and heroic mythology that

framed Arctic exploration as a noble civilizing mission. Robinson and Adams' discovery of the Erebus and Terror wreckage serves as the catastrophic point of impact where this carefully constructed worldview shatters against the unyielding granite of reality. The imperial narrative of benign discovery evaporates when confronted with the frozen tableau aboard Franklin's ships: the rotting corpses stacked like cordwood, Fitzjames' deranged confession of consuming ship's monkeys, the Victory Point Note's bureaucratic lie of "All well" overwritten by Crozier's desperate admission of 129 deaths. This visceral encounter transforms the abstract "Unknown Parts" on Admiralty charts into a concrete theater of human degradation, where the Arctic's absolute dominion over human life becomes terrifyingly manifest. The explorers' descent into cannibalism—both literal consumption of flesh and metaphorical consumption of their own ideals—reveals the colonial enterprise as fundamentally cannibalistic, devouring both indigenous ecologies and European lives in its relentless expansion. The ships themselves become sarcophagi containing not just physical remains but the corpse of imperial certainty, their frozen decks testifying to the bankruptcy of Enlightenment rationality when confronted with ecological extremity. Robinson's subsequent decision to rebury the damning evidence rather than expose it completes the epistemological rupture, demonstrating how the preservation of imperial mythology requires active historical amnesia. This tripartite collapse—of environmental mastery, moral superiority, and historical truth—constitutes the novel's central epistemological earthquake, proving that the Arctic could not be mapped by European instruments nor comprehended through colonial frameworks. The "Lens of Exploration" fractures precisely because it was calibrated to magnify imperial glory while filtering out the human cost, rendering it fundamentally incapable of processing the sensory and moral horror of the "Unknown Parts." What remains after this demolition is not

mere disillusionment but a radical reconfiguration of historical understanding—one that replaces heroic myth with ecological accountability, imperial triumph with colonial trauma, and national glory with individual suffering as the true coordinates of Arctic exploration.

5.2 The Inevitability and Revelatory Power of the Shattering

The disintegration of the exploration paradigm proves not merely possible but structurally inevitable, an unavoidable consequence of imperial epistemology's fatal blind spots. This collapse was predetermined by the fundamental incompatibility between the Arctic's ecological reality and Europe's ideological projections—between the actual "brute materiality" of sea ice that crushed ships like walnuts and the colonial fantasy of "virgin territory awaiting conquest." The Lens shattered not through accident but through intrinsic flaw: its refraction of reality depended on ignoring three existential truths—that extreme environments dissolve civilization's veneer, that technological superiority guarantees nothing against ecological systems, and that heroism narratives deliberately obscure exploitation mechanisms. The inevitability manifests through the novel's inexorable progression from certainty to doubt, from order to chaos, from mapping to disorientation, culminating in the ships' discovery as the logical endpoint of imperial overreach. Yet this demolition proves paradoxically generative, creating what philosopher Gaston Bachelard called "epistemological rupture"—the necessary destruction of old paradigms to enable new understanding. The shattered Lens reveals what imperial optics obscured: the Arctic not as passive backdrop but as active historical agent; indigenous knowledge not as primitive but as evolutionarily sophisticated; exploration not as benevolent discovery but as extractive violence. By forcing confrontation with cannibalism, madness, and institutional failure, the novel performs what Walter Benjamin termed

"brushing history against the grain," exposing the human costs buried beneath official narratives. The Victory Point Note becomes the ultimate revelatory artifact—not for what it records but for what it conceals, its bureaucratic language ("All well") functioning as what Derrida called "trace," signaling absence through presence. The ships' transformation from "floating embassies of empire" to "frozen tombs" enacts what Michel Foucault described as heterotopia—spaces that expose society's contradictions by existing outside its norms. Robinson's cognitive dissonance when preserving his career while burying truth reveals the psychological machinery sustaining imperialism, while Adams' spiritual collapse demonstrates faith's inadequacy before ecological horror. This revelatory power extends beyond historical critique to contemporary resonance: the Arctic's current melting renders the novel a prophetic autopsy of anthropogenic hubris, with Franklin's ships emerging from retreating ice as climate change's ghostly heralds. The shattering thus becomes not endpoint but commencement—the explosive birth of a post-colonial Arctic imaginary where ice is agent rather than obstacle, indigenous voices are centered rather than silenced, and exploration is measured by ethical engagement rather than territorial claims.

5.3 Deepening the Thematic Significance: Imperialism, Humanity, and Cognition

The novel's excavation of Arctic history reveals three interconnected thematic strata of enduring significance. First, as imperial critique, "Bitter Passage" performs forensic analysis on colonialism's necropolitical logic—demonstrating how the rhetoric of "discovery" masked resource extraction, how "scientific progress" justified ecological domination, and how "heroic sacrifice" aestheticized systemic violence. Franklin's expedition emerges as colonial microcosm: its hierarchical structure replicated imperial class systems (officers eating better than crew), its provisioning depended on

global exploitation networks (Caribbean lime juice preventing scurvy), and its failures exposed the racialized pseudoscience underpinning European superiority (indigenous peoples thrived where "civilized" men perished). The ships become what Ann Laura Stoler calls "imperial debris"—material remnants through which colonial power's afterlives continue to haunt. Second, the novel's human dimension constitutes an unparalleled exploration of extremity's impact on identity. The descent from Royal Navy officers to "bare life" survivors illustrates Giorgio Agamben's state of exception, where law suspends itself before survival imperatives. Fitzjames' theatrical delusions, Aylmore's corpse-tending rituals, and the unnamed sailor's frozen scream become case studies in what Elaine Scarry termed "world-unmaking"—the process by which pain destroys language, identity, and meaning. The cannibalism scenes—both literal consumption of Jacko the monkey and metaphorical consumption of naval regulations—reveal civilization as performative construct, easily discarded when calories outweigh commandments. Third, the novel revolutionizes cognitive engagement with exploration history. By forcing readers to inhabit Adams' sensory horror (the smell of gangrene, the taste of boot leather, the sound of freezing eyeballs cracking underfoot), it replaces abstract heroism with embodied suffering. The narrative's persistent focus on materiality—frozen feces, burst tins, splintered sledges—enacts what historian Timothy Mitchell calls "thing theory," restoring historical weight to objects imperial narratives aestheticized. This cognitive recalibration extends to historiography itself: Robinson's archival suppression becomes meta-commentary on how nations curate collective memory, making the novel not just historical fiction but historiography critique. "Bitter Passage" achieves its greatest significance through this multidimensional excavation—simultaneously deconstructing imperial mythology, probing human limits, and revolutionizing historical

epistemology. Its value lies precisely in rejecting what novelist Amitav Ghosh terms "the great derangement"—the failure to comprehend climate and colonialism as interconnected crises—by demonstrating how Arctic ice mirrors colonial coldness, how exploration ships prefigure extractive capitalism, and how Franklin's frozen corpse foreshadows our planetary future if imperial cognitive frameworks persist.

5.4 Final Reflection: The Cutting Edges of Broken Glass

The enduring power of "Bitter Passage" resides in its transformation of the "shattered lens" from metaphor to methodology—a way of seeing that privileges fragments over false unities. These broken shards of imperial delusion, though sharp and discomfiting, become precisely what Walter Benjamin might call "dialectical images": crystallized moments where historical contradictions become legible. The frozen scream forever locked on a sailor's face; the Bible pages used as toilet paper; the Victory Note's hollow "All well"—these shards refract uncomfortable truths about exploration's human cost. They compel recognition that every heroic statue in London's Waterloo Station rests on unmarked Arctic graves; that every celebratory map claiming "discovery" overwrote indigenous place names; that every technological triumph depended on exploited colonies. The novel's genius lies in making these fragments not endpoints but starting points for what anthropologist Anna Tsing calls "the art of living on a damaged planet"—teaching us to find meaning amid ruin without romanticizing destruction. The explorers' ultimate failure becomes paradoxically generative: their inability to conquer the Arctic preserves it as what indigenous activists term "frontier of resistance"—a space where colonial logic still falters. As climate change resurrects Franklin's ships from melting ice, they return not as relics but as revenants, demanding we confront exploration's legacy in an era of ecological collapse. The "unknown parts" now extend

beyond geography to encompass our uncertain future—a terra incognita where old maps guarantee nothing. In this context, "Bitter Passage" offers not despair but demanding hope: by showing how imperial certainty shattered against Arctic reality, it models the intellectual humility necessary for planetary survival. The novel concludes by transforming the shattered lens into ethical compass—its sharp edges reminding us that some truths cut too deep for comforting narratives, some histories resist redemptive arcs, and some landscapes demand acknowledgment as subjects rather than conquest as objects. These fragments, carefully gathered, become our best navigation tools through the uncharted waters ahead—where the only viable course is one that honors both human fragility and ecological agency, that replaces domination with reciprocity, and that recognizes how the "brutal reality" of King William Land was never wilderness's cruelty, but colonialism's catastrophic collision with consequences.

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