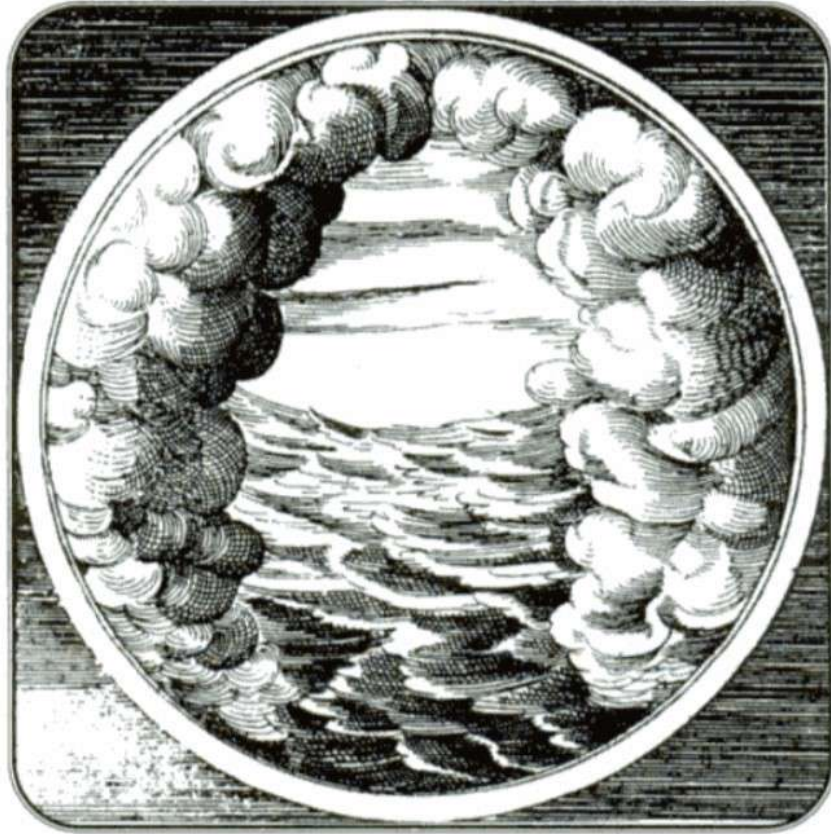


TERROR AND EREBUS



The Speakers

RASMUSSEN

FRANKLIN

CROZIER

QAQORTINGNEQ

(Roaring wind which fades out to Rasmussen)

RASMUSSEN:

King William Island... latitude unmentionable.
But I'm not the first here.
They preceded me, they marked the way
 with bones
White as the ice is, whiter maybe,
The white of death,
 of purity...

But it was almost a century ago
And sometimes I find their bodies
Like shattered compasses, like sciences
Gone mad, pointing in a hundred directions
 at once—
The last whirling graph of their agony.
How could they know what I now know,
A century later, my pockets stuffed with
 comfortable maps—
That this was, after all, an island,
That the ice can camouflage the straits
And drive men into false channels,

Drive men
How could they know, even stand back and see
The nature of the place they stood on,
When no man can, no man knows where he stands
Until he leaves his place, looks back
 and knows.

Ah, Franklin! I would like to find you
Now, your body spread-eagled like a star,
A human constellation in the snow.

The earth insists
There is but one geography, but then
There is another still—
The complex, crushed geography of men.
You carried all maps within you;
Land masses moved in relation to
you—

As though you created the Passage
By willing it to be.

Ah, Franklin!
To follow you one does not need geography.
At least not totally, but more of that
Instrumental knowledge the bones have,
Their limits, their measurings.
The eye creates the horizon,
The ear invents the wind,
The hand reaching out from a parka sleeve
By touch demands that the touched thing
be.

(Music and more wind sound effects, fade out)

So I've followed you here
Like a dozen others, looking for relics
of your ships, your men.
Here to this awful monastery
where you, where Crozier died,
and all the men with you died,

Seeking a passage from imagination to
reality,
Seeking a passage from land to land
by sea.

Now in the arctic night
I can almost suppose you did not die,
But are somewhere walking between
The icons of ice, pensively
like a priest,
Wrapped in the cold holiness of snow,
of your own memory...

(Music bridge to Franklin, wind sound effects)

FRANKLIN:

I brought them here, a hundred and twenty-nine men,
Led them into this bottleneck,
This white asylum.
I chose the wrong channel and
The ice folded in around us,
Gnashing its jaws, folded in
around us...

The ice clamps and will not open.
For a year it has not opened
Though we bash against it
Like lunatics at padded walls.

My ships, the *Terror*, the *Erebus*
Are learning the meanings of their
names.

What madman christened them
The ships of Terror and of Hell?
In open sea they did four knots;
Here, they rot and cannot move at all.

Another winter in the ice,
The second one for us, folds in.
Latitude 70 N. November 25, 1846.
The sun has vanished.

(Music, etc.)

RASMUSSEN:

Nothing then but to sit out the darkness,
The second sterile year,
and wait for spring
And pray the straits would crack
Open, and the dash begin again;
Pray you could drive the ships
Through the yielding, melting floes,
drive and press on down
Into the giant virginal strait of
Victoria.
But perhaps she might not yield,
She might not let you enter,
but might grip

And hold you crushed forever in her stubborn
loins,
her horrible house,
Her white asylum in an ugly marriage.

(Music, etc.)

FRANKLIN:

I told him, I told Crozier
The spring is coming, but it's wrong
somehow.
Even in summer the ice may not open,
It may not open.
Some of the men have scurvy, Crozier...
Their faces, the sick ones,
their faces reflect their minds.
I can read the disease in their souls.
It's a mildewed chart
On their flesh.
But this is no place
To talk of souls; here
The soul becomes the flesh.

(Sighs)

I may have to send men on foot
To where the passage is,
To prove it, to prove it is there,
That Simpson joins Victoria,

That there is a meaning, a pattern
 imposed on this chaos,
A conjunction of waters,
 a kind of meaning
Even here, even in this place...

RASMUSSEN:

A kind of meaning, even here,
Even in this place.
 Yes, yes,
We are men, we demand
That the world be logical, don't we?

But eight of your men went overland
 and saw it, proved it,
Proved the waters found each other
 as you said,
Saw the one— flowing into the other,
Saw the conjunction, the synthesis
 of faith, there
In the white metallic cold.

And returned to tell you, Franklin,
And found you dying in *Erebus*,
In the hell
 of your body,
The last ship of your senses.

June 11, 1847...

(Music and sound effect bridge)

RASMUSSEN:

Crozier took command,
A scientist, understanding magnetism,
 the pull of elements, but
The laws which attract and as easily repel
Could not pull him from the hell
 of his science.

Crozier, what laws govern
This final tug of war
 between life and death,
The human polarities...?
What laws govern these?
 The ice
Is its own argument.

(Music bridge)

CROZIER:

It is September, the end of summer...

(Laughs briefly, bitterly)

Summer there was no summer...
Funny how you go on using
 the same old terms

Even when they've lost all meaning.

Two summers, and the ice has not melted.
Has the globe tipped? The axis slipped?
Is there no sense of season
Anywhere?

September 1847.
We await our *third* winter in the ice.

(On the word third a chilling sound effect)

RASMUSSEN:

But the ice, wasn't it drifting south
Itself, like a ship, a ship within a
Ship?

CROZIER:

The ice is drifting south, but
not fast enough.
It has time, it has more time than we
have time;
It has eternity to drift south.
Ice doesn't eat, doesn't get scurvy,
Doesn't die, like my men are dying.

(Music to suggest a time lapse)

CROZIER:

April 1848. The winter is over.
Supplies to last three months only.
We are leaving the ships for good.

RASMUSSEN:

You went overland, then.
Overland, an ironic word...
How can you call this land?
 It's the white teeth
Of a giant saw,
 and men crawl through it
Like ants through an upright comb.
Overland. You set out from the ships
In a kind of horrible birth,
 a forced expulsion
From those two wombs, solid at least,
Three-dimensional, smelling of wood
And metal and familiar things.

Overland...

(Music bridge)

CROZIER:

April 21, 1848. Good Friday.
Our last day in the ships.

We pray, we sing hymns, there
is nothing else to do.
We are all of us crucified
before an ugly Easter.
Civilization... six hundred and seventy miles away.

*(On the words six hundred and seventy miles away
more chilling sound effects)*

CROZIER:

A hundred and five men left. Three months' supplies.
Our Father who art in heaven,
Hallowed be thy name...
Six hundred and seventy miles to civilization,
Three months' supplies, a hundred and five men...
Give us this day our daily bread
And forgive us...
scurvy among the men.
We leave ship tomorrow.
Thy kingdom come, thy will be done...
Six hundred and seventy miles to
civilization...
For Thine is the kingdom, and the Power,
And the Glory...
Our Father
Our Father
Our Father

RASMUSSEN:

April 25, 1848. *HMS Terror* and
Erebus were deserted, having been beset
since the 12th of September 1846.

The officers and crew consisting of a hundred and five
souls under the command of Captain F.R.
Crozier landed here.

The total loss by deaths in the Expedition
has been to this date nine officers and
fifteen men.

So you pushed on, and sun and snow,
 that marriage of agonizing light
Assailed you.

(Music bridge)

CROZIER:

In the beginning God made the light
And saw that it was good...

 the light...

 and saw that it was good...

(Eerie music)

My men fall back, blinded,
 clutching their scorched eyes!
Who ever said that Hell was darkness?

What fool said that light was good
and darkness evil?
In extremes, all things reverse themselves;
In extremes there are no opposites.

RASMUSSEN:

The naked eye dilates, shrinks,
Goes mad, cannot save itself.
You didn't even have those wooden slits
The eskimos wore
to censor the sun,
to select as much light
As the eye can bear.
Some science could have tamed the light
For you,
not hope, not prayer—
But pairs of simple wooden slits,
Only those, only those ridiculous
instruments
You need to keep the cosmos out.
I share your irony, Crozier,
That, and your despair...

CROZIER:

(Breathing heavily while speaking)

To select what we will and will not see,
To keep the cosmos out with layers of cloth

and strips of leather—
That's man, I suppose,
an arrogant beast. Whether
He is right or wrong is—

O Hell! Look, Lord, look how
They fall back behind me!

(Music bridge)

CROZIER:

I sent thirty men back to the ships,
Thirty good men back to the *Terror*, the *Erebus*
for food, somehow.
We can go blind but we must eat
in the white waste.
Though all our senses fall apart
we must eat
we must still eat...

RASMUSSEN:

Thirty good men.
On the way back all of them but five
died,
Knelt before the sun for the last time
and died,
Knelt like priests in the whiteness
and died,

on their knees, died,
Or stretched straight out,
Or sitting in a brief stop
which never ended,
died.

It does not matter how.
Five made it back to the ships
And there, in the womb, in the
wooden hulls,
died.

Five who could not go back,
Who could not a second time
Bear the birth, the going out,
the expulsion
into pure worlds of ice.

(Music bridge)

The men do not return with food.
We push on, we cannot wait here.
The winds wait, the sun waits,
the ice waits, but
We cannot wait here;
to stop is to die
In our tracks,
to freeze like catatonics
In our static houses of bone.

Already we look like statues,
marbled, white.

The flesh and hair bleaches out;
 we are cast in plaster.
The ice cannot bear the flesh of men,
The sun will not tolerate colouring;
 we begin already
To move into the ice, to mimic it.
Our Father who art in heaven,
Our Father
Our Father

(Music, wind)

One night we saw Eskimos
And they were afraid;
They gave us a seal,
They ran away at night...

(More music, wind)

CROZIER:

(Slowly)

We have come two hundred miles from the ships,
We have come two hundred miles.
There are thirty men left.
It is the end, it is
The end...

(Wind, bridge to)

RASMUSSEN:

Now there was nothing more to do,
no notes to write and leave in cairns,
no measurements to take, no
Readings of any temperatures
save the inner
Agony of the blood.
Now, Crozier, now you come
To the end of science.

CROZIER:

(Speaking slowly, painfully)

We scattered our instruments behind us,
and left them where they fell
Like pieces of our bodies, like limbs
We no longer had need for;
we walked on and dropped them,
compasses, tins, tools, all of them.
Now we come to the end of science...

Now we leave ciphers in the snow,
We leave our instruments in the snow.
It is the end of science.
What magnet do I know of
Which will pull us south...?
none,
none but the last inevitable
one.
Death who draws

Death who reaches out his pulling arms
And draws men in like filings
 on paper.

This is the end of science.
We left it behind us,
A graph in the snow, a horrible cipher,
 a desperate code.
And the sun cannot read, and the snow
 cannot either.

(Music, etc. suggesting death)

RASMUSSEN:

No, Crozier, the sun cannot read
And the snow cannot either.
But men can, men like me who come
To find your traces, the pieces
Of your pain scattered in the white
 vaults of the snow.
Men like me who come and stand
 and learn
The agony your blood learned—
 how the body is bleached
And the brain itself turns
 a kind of pure, purged
 white.

And what happened to the ships—
It hurts to talk of it.
 The Eskimo Qaqortingneq

Knows—
let him tell of it...

(Wind etc. bridge to QAAQORTINGNEQ, who speaks slowly, falteringly, with language difficulties)

QAAQORTINGNEQ:

I remember the day
When our fathers found a ship.
They were hunting seals,
And it was spring
And the snow melted around
The holes where the seals breathed.

(Music)

Far away on the ice
My fathers saw a strange shape,
A black shape, too great to be seals.
They ran home and told all the men
In the village,
And the next day all came to see
This strange thing...

It was a ship, and they moved closer,
And saw that it was empty,
That it had slept there for a long time.
My fathers had never seen white men,
And my fathers did not know about ships.
They went aboard the great ship

As though into another world,
Understanding nothing;
They cut the lines of the little boat
Which hung from the ship
And it fell broken to the ice;
They found guns in the ship
And did not understand
And they broke the guns
And used them for harpoons...

And they did not understand...

They went into the little houses
On the deck of the ships,
And found dead people in beds
Who had lain there was a long time.
Then they went down, down
Into the hull of the great ship
And it was dark
And they did not understand the dark...

And to make it light they bored a hole
In the side of the ship,
But instead of the light,
The water came in the hole,
And flooded, and sank the ship,
And my fathers ran away,
And they did not understand...

(Music)

RASMUSSEN:

And the papers? Franklin's papers?
The ship's logs, the reports?

QAQORTINGNEQ:

Papers, O yes!

The little children found papers
In the great ship,
But they did not understand papers.
They played with them,
They ripped them up,
They threw them into the wind
Like birds...

(Music)

RASMUSSEN:

(Laughing bitterly)

Maybe they were right—
What would papers mean to them?
cryptic marks, latitudes,
signatures, journals,
diaries of despair,
official reports
Nobody needs to read.

I've seen the real journals
You left us, you Franklin, you Crozier.
I've seen the skulls of your men
 in the snow, their sterile bones
Arranged around cairns like
 compasses,
Marking out all the latitudes
 and longitudes
Of men.

(Music)

Now the great passage is open,
The one you dreamed of, Franklin,
And great white ships plough through it
Over and over again,
Packed with cargo and carefree men.
It is as though no one had to prove it
Because the passage was always there.
Or... is it that the way was invented,
Franklin?

 that you cracked the passage open
With the forces of sheer certainty?
 —or is it that you cannot know,
Can never know,
Where the passage lies
Between conjecture and reality...?

(Music, fade out)

