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13 ‘An outcry of silences’

Charles Hoy Fort and the uncanny voices of science

Charlotte Sleigh

Few people have heard of Charles Hoy Fort (1874–1932).¹ Sometimes mention of the Fortean Society, however, will ring a bell. ‘Oh, isn’t he something to do with UFOs?’ The answer, from a historical point of view, is ‘not really’. The International Fortean Society as it now exists was reinvented in 1961, the UK-based *Fortean Times* in 1973. As such, they were creations of the Cold War, and their UFOs – which were indeed a prominent part of their focus – part of the well-established political and cultural paranoia of that time (Seed, 1999). A pall of weirdness hangs over the Forteans – alien abductions, conspiracy theories – which has served to silence any serious historical investigation of Fort. Ominously, his Wikipedia page (8 May 2015) is flagged as having ‘multiple issues’.

Charles Fort was, in his own words, no more a Fortean than he was an elk (Knight, 1971: p. 81). Fort died long before the Second World War and although there are other worlds in his work, there are no UFOs in anything like the Cold War sense (Kripal, 2010: pp. 93–141). The society that was established in his name was largely the work of Tiffany Thayer; it was spawned at a gathering in Fort’s apartment in the year before his death. Thayer began publishing the Society’s magazine in 1937; it quickly became a vehicle for his own preoccupations, ventriloquised as Fort’s. Yet, notwithstanding his subsequent historical silencing, Fort’s voice was his most remarkable feature. He possessed considerable and unique talents as a writer, and one aim of this chapter is to bring this voice to historical and literary-critical attention.

Fort’s voice, I argue, was above all raised in criticism of contemporary science and its silencing tendency in relation to outsider voices. I focus upon Fort’s first book in order to make his argument clear; he attempted to raise a chorus of anomalous data that could not be silenced as individual efforts to critique science usually were. It is my claim that Fort’s critical and creative stance on science is a more fruitful way of understanding his oeuvre than the more usual focus on his weird cosmos and strange phenomena. At the chapter’s close I reflect, via one of Fort’s stories, on why his strategy of raising a chorus of dissent from scientific data was ultimately unsuccessful. In short, it was a thermodynamic failure; just as heat returns to cold, so sound becomes chaotic noise, and finally recedes into silence. Meanwhile, the chapter is shot through

with a second-level meditation upon silencing: a consideration of the reasons why Fort is such a problematic figure, having been silenced by historical and literary scholars to date. These reasons are threefold: that he was derivative, an insignificant loner, or just plain mad. None of these, I argue, quite suffices as reason to dismiss Fort.

'So Charles Fort has written a – whatever it is': introducing Fort's life and work

After an unhappy childhood in Albany, New York, during which he nursed ambitions to become a naturalist (Fort, n.d.a: pp. 47–51), Fort began his adult life as a journalist. He was also a published writer of short stories (in newspapers and magazines) and drafted an unpublished autobiography, *Many Parts* (Fort, n.d.a), somewhere in the period 1899–1904. Fort wrote an unknown number of novels of which one remains, published in 1909. In the mid-1910s he received a series of bequests and, liberated from the need to earn (though far from wealthy), he underwent a dramatic change of focus. He began collecting reports of unusual phenomena culled from scientific journals and newspapers, which he wrote up in two manuscripts that have since been lost. Fort named them *X* and *Y*. With the encouragement of the editor and novelist Theodore Dreiser, he reworked the material and added more, to create four books that were published: *The Book of the Damned* (1919), *New Lands* (1923), *Lo!* (1931) and *Wild Talents* (1932).

Fort divided his final fifteen years between New York and London. His wife, Anna Fort (née Filan or Filing; see Bennett, 2009: p. 37), gave detail of three sojourns in the British capital.² The first was 'just before Prohibition came in' [1920] and lasted two years. According to Annie, the couple came back to New York for a year before a second, four-year spell in London. They spent a final two years in London after another year in New York. Fort had returned to New York by the time of his death. Whilst in London, Fort made extensive use of the reading room of the British Library, where he found his scientific journals and magazines. The New York Public Library provided him with the equivalent in the USA.

'So Charles Fort has written a – whatever it is'.³ Fort's report of his completion of *X* to Dreiser went for his published oeuvre too; it is impossible to say exactly what his four final books *are*. They are not fiction, nor are they quite fact. ('A library-myth that irritates me most is the classification of books under "fiction" and "non-fiction"', Fort, 1932: p. 43.) They are not science, nor are they mysticism. They are not personal, nor are they impersonal. They are not even quite prose or poetry. Fort was outraged to discover that the New York Public Library classed *The Book of the Damned* as a 'speculative' work (Steinmeyer, 2008: pp. 190–191); it definitely was not that either. Quentin Skinner's admonition (Skinner, 1969) to beware imposing a myth of consistency upon a written oeuvre applies ten-fold to such a provisional, sly and jokey writer as Fort. Nonetheless, it will be useful to review the content of his tetralogy in the order of publication.

The Book of the Damned consisted of two main interwoven strands. Accounts of strange phenomena are insistently rehearsed as ‘data’, interspersed with pot-shots at science. The data in question are predominantly sky-falls of one kind or another; as the text progresses they go from inorganic to gelatinous matter and finally to frogs and so forth. There is also discussion of things further out in the sky: of planets and objects in space. Chapter 12 is, for Forteans, the crucial one, in which Fort posits the possibility of previous alien visits to Earth and entertains the famous thought: ‘I think we’re property’ (Fort, 1919: p. 156). It is not, however, at all the central element of this text taken on its own terms. Instead, Fort’s strange phenomena serve the purpose of attacking what he sees as the silencing tendency of modern science vis-à-vis problematic results, anomalous data, the achievements of amateurs.

This silencing, according to Fort, was caused by something that he called ‘the dominant’ in science. The dominant – which it is almost impossible to resist glossing as ‘paradigm’ (Kuhn, 2012) – is a historically-specific mode of science. It professes to ‘explain’ natural phenomena but in fact simply re-categorises or ‘correlates’ them according to accepted knowledge.

[B]y reasonableness and preposterousness are meant agreement and disagreement with a standard ... Analyze [scientific judgements] and we find that they meant relatively to a standard, such as Newtonism, Daltonism, Darwinism, or Lyellism. But they have written and spoken and thought as if they could mean real reasonableness and real unreasonableness.

(Fort, 1919: p. 246)

Science’s ability to define its own reasonableness without external reference is captured in one of Fort’s pithy epigrams: ‘Science is very much like the Civil War, in the U.S.A. No matter which side won, it would have been an American victory’ (Fort, 1931: p. 129). In other words, science was always self-vindicating and the data were always made to speak in its favour. Science ‘saved’ only the data that were compatible with the dominant. Because the latter data fitted, they could be allowed to speak: written up in scientific journals and promulgated in the popular press. However, the expression of these data was performed by scientists in bad faith, as though it were a proof of the dominant. Logically, this was fallacious: a case of *post hoc ergo propter hoc*. ‘We give up trying really to explain, and content ourselves with expressing’ (Fort, 1919: p. 294).

In ‘saving’ the phenomena, says Fort, science may actually make them into something different: re-voice them. One of his instances concerns repeated reports of mysterious tracks. In a medieval ‘dominant’ these are made by the devil; in the modern one, by animals. The devil has no claws, but animals do, and thus claw prints within the tracks are either present or not present, depending on the dominant. The dominant, in some important sense, actually changes the reality of the phenomena. ‘But I shall give reference to two representations of them that can be seen in the New York Public Library’,

Fort promises. 'In neither representation is there the faintest suggestion of a claw-mark' (Fort, 1919: p. 294).⁴

New Lands treats the two themes of the *Damned* – data and critique – separately. The first part of the book is a sustained critique of science, astronomy in particular, and its epistemology. This clears the way for the wild possibilities of part 2: that items in space are nearer than we think. Specifically, it may be that another planet or shadow-earth tracks us, and that from it strange items periodically fall in showers. There are also hints that the Earth may be flat or stationary. It would be unfair, I suggest, to take the ordering of the book to mean that the alternative cosmology is the main theme and the epistemological critique only a preparation. For one thing, they are interwoven in the *Damned* and for another, Fort's complex fascination with 'what-if?' modes of reasoning means that either theme could be taken as imaginative foundation of the other. Entertaining thoughts of other planets may be a way of finding faults in science, just as much as the reverse may be possible.

Lo! (1931), written with evidence from the British Museum, more or less continues the themes of the first two books, with a fresh injection of zoological phenomena and arguably even greater panache. Astronomers come in for stronger attack; this is perhaps the book with the greatest number of named scientists in it and the most specific critique.

In his final book, *Wild Talents* (1932), Fort mostly abandoned cosmological themes. Instead the book is filled with tales of human crimes, accidents, deaths and fires – more 'normal' things than the phenomena of the earlier volumes. If one takes the phenomena as genuine, they would appear much easier to explain naturalistically. However, Fort entertains the thought that there are people with 'wild talents', akin to psi phenomena, who produce these effects. There is a great deal of sneering at 'mass psychology', which by his lights requires more by way of complexity and coincidence in its explanations than would witchcraft: a kind of Occam's razor argument. Witchcraft, then, is Fort's final word on the silencing effects of science. 'Religion is belief in a supreme being. Science is belief in a supreme generalisation. Essentially they are the same. Both are the suppressors of witchcraft' (Fort, 1932: p. 249). Fort does not necessarily *believe* in witchcraft, but he *identifies* with it in order to express his experience of being silenced.⁵

Collectively, then, Fort's works attempted to highlight the shortcomings of science, and its arrogance, by presenting alternative data of his own. They were 'damned' because they were inadmissible, inexpressible within the current dominant. Fort challenged the reader:

Here are the data.

Make what you will, yourself, of them.

(Fort, 1919: p. 88)

Crucially, Fort's data needed to be manifold – individually silent, they acquired a voice *en masse*.

We shall have an outcry of silences. If a single instance of anything be disregarded by a System – our own attitude is that a single instance is a powerless thing.

(Fort, 1919: p. 274)

Fort's guiding assumption that data, in sufficient quantity, would achieve a collective voice, is evident in his working method – which was a remarkable thing, to say the least. It consisted of an extraordinarily obsessive making and collecting of notes. When Dreiser first went to the Forts' apartment in the early years of the twentieth century, he was astonished to be shown Fort's collection of 'tens of thousands' of metaphors, each one written out on a separate slip of paper (Steinmeyer, 2008: p. 125). There is no record of what happened to them, but the process of noting and filing began again with scientific data in 1912, culminating in a collection of some 60,000 notes, under 1,300 topics: '1300 hell hounds ... with 1300 voices', Fort complained (*ibid.*: p. 135). He destroyed them all before setting sail for England around 1920 (*ibid.*: p. 192). Once in London the process began again. This time Fort gathered approximately 40,000 hand-written notes on small pieces of card,⁶ which he physically categorised by placing them in a pigeon-hole system of his own construction. Additionally, Fort clipped and kept articles from newspapers and kept these too. As his work became known, correspondents wrote to him with their own experiences and observations. These also were filed. It is overwhelming to contemplate the sheer physical presence of Fort's collections – hundreds of kilograms of paper. They cast a shadow of possible mental illness over their creator and, by extension, they silence his books, preventing them from participation in any serious cultural dialogue. More than this, however, Fort's notes test the boundaries of scientific education and research. By their crushing volume they question the assumption that more knowledge, more data, is always better – that there exists an end-point of induction at which one will have gathered enough instances to approach certainty. The appalling excess of Fort's research throws unwelcome light on the impossibility of this epistemology, and in so doing questions the scientific enterprise. Too much research is as suspect as too little – but why?

One reason that might be adduced in favour of not having to take Fort seriously is that his research was derivative: he did not do original research, but only gleaned it from other people's. One might usefully pause, however, and inspect the supposed categorical difference between first-hand and second-hand knowledge. Work on the early modern period in particular has highlighted the complex relationships between these modern typological categories. Richard Yeo's recent study on notebooks (2014) shows how the often copious gathering of apothegms and other verbal forms of knowledge was an intrinsic part of the shaping of the empirical project. Meanwhile, Adrian Johns (1998) and Steven Shapin (1984) have highlighted how the development of writing as a form of virtual witness was essential to creating a stable, transmissible body of knowledge. More recent scientists have also

depended substantially on the gathering of vicarious knowledge. Darwin is the most obvious example; although an original and industrious researcher in some of his projects, his books were stuffed with reports from naturalists around the world, from which he built his inductive theories. The published *Correspondence of Charles Darwin* (Burkhardt et al., 1985–) currently runs to 22 volumes, with another eight projected, each of around 1,000 pages. The scale, if not the medium, is comparable with Fort's output; and yet only one seems beyond the pale on account of its voluminousness. Even if one sets the requirement for original research to one side, Fort's activity could be counted as compatible with the work of a scientific populariser, or even a philosopher of science. Finding and digesting other people's research, one might argue, is exactly scientific labour in this respect.

'Are you a follower of the late Charles Fort?': reading communities as judges

A second reason to discount Fort's claims might stem from faith in the mechanisms of science for establishing validity and permanence as symbiotic affirmations of knowledge. The very fact that Fort remained unappreciated in his own day is reason enough to ignore him in the present. Original readers and critics could scent his lunacy and left him well alone – and so should we. We can trust the scientific filters of the past. Although this argument is tautological in form, it is one that a sociological historian might take seriously. Science is whatever counts as science in its given era: if Fort was discounted, then we must accept that. And yet historiography is full of examples which have been silenced by current scientists but re-voiced by historians as vibrant fields of past science. Phrenology is a case in point: clearly bogus by today's standards, it was a genuine area of past scholarship and debate. It has even been identified as 'the most important vehicle for the diffusion of naturalistic and materialistic views in early to mid-nineteenth century Britain' (Shapin, 1983: p. 158). If one wished to create a Whiggish history, as many scientists do, one might say that phrenology paved the way for Darwinian evolution: a vindication of a 'pseudo-science' if ever there was one. Thus the way is open at least to wonder whether Fort might have a place in the history of science after all.

Sociological historians, of course, as their name suggests, search for phenomena on a *social* level. They cannot account for individual psychology. Perhaps the isolated nature of Fort and his oeuvre is a stronger reason to ignore him. Fort is an eccentric – a one-off – ergo his work is insignificant. Again, however, one might usefully probe whether the attribution of eccentricity is accurate or whether it is an artefact of the unpalatable nature of his work.⁷ 'Eccentricity', in its etymological roots, implies an absence from the centre, an isolated existence. On a simple factual basis, this is a difficult claim to make. Fort was a bit of a loner, but not a complete recluse. His strong friendship with the novelist and journalist Theodore Dreiser placed him in a network of

journalists, realist novelists and sceptics. The membership of the Fortean Society, founded in 1931, yields an immediate list of Fort's literary admirers: the writer and film-maker Ben Hecht, the poet and novelist John Cowper Powys, the critic Alexander Woollcott and Dreiser. Even more significantly, one can look at Fort's work in the context of amateur science journalism and in the context of a readership of 'science fans'.

Recent scholarship has developed an appreciation of the extensive and diverse engagements with science in professionally published periodicals, most especially in the late nineteenth century (Cantor et al., 2004; Henson et al., 2004; Cantor and Shuttleworth, 2004). Fort's story connects with a lesser-known history of amateur journalism at the turn of the twentieth century (Spencer, 1957), an emergent force in the commercial context of US publishing (Zboray and Zboray, 2013). Amateur journalism was a youthful and aspirational phenomenon. Between the ranks of amateur publications and major professional periodicals, there were countless local titles with parochial reach in which would-be writers could try their hand. Authors moved, or attempted to move, through these hierarchies.

Whilst still at his childhood home, Fort began writing for the *Albany Argus*, (alias *The Democrat*). He recounted in *Many Parts* how he had recycled his stepmother's gossip to fill his articles (Fort, n.d.a: p. 218). Upon leaving home for New York City, he became a reporter for the *New York World* (Brooklyn edition) in 1892, progressing to editor of the (unsuccessful) *Woodhaven Independent* in Queens.⁸ In 1905 he introduced himself to Theodore Dreiser, then editor of *Smith's Magazine*, and succeeded in publishing short stories for him. Upon Dreiser's moving to another title, he begged Fort for more, but Fort had then moved on to his scientific work (X, n.d.).

In this context, as well as in the context of weird writing, Fort bears comparison with H. P. Lovecraft (1890–1937). Like Fort, Lovecraft combined an interest in science with the writing of strange, other-worldly texts, and both were interested above all in astronomy. Unlike Fort, however, Lovecraft kept a strict generic demarcation between science and fiction, producing copy that was always clearly identifiable as one or the other. Lovecraft came to the attention of the *Pawtuxet Valley Gleaner* as a result of writing to the state-level *Providence Sunday Journal* and the national *Scientific American* – both whilst still at school. He began writing astronomy for the *Gleaner*, simultaneously contributing a monthly column on the same topic to the *Providence Tribune*. He also formed links with the United Amateur Press Association, though this is an unduly grand title for what was a rather youthful and disorganised organisation (Burlison, 1983: p. 6; Fossils, n.d.). Lovecraft's original ambition to write for the *Providence Journal* had been stymied by the fact that a family friend, the professional astronomer Winslow Upton of Brown University, already had a long-running column in it (Lovecraft 2005: p. 100). Writing for the *Tribune* was a second choice, and as a youthful amateur Lovecraft felt the sense of exclusion rather keenly. The nature of professional astronomy and his relationship with it as an

amateur was a constant sub-theme to his writing on the science, just as it was for Fort.

Astronomy was well established as an amateur science in this period (Marché, 2005), and during the decades of Fort's activity American amateurs sought to organise themselves into groups for greater sharing of knowledge and methods; the Society for Practical Astronomy, for example, was formed in 1910 (Williams, 2000). Clubs were also founded for the study of special astronomical phenomena, for instance, the American Meteor Society in 1911 (Williams, 2000). Close by Fort, the Amateur Astronomers Association of New York was founded in 1927 (Amateur Astronomers Association of New York, n.d.). It is difficult to ascertain Fort's level of involvement, if any, with practical astronomy. Annie Fort could not remember her husband ever meeting with astronomers, but recalled his pleasure in looking at the night sky for hours on end and his great knowledge about it.⁹ Fort's books, especially *Lo!*, reveal a close engagement with recent and historic astronomical science.

Amateur astronomical groups instantiated a confident and occasionally pugnacious faith in amateur science. Lovecraft, for instance, had a particular bee in his bonnet about one-dollar telescopes, which he recommended to all his readers, claiming that as much could be achieved using one of these as using the latest, professional equipment (to Fort, the latter were 'millionaire's memorials', Fort, 1923: p. 139). Fort was particularly critical of the spectroscope as an astronomical tool, pointing out that the same instrument had been used both to 'prove' and 'disprove' Lowell's contention that there was life on Mars (Lowell, 1909):

The question is not what an instrument determines. The question is – whose instrument? All the astronomers in the world may be against our notions, but most of their superiority is in their more expensive ways of deceiving themselves.

(Fort, 1931: pp. 250–251)

Fort also had great scorn for astronomers' 'proof' of their theories by finding heavenly bodies where they predicted them. A typical example was the ecstatic reaction to Charles Delaunay's 'brilliant vindication' of the Newtonian system by his discovery of Neptune (see Daston and Galison, 2007: p. 212; cf. Fort, 1923: pp. 12–18). The title of *Lo!* was an ironic evocation of such post hoc announcements. To Fort, this was a patently shoddy method, epistemologically meretricious and, sociologically speaking, nothing more than a confidence trick on the part of scientists:

My notion of astronomic accuracy:
Who could not be a prize marksman, if only his hits be recorded?

(Fort, 1919: p. 134)

Fort gathered astronomical newspaper clippings with particular assiduity. Anything contradicting previous findings was instantly filed away.¹⁰

Jeremiah Horrocks's 'triumph' in successfully predicting a transit of Venus in 1639, contrary to the predictions of Kepler, was a particular source of inspiration. To Fort, it was a tale of the amateur David and scientific Goliath. 'I suppose this was one of the most agreeable humiliations in the annals of busted inflations', he judged (Fort, 1932: p. 35). Fort made play of the fact that though Horrocks 'was interested in astronomic subjects', he 'had not been heard of by one [professional] astronomer of his time'; he was 'an outsider' (ibid.: p. 34). It does not take a great deal of psychologising to see how Fort related himself to this tale. By extension, he gave succour to the amateur astronomers (see especially Fort, 1931: pp. 390–403). Their observations – without fancy equipment, without fancy theories – were the hope of the science. 'A ... reasonable idea is that if nightwatchmen and policemen and other persons who do stay awake nights, should be given telescopes, something might be found out' (Fort, 1923: p. 118). When a Japanese farm hand in Washington discovered a comet, that went straight into Fort's file.¹¹ 'If amateur astronomers were as numerous as amateur golf players', Fort suggested, 'we'd realize much more' (Fort, 1931: p. 379).

One can find more legitimate contemporary critics making similar points in the same vein. The British chemist Henry Armstrong, for example, was a powerful opponent of 'dogma' in science and a believer in teaching through experiment (Armstrong, 1903). Closer to Fort, in the sense of being a scientific outsider, was George Bernard Shaw, who mooted a few similarly unusual astronomical notions (Henderson, 1911: pp. 469–470). Fort's countryman and contemporary Henry Adams, was closest of all; his *Education* was publicly published in 1918, just as Fort was writing the *Damned*.¹² In 'The Grammar of Science' (Adams, 1999: pp. 375–384) Adams paints the historic arrogance of science and its failure in the face of recent discoveries – an avalanche of new forces (X-rays, radium) which has exploded its apparently sewn-up universe. This catastrophic disruption has, says Adams, provoked mixed reactions amongst scientists, with some of them scuttling to try and defend the indefensible whilst others attempt to brush off the limits of knowledge as though they were merely temporary. Still others have resorted to deliberate obfuscation, for example in their textbooks:

Chapter after chapter close[s] with phrases such as one never met in the older literature: 'The cause of this phenomenon is not understood'; 'science no longer ventures to explain causes'; 'the first step towards a causal explanation still remains to be taken'; 'opinions are very much divided'; 'in spite of the contradictions involved'.

(Adams, 1999: p. 414)

Nowhere was a cognitive engagement with the new reality encouraged. Adams expressed this in a most Fortean phrase: there was 'a conspiracy of silence inevitable to all thought which demands new thought machinery' (Adams, 1999: p. 315).

‘An outcry of silences’: Charles Hoy Fort 283

How widely was Fort read in his own day? *The Book of the Damned* sold well, going into a reprint edition in 1920. *New Lands* did not do nearly so well, apparently failing to sell its initial run of 1,000 copies, but *Lo!* was produced in a costly-looking edition, suggesting the publisher’s faith in the run. It was also serialised in the science fiction magazine *Astounding Stories* from May to November 1934 and thus came to a large audience, including British fans. The British science fans, as I have described elsewhere (Sleigh, forthcoming), were lower-middle or working class and moderately educated, typically originating in the industrial towns of northern England. They had been brought together by pulp magazines imported from the USA and found in scientific writing a way to develop their collective identity. Fort, it seemed, was easily co-opted into this vision.

For British readers at least, Fort was not anti-science but rather firmly in the camp occupied by their own magazines: pro-science, pro-imagination, pro-participation. The official journal of the British Science Fiction Association endorsed the very first issue of the Fortean Society’s magazine: ‘Not just another fan mag, but something considerably higher in both production and contents’ (Carnell, 1937: p. 16).

Writing in the fanzine *Tomorrow*, H. S. W. Chibbett placed Fort firmly in the realm of science as fans understood it:

It is clear, however, that ... super-normalities occur in Nature. They are not super natural, therefore, and should be diligently studied by Science. For this reason the Group to which I belong makes a practice of collecting and collating data of unusual happenings throughout the world – much in the manner of the late Charles Fort ... [C]lose study of apparent irregularities in Nature will eventually show that they fall into line with generally accepted knowledge. Here scientific fiction can play its part, by dwelling upon the data laboriously acquired by the methods of psychic research, and allowing the flame and colour of its imagination to suggest through the media of stories the interpretation and meaning of existence.

(Chibbett, 1938: p. 8)

In a questionnaire intended to understand the nature of the scientific movement, fans were asked: ‘are you a follower of the late Charles Fort?’ (Hanson, 1938: p. 2). Although the results of this survey are not, apparently, in existence, it is surely revealing that the question was worth asking. A later contributor to the same fanzine defended science fiction against its realist detractors by claiming that some of the things it described could be linked to real events in newspapers – Fort’s sources – and in *Lo!* (Birchby, 1939).

**‘The new American would need to think in contradictions’:
belief and earnestness**

A third perspective on the silencing of Fort might be that, although his methods were in themselves reasonable, his mental framework was not. The

problem, one might suppose, was simply that he insisted on relating everything to his ridiculous cosmology, selecting and skewing as he went. Thus, for example, the (near) conclusion to *New Lands*:

Behind concepts that sometimes seem delirious, I offer – a reasonable certainty –

That, existing somewhere beyond this earth, perhaps beyond a revolving shell in which the nearby stars are openings, there are stationary regions, from which, upon many occasions, have emanated ‘meteors,’ ... flaming intimacies of destruction and slaughter and woe.

(Fort, 1923: p. 249)

Such cosmological claims cannot be entertained seriously (although one might note its curiously medieval air). Yet one need not read Fort’s writing as the deluded attempt to ‘prove’ such madness, for several reasons.

The first set of reasons clusters around issues of style and genre. Fort was an experienced journalist. Many of his short stories reveal a cynical knowledge of how journalism twisted (or invented) facts and created realities through its exploitation of naive readers. His tetralogy completely eschews anything approaching a journalistic style, which he might have employed effectively had he wished to delude and mislead.

It is almost impossible to give a sense of Fort’s strange use of language without quoting pages of text. The following, from the middle of *Lo!*, gives a taste:

A TREK of circumstances that kicks up a dust of details – a vast and dirty movement that is powdered with particulars –

The gossip of men and women, and the yells of brats – whether dinner is ever going to be ready, or not – young couples in their nightly sneaks – and what the hell has become of the grease for the wheels? – who’s got a match?

It’s a wagon train that feels out across a prairie.

A drink of water – a chew of tobacco – just where to borrow a cupful of flour – and yet, even though at its time any of these wants comes first, there is something behind all –

The hope for Californian gold.

The wagon train feels out across the prairie. It traces a path that other wagon trains make more distinct – and then so rolls a movement that to this day can be seen the ruts of its wheels.

But behind the visions of gold, and the imagined feel of nuggets, there is something else –

The gold plays out. A dominant motive turns to something else. Now a social growth feels out. Its material of people, who otherwise would have been stationary, has been moved to the west.

The first, faint structures in an embryonic organism are of cartilage. They are replaced by bone.

The paths across prairies turn to lines of steel.

Or that once upon a time, purposefully, to stimulate future developments, gold was strewn in California – and that there had been control upon the depositions, so that only enough to stimulate a development, and not enough to destroy a financial system had been strewn –

That in other parts of this earth, in far back times, there had been purposeful plantings of the little, yellow slugs that would – when their time should come – bring about other extensions of social growths.

(Fort, 1931: pp. 266–267)

In this passage many aspects of Fort's writing are illustrated. There are subjects and objects without verbs: 'the yells of brats'; there are objects and actions without subjects: 'The hope for Californian gold'. Such stylistic quirks are developed in Fort's earliest writing, his autobiography and novel. With its frequent line breaks, Fort's style at times approaches a kind of prose poetry. He interleaves themes which, like a leitmotif returning in a piece of music, slowly evolve as they go. Some are running jokes, like the butter that keeps cropping up in the *Damned*. Although the paragraphs are short, they frequently end with dashes rather than full stops. (Poe often did the same, only with ellipses.) They are not complete in themselves, but lead on to the next. One is forced to read provisionally, not knowing whether the next paragraph will confirm or annul the meaning one has ascribed to the present one. This is even more true in sections of the text that are more argumentational in nature. Pages and pages go by, and the reader forgets whether she began on a trail of proof or disproof. 'Or this', 'or that' – it is almost impossible to recall to what these sub-clauses refer and in what respect.

Even within each paragraph the grammar often seems incomplete, provisional, such as the final sentence in the excerpt above. The first is little better: 'A trek of circumstances that kicks up a dust of details' – where is the main clause? – what does this trek *do*? Passive formulations are used to open a sentence and then lead nowhere. They imply a missing agency that is never confirmed, unless by the reader. The people are not, it turns out, the active subjects of the story, but rather the hope, the train, the 'yellow slugs'. Similar devices are used in the more overtly argumentational passages of Fort's books.

One verbal device that recurs perhaps more than any other is Fort's tendency to begin his short paragraphs with the word 'That ...': 'That something, far from this earth, had bled – super-dragon that had rammed a comet – ' (Fort, 1919: p. 287). At the opening of the *Damned*, a series of paragraphs beginning 'that' appears to supply a straightforward articulation of a thesis:

That the quest of all intellection has been for something – a fact, a basis, a generalization, law, formula, a major premise that is positive: that the best that has ever been done has been to say that some things are self-evident – whereas, by evidence we mean the support of something else –

That this is the quest; but that it has never been attained; but that Science has acted, ruled, pronounced, and condemned as if it had been attained.

(Fort, 1919: p. 9)

The procession of ‘that’ clauses (and there are many others) appears to be a mischievous echo of legislative formulation:

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.

That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed, That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it.

The ‘thats’ of the Declaration of Independence function differently than Fort’s, anchored by an overt statement of belief at the outset. ‘We hold these truths to be self-evident’; all the subsequent ‘thats’ hinge grammatically from this axiom. Fort’s ‘thats’, however, pile up without either an initial anchor or an end-point of completion.

‘That’ introduces a clause which could be completed ‘is deniable’, or perhaps more plausibly ‘is undeniable’. But it can also be seen in the most natural grammatical sense as the *end* clause of a sentence. ‘Because x happens it can be proved *that y is the case*.’ Its use thus gestures at the kind of abductive logic that has been ascribed to Poe (Eco and Sebeok, 1983; Sleight, 2010: pp. 98–99). Abductive logic begins with a conclusion summoned in imagination, then argues backwards to show that this indeed must have been the case. Fort, however, withholds his abductive axiom from the reader, forcing him to reach it for himself. The technique bears obvious comparison with his constant invitations to let the data speak for itself. Indeed, ‘that’ is often used to introduce the data, as a frame for what a newspaper or journal has said: *that* such-and-such occurred. ‘*Edinburgh Philosophical Journal*, 2–381: That the earthquake had occurred at the climax of intense darkness and the fall of black rain’ (Fort, 1919: p. 33).

According to many accounts – Popper’s is perhaps the best known – science is about the maintenance of scepticism, the continuing provisionality of knowledge. Fort’s style of non-closure perpetuates this stance to the point of agony. It stretches regular science to create an unbearable fermata (Kaplan, 1993), an *ad absurdum* critique. Fort’s is uncanny science, not just in content but also in form.

At this point the reader may wonder whether Fort is not in fact practising a confidence trick upon his audience. Perhaps his invitation to open-minded contemplation of the data, couched in an ultra-provisional presentation, is all a hustle. Harry Houdini commissioned Lovecraft to write a book debunking

pseudoscience (Lovecraft, 2005: p. 11); Fort is perhaps doing the opposite. By encouraging readers to think he is being nothing more than open-minded, Fort is able to sneak his strange ideas past their critical faculties. By making readers identify with Fort as the underdog, he carries them along. Again, one can see strong resemblances to Poe, whose various writings and lectures have never been uniformly and definitively designated as either in earnest or hoaxing (Higginson, 1998; Stott, 2009). Poe's narrators protest, 'Yet, mad am I not', and the reader lends them all the more trust for their admission that the world thinks them insane (Sleigh, 2010: p. 98).

Fort's earliest supporters responded to his writing in a wry sort of way. It seems that the knowing/not knowing tension was a crucial element of their pleasure in his texts. Ben Hecht's review of the *Damned* in the *Chicago Daily News* proclaimed:

If it has pleased Charles Fort to perpetuate a Gargantuan jest upon unsuspecting readers, all the better. If he has in all seriousness heralded forth the innermost truths of his soul, well and good. I offer him this testament. I believe.

(Fort, 1931: p. 3)

The actor and pulp writer Tiffany Thayer announced: 'But regardless of the absence of anything to believe, I was converted too. I "believed"' (Fort, 1931: p. 3). Thayer's praise is wonderfully contradictory, denying that there is any substance to Fort and placing his own belief in scare quotes. And yet Thayer was Fort's greatest fan. Though ultimately in large part responsible for Fort's unfortunate reputation, at this early stage Thayer affirmed the carefully poised uncertainty of his hero's claims. The considerably more highbrow writer Booth Tarkington also reviewed the *Damned* positively; for him, its literary qualities were foremost. By selective quotation Tarkington suggested that Fort's alarming beasts in the sky were neither fact nor fiction, but incarnations of science itself (Fort, 1923: pp. 1–4). This reading is, as I hope I have already demonstrated, a most plausible one.

Nor did Fort take his own claims too seriously. Reflexivity and humour were never far from his pen, either in his books or his letters. He called his philosophy of intermediatism 'a pseudo-standard', noting that:

To the intermediatist there is but one answer to all questions:
Sometimes and sometimes not.

(Fort, 1919: p. 268)

He was not unaware of his developing reputation as a crank (he uses the term of himself in *Wild Talents*), and even the data themselves were subject to doubt. Fort consistently used the word 'yarn' to describe them: 'I go on with my yarns. I no more believe them than I believe that twice two are four' (Fort, 1931: p. 153). Perhaps contrarianism would have been a better word for Fort's

philosophy than intermediatism. The point was that he could always argue another way on the basis of his data:

at any time, let anybody say to me, authoritatively, or with an air of finality, that the stars are trillions of miles away, or ten miles away, and my contrariness stirs, or inflames, and if I can't pick the lock of his pronouncements, I'll have to squirm out some way to save my egotism.

(Fort, 1931: p. 367)

This suggests that his strange cosmology was a ruse, a self-imposed challenge of mounting a counter-case to the descriptions of science. Had science held some other form of nature to be the case, his cosmos would have altered accordingly in reaction. He took explicit pride in his ability to cook up any theory and make it work:

If I had the time for an extra job, I'd ask readers to think up loony theories, and send them to me, I'd pick out the looniest of all, and engage to find abundant data to make it reasonable to anybody who wanted to think it reasonable.

(Fort, 1931: p. 65)

Perhaps the best source for understanding Fort's quasi-scientific voice (and certainly one of the more compact) is his short story 'The Giant, the Insect, and the Philanthropic-looking Old Gentleman' (Fort, n.d.b). The manuscript is undated but its contents suggest that it was written around the time that the third and final collection of data was finished. It is a tale of the uncanny and also a rehearsal of Fort's own working method vis-à-vis voice. It is a tale of superfluity designed to reveal emptiness: of voices raised to silence a shouter.

The narrator begins by describing how he has been taking notes on science – 48,000 of them – to try and prove his theory that the laws of nature apply also to human beings. He describes how in the course of his researches he is distracted by the sight of another man, Mr Rapp, who is himself watching a house on the corner of the street. It turns out that Rapp is keeping an eye on one Dr Katz, a peddler of quack medicine. For many years Katz has been appearing in public as an advertisement for his nostrum, but now he has fallen ill and has been replaced by another 'Katz'. The narrator and Rapp get talking about the former's notes and by reference to them they come to identify the Katz problem as 'mimicry, aggressive'. They get the idea from records of natural history: 'In India there is a mantis that has taken on the appearance of a flower; by means of its form and pink color, it allures other insects upon which it subsists' (Fort, n.d.b).

How to counter this mimicry and unveil the quackery? The narrator is fortified by his belief that 'for every device of defense there is some weapon of attack in Nature', no less in the human than in any other realm. He combs further through his notes:

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And we found the answer soon enough. By its own multiplication this phenomenon is kept in check. We found a hint of this in observations by Mr. Bates and Dr. Wallace that mimicking species are always much rarer than the mimicked.

(Fort, n.d.b)

There was, as the narrator explains, additional data to back this up. It related to the case of the 'Cardiff Giant'. In 1869, a 10-foot petrified man was dug up behind a farmer's barn in Cardiff, NY, and the farmer and his cousin began a brisk trade in exhibiting the hoax. P. T. Barnum offered \$50,000 for it and, incensed at being turned down, created a copy which he exhibited as the original. The existence of a second giant, it seems, sowed seeds of doubt in the public mind; *both* became suspect (Tribble, 2008). The narrator exaggerates the account of historical record, stating that 'reproductions of it sprang up all over the country'. However, the result was the same: 'multiplication was the undoing of the Cardiff Giant' (Fort, n.d.b).

Without explaining how, or when, or by whom it is effected, the narrator presents the story's denouement: multiple 'Katzes' appear in the street. One after another, these philanthropic-looking old gentlemen spread through the city. Although it is not stated overtly, the reader is given to understand from what has gone before that these simulacra will undo the power of the original copy. Five are counted off and then the story closes:

Up from an area-way! Upon my word, another of them! Most spiritual-looking and healthiest-looking of all of them: white hair curled; black-specked; blinking up at the tall buildings, so placidly, so exotically, in our wicked city.

(Fort, n.d.b)

Amplification, then, is the key to judgement. Something untrustworthy, when amplified, betrays its untrustworthiness. Multiplying its voice will force it into silence.

Fort's style in his 'literary' writing is itself often an experiment in amplification. He will frequently take a metaphor and extend it until it is stretched beyond aesthetic norms. Eventually it goes so far that it regains its power to work, having passed through a phase of over-extension and out the other side:

Extraordinary nose; made me think of a gargoyle; long and lean and poised recklessly over a heavy underlip – like a precarious gargoyle over a window sill with a red blanket out airing on it. He was nervous, and two white teeth appeared frequently, and bit upon and drew in the lower lip – very much as if he were a dwelling of some tall, tower-like kind – a little butler wearing white gloves, inside, you know – little butler constantly fearing the hovering gargoyle, and forever drawing in the too conspicuous

red blanket, with his white-gloved hands, and then putting it out for an airing again.

(Fort, n.d.b)

The first repetition of ‘gargoyle’ breaks an unspoken aesthetic rule that catachrestic metaphor only works once, and after that becomes clumsy. The introduction of the butler breaks a second rule of applying metaphors too densely. By the time the gargoyle returns as the object of the butler’s terror, it has become an amusing familiarity with fresh force. The fact that Fort first collected metaphors as he was later to collect data suggests some affinity between the two in his method. Both are pushed to test the boundaries of narrative, whether in ‘fiction’ or ‘science’.

Fort’s narrator in ‘The Giant’ bases his method – as Fort based his own – upon an amplification of data that constantly risked tipping into insanity. There is a fine line between amplification and superfluity. Fort’s friend and editor Theodore Dreiser spent a great deal of time reflecting on this problem (Dreiser, 1974: pp. 184–189), and letters between the two men touch upon it. Dreiser was greatly struck by the enormous wastage of individuals in life; for example, the black widow spider’s eggs that were eaten in their thousands. Nor was it just a matter of individuals; entire species were wiped out in the evolutionary process. Superfluity was waste, and waste was death. One could read Fort’s collection of data (and his childhood natural history collection) as an attempt to combat death through conservation; and yet he railed at scientists who froze knowledge in meaningless grimaces of ontology. Twice Fort destroyed his collections, perhaps aware that science, in its appetite for data, approaches thermodynamic death:

Heat is Evil. Final Good is Absolute Frigidity. An Arctic winter is very beautiful, but I think that an interest in monkeys chattering in palm trees accounts for our own Intermediatism.

(Fort, 1919: p. 247)

A superfluity of words approached the heat death of the universe, the final silence. In that death, heat and cold met one another; when all effort, all words, had been expended through infinity there would be absolute cold; absolute silence. One could be silent – but this would be an empty, Arctic beauty. Or one could expend words, collect vertiginous quantities of data – but this would lead back to the frigidity of heat death. Either path led to the same silence. ‘Chattering’ was unsustainable – ridiculous – but it was the only sane response in the interim.

Fort’s practice of silencing through superfluity is clearly inflected with a thermodynamic awareness. In this, Fort again resembles Henry Adams. Adams has been placed by the historians Crosbie Smith and Ian Higginson in a mode of history that is thermodynamically degenerative; unlike the evolutionists’ vision of improvement, Adams’ prospect was energetic dissipation at

work. Heat was evil for him too. The acceleration that Adams perceived in the new century was not a matter of progress, but of 'fragmentation and disintegration' (Smith and Higginson, 2001: p. 103).

Adams, like Fort, entertains a speculative ontology that underpins both human history and the unfolding of the earth within the cosmos. (Recall that in 'The Giant' the narrator has a foundational theory that the laws of nature apply also to human beings.) Adams' chapter 'A Dynamic Theory of History' (Adams, 1999: pp. 395–406) is a sort of ontologically flat account that summons 'forces' in history in ways that sometimes appear metaphorical and other times, finally, naturalistic. 'Man is a force; so is the sun' (*ibid.*: p. 395).

In 'A Law of Acceleration' (*ibid.*: pp. 407–414), Adams grapples with the challenge of integrating the new forces into an account of history. It is a challenge because such forces are by definition 'super-sensual', that is, beyond ordinary empirical means of inspection. It is perhaps in this essay that Adams approaches closest to Fort (or vice versa), drawing on cosmic imagery to express the mental leap that must occur.

The image needed here is that of a new center, or preponderating mass, artificially introduced on earth in the midst of a system of attractive forces that previously made their own equilibrium, and constantly induced to accelerate its motion till it shall establish a new equilibrium.

... this is probably [a] comet, or meteoric streams, like the Leonids and Perseids; a complex of minute mechanical agencies, reacting within and without, and guided by the sum of forces attracting or deflecting it. ... The mind, by analogy, may figure as such a comet, the better because it also defies law.

(*ibid.*, p. 407)

Fort's extra-terrestrial realms, the source of all those sky falls, performed exactly this role. Fort's cosmos, his philosophy, can be both believed and disbelieved. It is both true and not true; it is both meant and not meant. Embodying such contradiction, 'The Giant' flip-flops in meaning like one of those impossible logical statements ('I always tell lies'). It is the science gleaned by the narrator that proves reliable in solving the problem of Katz; and yet, by the same method of amplification, the narrative voice of Fort's tetralogy undermines science. Science is both true and not true. Or as Adams put it, also speaking of science: 'The new American would need to think in contradictions' (*ibid.*: p. 434). Such nonsense, at least in Fort's mouth, sounds like chatter.

Conclusion

In his *Silence: A Christian History*, Diarmaid MacCulloch (2013) points out that silence can be chosen or imposed: creative or damaging. Fort, it seems,

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was aware of both kinds. He saw, first, a silencing that he judged had been imposed upon past scientific outsiders and on scientific amateurs of his own day. Thus he concluded *New Lands*: ‘Silence that is conspiracy to hide past ignorance; that is imbecility’ (Fort, 1923: p. 249).

I am not, of course, arguing that Fort should be treated as a legitimate scientist, but I am trying to demonstrate that none of the *prima facie* reasons one might have for dismissing him as a serious interlocutor in scientific discourse is in itself sufficient. The very troubling nature of Fort and his work arises because of their similarity to legitimate scientific practices. Fort is alarming because he is *too close* to science. He attempted to create such a babble of voices from science, to invoke such a torrent of ‘expert’ knowledge-telling, that it would become a kind of white noise and conjure the silence that lay behind it – the silence of true observation.

The silencing of the amateur, was – perhaps as he feared – imposed upon Fort too; and yet it was also what he chose, in his own wry and contrary way. In 1916 he wrote to Dreiser:

I asked you for advice, and you gave me silence. This is the only sound philosophy. Hereafter I am going to publish only silences, myself. Only nothingness can be Truth.¹³

What could he expect, if he was to speak in silences? A stony silence in response.

Notes

- 1 Two archives of Fort’s papers are in known existence. One set is at the University of Pennsylvania, catalogued as mscoll30. These are referred to in this essay in the format ‘Penn [folder number]: [page number]’. The other archive is at the New York Public Library. Reference to these follows the library’s system, prefaced ‘NYPL’. An additional online resource is at resologist.net. This collection of unpublished and rare writing by Fort is curated by someone going by the name of Mr X. Although the name does not inspire scholarly confidence (it is another symptom of the Fort story), the material on the site gives every impression of being accurately transcribed and meticulously edited. In so far as I have cross-checked it with original materials from the two archives and published primary sources it is completely reliable. I am grateful to Mr X for his answers to my questions during the preparation of this essay, and recommend his website to anyone wishing to begin reading Fort.
- 2 Anna Fort, interview with Tiffany Thayer, n.d. Penn 12330: 2–3.
- 3 Fort, letter to Dreiser, 31 March 1916. Penn 2043: 5.
- 4 This might appear to affirm that the claw marks are and have always been real, irrespective of the dominant in place at any given time. However, Fort rarely means anything straightforwardly.
- 5 The identification of scientists with witch-hunters has been exploited by more recent conspiracy theorists than the Forteans, namely climate change deniers. See publications of the George C. Marshall Institute, e.g., <http://marshall.org/climate-change/climate-skepticism-todays-witch-hunt-and-mccarthyism/>.

- 6 Personal communication from Mr X.
- 7 Cf. Sleight (2007: p. 36) on August Forel as 'eccentric'.
- 8 Letter to Dreiser, 1 December 1919 [1915?]. Penn 2042: 16.
- 9 Anna Fort interviewed by Tiffany Thayer [transcript]. Penn 12330: 7.
- 10 NYPL AF-III-456; AF-I-11.
- 11 NYPL AF-I-336.
- 12 There is no archival evidence to suggest whether or not Fort read Adams' *Education*, but as I explore below, there are textual hints that he may have done.
- 13 Fort, letter to Dreiser, 27 August 1916. Penn 2043: 18.

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Both the sociology of science and the history of science have also failed to highlight the varied functions of silence in the practice of science, despite interests in tacit knowledge and cultures of secrecy. Through a range of case studies from historical and contemporary situations, this volume draws attention to the significance of silence, its different qualities and uses, and the nature, function and meaning of silence for science and technology studies. Table of contents. chapter |28 pages. Introduction: The communicative functions of silence in science. ByFELICITY MELLOR. [View abstract.](#) "An outcry of silences": Charles Hoy Fort and the uncanny voices of science. ByCHARLOTTE SLEIGH. [View abstract.](#)