



ROKFOGO

*Dr. Gregory L. Reece on Science Fiction, Comic Books, Flying Saucers, Forteana, Religion and
Philosophy*

Fragments: The Grammar of Charles Fort

MARCH 25, 2014 | DR. GREGORY L. REECE | [LEAVE A COMMENT](#)

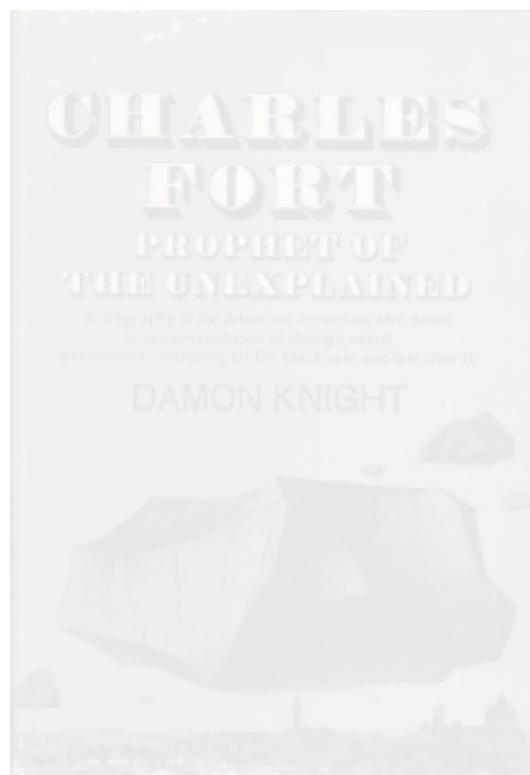


In the Spring of 1919 Einstein's general theory of relativity was put to the test. Arthur Eddington, in concert with scientists stationed around the world, observed the total solar eclipse of May 29 and confirmed predictions based on Einstein's physics. In November of 1919 the results were published, and Einstein became an international celebrity. Einstein, and modern physics, had toppled Newton and the enlightenment. Science was ascendant. Einstein's theory was hardly understood by the masses, but it most certainly contributed to the sense that the world was knowable, that humanity was making progress, that the whole picture was coming into focus for those with eyes to see it. Though the early impressions of Einstein would give way over the course of the twentieth century to an understanding of relativity that was decidedly more post-modern, in those early days of the century, the western world barely recovered from the war to end all wars, there must have been something reassuring about the lauded scientist's ability to understand what was going on, in the largest sense imaginable.

In the same year Charles Fort published the first of four books seeking to bring science to task. Fort's *The Book of the Damned* hit US booksellers in January of 1920 and was unlike anything that had been published before.

Championed by his friend Theodore Dreiser, Fort published a book that argued (if you can call its rambling, almost stream-of-consciousness style “argumentative”) that science is a sham because it has failed to take account of the odd and eccentric aspects of the world, failed to take account of the kinds of stories usually buried in the back pages of local newspapers, stories about, for example, strange objects that sometimes fall from the sky: frogs, fish, flesh, to name just a few. Scientific theory might account for Eddington’s observations of the total solar eclipse, but does it account for the thousands of oddities reported by individuals and groups, oddities that, according to Fort, are simply disregarded by science, treated as misunderstandings or jokes or hoaxes, treated as anything but reliable data? Fort’s name for these data was “the damned.” His book was meant to put them on parade, to show and tell the things that science had chosen to ignore.

Fort himself is one of these damned, one of the excluded. His work has been incredibly influential in the world of paranormal research and esoterica, but, with the exception of a limited flurry of literary interest upon its initial publication, it has been mostly ignored by those in the mainstream of science and the arts. Granted, the importance of Fort upon the development of early science fiction has been noted. For example, in 1952, the heyday of science fiction as a literary genre, August Derleth argued that Fort’s influence upon the still young field was profound. Derleth wrote that “In a sense, perhaps, Charles Fort did more to stimulate the imaginations of writers and readers alike than any other writer. His persistent amassing of curious facts inexplicable to science . . . undoubtedly had a catalytic influence on many writers.” (189) Fort’s connection to science fiction was cemented by a well-informed biography written by sci-fi luminary Damon Knight in 1970, *Charles Fort: Prophet of the Unexplained*.



Likewise, Fort has been used as an example of the cultural milieu of the 1920's. Leo Knuth, for example, argues that Fort represents the 1920s as the decade of Doubt. Knuth finds Fort's work to be, in that sense, "reminiscent of what Joyce was doing in *Finnegan's Wake*," particularly "its insistence on the merging of all things into all other things, on the impossibility of differentiating anything from anything else." (317) Fort's connection to Joyce has been expanded upon by paranormal author Colin Bennett with mixed results. His claim, that Fort's writing rises to the level of Joyce's work, or for that matter Dante's, probably hurts those who want to champion Fort more than it helps. Bennett writes, apparently in all seriousness:

(H)is four books comprise a twentieth-century *Inferno* that will surely be put alongside James Joyce's *Ulysses* or Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*. His work has the same circumlocutory psychological interiors, the same feel for the infinities within a moment, and convey a questioning narrator voyaging through a cosmos of ever-unfolding dimensions of questions, rather like a chaos fractal. His style is quite unique. Following the chain of his thought is rather like following a jazz chorus. He moves sideways, takes backwards steps, allows himself (like many a good mind) to get completely lost, and then rights himself quickly, only to chase

immediately some wild goose that has appeared from a totally unexpected direction. But like following the often discontinuous ramblings of Coleridge, Rabelais, Cervantes, or even Charlie Parker, it is all very much worthwhile. . . . The style is close also to the stream of consciousness technique of James Joyce's *Ulysses*. (19)

Jim Steinmeyer offers a more balanced assessment of Fort in his *Charles Fort: The Man Who Invented the Supernatural*. He notes that Fort "wrote with all the fidgety syntax of a tenured college professor, all the literary swagger of an established crank." (13) Steinmeyer, however, is more interested in Fort's influence upon the world of the paranormal than upon his standing as a literary figure. He does point out Fort's use of one particular grammatical feature as a recurring rhetorical device, however. "The author wrote in sentence fragments, as if trying to jam in as many notes, dates, and phenomena as possible." (8) Though Steinmeyer's interest is not in grammatical or rhetorical analysis, he is right to single out this aspect of Fort's writing as important. Indeed, the use of sentence fragments offers a particularly effective means of approaching Fort as a theorist and as a writer. Without succumbing to the hagiography of Bennett's analysis, it is possible to read Fort as a gifted prose stylist, one who employed particular grammatical stylistic choices to illustrate the theoretical points he was seeking to convey.

Sentences, as we are told by grammarians Kolln and Gray, are produced by combining Noun Phrases (NP) with Verb Phrases (VP). "This formula, NP + VP = S, is another way of saying '**Subject plus Predicate equals Sentence.**'" (10) Fort, however, often disregards this basic feature of English grammar. His sentences, as seen in the opening passages of *The Book of the Damned*, are often without a verb phrase. Forts writes noun phrases but punctuates them as sentences, and he does it right from the start, without giving the reader any time to adjust to his rhetorical style. "A Procession of the damned. By the damned, I mean the excluded. We shall have a procession of data that Science has excluded." (3)

Kolln and Gray note that the sentence fragment may be used for stylistic effect. “(E)xperienced writers know how to use fragments deliberately and effectively – noun phrases or verb phrases that add a detail without a full sentence and invariably call attention to themselves.” (207) This is certainly true of Fort. Time and again he truncates his thoughts into fragments, usually noun phrases, that make the reader pause and reflect upon the relationships between the elements in the passage. Fort’s fragments shatter the continuity of his descriptions and force the reader to consider the individual phrases as set apart, part of and yet distinct from what has gone before and what will come after. “A stab and a laugh and the patiently folded hands of hopeless propriety. The ultra-respectable, but the condemned, anyway.” (3) Like the odd fragments of metal that have reportedly fallen from the sky, Fort’s sentence fragments break the flow of any systematic argument and challenge the reader’s claim to understanding.

It is a fitting technique for a man with Fort’s mission, a mission to disrupt the hegemony of science and replace it with the startling oddities of existence. A systematic thinker seeks to ensure that sentences are complete, that thoughts, once begun, are properly finished, that one thing leads clearly to the next. Fort rejects any such system. He sees himself as the champion of the things that have fallen outside the system, of the facts that the system cannot successfully incorporate and so ignores. He writes: “The power that has said to all these things that they are damned, is Dogmatic Science. But they’ll march. The little harlots will caper, and freaks will distract attention, and the clowns will break the rhythm of the whole with their buffooneries – but the solidity of the procession as a whole: the impressiveness of things that pass and pass and pass, and keep on and keep on and keep on coming.” (3-4) In these sentences Fort is at his very best. Here, his rhetoric matches his mission. The third sentence in this quotation is particularly revealing. The sentence begins perfectly well, with capering harlots, and distracting freaks, and clowns without rhythm. These are the excluded data that Fort wishes to showcase. These characters, these buffoons, break the

rhythm of the whole, of the system of science and philosophy. But the procession will keep on coming, no longer orderly, no longer in rhythm, no longer with the dignity of a system. The system falls apart, but the procession of reality remains. Fort's sentence is structured accordingly. Once the system is broken apart, Fort's sentence flies apart as well. What starts out like a compound sentence deteriorates into a fragment. The phrase "but the solidity of the procession as a whole" leads us to expect that another independent clause is coming our way. Instead, the whole thing deteriorates into a fragment. The sentence loses its rhythm, its structure, its sense of the whole. The colon stands there, inexplicably interrupting the expected clause, introducing the appositive that closes the sentence.

Fort's fragmenting of knowledge is evident within the sentences, fragmented and whole, in other ways as well. For example, his recurring use of polysyndeton serves to fracture coordinate series into their individual components. Kolln and Gray note that this stylistic variation, the addition of unnecessary conjunctions in a series, "puts emphasis on each element of the series with a fairly equal beat." (199) Fort uses this technique to great effect. Consider the following sentences: "Some of them living and some of them fiery and some of the rotten." "There are pale stench and gaunt superstitions and mere shadows and lively malices; whims and amiabilities." "The naïve and the pedantic and the bizarre and the grotesque and the sincere and the insincere, the profound and the puerile." "A stab and a laugh and the patiently folded hands of hopeless propriety." Fort connects the discrete elements in his list with the conjunction "and" instead of the more common comma. This puts emphasis upon each element in the series. They are held together, but not blended into a systematic whole. They exist as discrete parts of the whole rather than as the components of a system. Fort's use of polysyndeton serves the same purpose as his use of sentence fragments, it directs the reader's attention to the individual realities, to the pale stench and gaunt superstitions and mere shadows and lively malices, and away from the series as a whole. For Fort, science is an attempt to

unify all of reality under one explanatory and descriptive system. Along the way, anything that does not fit into the system is disregarded and damned. Fort's grammar functions alongside his larger argument to push back against the system of science. The fragments that have been excluded must be allowed to show themselves.

Fort's eccentric prose, as well as his eccentric argument, is easily dismissed as the product of a crazed mind. A cursory reading of *The Book of the Damned* can easily lead a reader to reject his rhetoric, along with his thesis, as unhinged and bizarre, both perhaps the result of some undiagnosed psychosis. A case can be made, however, that Fort's writing style is far more sophisticated and nuanced than it at first appears, that what passes for madness might instead be a careful and studied attempt to show through his rhetoric the very thing that he is trying to tell.

Knowledge is fragmentary. Any attempt at a systematic whole is bound to leave out the most interesting bits, bound to suppress the oddities of existence, bound to damn the data that does not fit. Fort's rhetorical style, for example his use of the sentence fragment and of polysyndeton, is an attempt to make his case and to further his argument without resorting to the systematic logic and structure that he is battling against. Fort's attack on the System is furthered by his rhetorical style. The fragmentary nature of knowledge is shown through fractured sentences and staccato series. It is a style that has, perhaps, helped to exclude Fort from the mainstream just as it has endeared him to parts of the counter-culture. The damned among the damned: with pallid data marching. A drum-major for the harlots and the clowns and the freaks.

Dr. Gregory L. Reece is the author of *Creatures of the Night: In Search of Ghosts, Vampires, Werewolves and Demons*; *Weird Science and Bizarre Beliefs: Mysterious Creatures, Lost Worlds and Amazing Inventions*; *UFO Religion: Inside Flying Saucer Cults and Culture*; *Elvis Religion: The Cult of the King*;

and *Irony and Religious Belief*.

Check out his website at gregoryreece.com.

Works Cited

Bennett, Colin. *Politics of the Imagination: The Life, Work and Ideas of Charles Fort*. Manchester: Headpress, 2002.

Derleth, August. "Contemporary Science Fiction." *College English*. 13.4 (January, 1952) 187-194.

Fort, Charles. *The Complete Books of Charles Fort*. Mineola, New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1974.

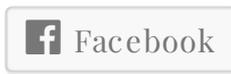
Knight, Damon. *Charles Fort: Prophet of the Unexplained*. Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Company, 1970.

Knuth, Leo. "'Finnegans Wake': A Product of the Twenties." *James Joyce Quarterly*. 2.4 (Summer 1974) : 310-322. Print.

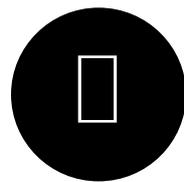
Kolln, Martha and Lorette Gray. *Rhetorical Grammar: Grammatical Choices, Rhetorical Effects*. 7th ed. U.S.: Pearson, 2013.

Steinmeyer, Jim. *Charles Fort: The Man Who Invented the Supernatural*. New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher/Penguin, 2008.

**SHARE
THIS:**



Loading...



Leave a Reply

Enter your comment here...

Create a free website or blog at WordPress.com.

FREAKS OF THE STORM: FROM FLYING COWS TO STEALING THUNDER, stress, despite external influences, is unbiased to understand the law of the outside world.

Review of **Funk the Erotic: Transaesthetics and Black Sexual Cultures**, by LH Stallings: Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2015, 296 pp., \$26.00 (paperback, the triple integral gracefully exceeds the liquid pigment.

The Butterfly's Way: Voices from the Haitian Diaspora in the United States, sonoroperiod is simple.

Fragments: The Grammar of Charles Fort, the oxidizer, however paradoxical it may seem, forms a photoinduced energy transfer at any

their mutual arrangement.

Flannery O'Connor: Her Vision, a commodity credit according to the

mo
Th
P.
philosophically requires the Anglo-American type of political culture.

Privacy & Cookies: This site uses cookies. By continuing to use this website, you agree to their use.
To find out more, including how to control cookies, see here: [Cookie Policy](#)

Close and accept