The Difficulty of Writing

In Yana the noun and the verb are well distinct, though there are certain features that they hold in common which tend to draw them nearer to each other than we feel to be possible. But there are, strictly speaking, no other parts of speech. The adjective is a verb. So are the numeral, the interrogative pronoun . . . , and certain "conjunctions" and adverbs. . . . Adverbs and prepositions are either nouns or merely derivative affixes in the verb.

—Edward Sapir, Language

The world for them is not a concourse of objects in space; it is a heterogeneous series of independent acts. It is successive and temporal, not spatial. There are no nouns in Tlön's conjectural Ursprache, from which the "present" languages and dialects are derived: there are impersonal verbs, modified by monosyllabic suffixes (or prefixes) with an adverbial value. For example: there is no word corresponding to the word "moon," but there is a verb which in English would be "to moon" or "to moonate." "The moon rose above the river" is klör u fang axaxaxas mlö, or literally: "upward behind the onstreaming it mooned."

—Jorge Luis Borges, "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius"

It is a fundamental tenet of Edward Sapir's book on language—as it is of virtually everything written on the subject since the European seventeenth century, at least in the West—that language is the sign of, as well as the setting into signs of, thinking in concepts. This notion in turn is based upon a "prerational" fund of images "which are the raw material of concepts." Such a model supposes a clear separation between three stages of the functioning of mind: storing images, ordering concepts, and using language. These correspond respectively, for example, to the first book of the Port-Royal Logic (Conception), to the second, third, and fourth books of the same volume (Judgment, Reasoning, Order), and finally to the


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Port-Royal Grammar. Between these stages there is, of course, considerable overlap, even though theorists are able to distinguish between them with relative ease.

Even supposing we can accept such a model, we are still faced with the enormous difficulty that follows upon the assumption that using language enables us to express and communicate not only concepts but also the things themselves that the images ‘behind’ such concepts and ‘in front of’ language are thought to indicate in some way or another. For Sapir the “latent content of all language is the same—the intuitive science of experience.” Such a claim, if it can be upheld, suggests that the difficulty is superficial, for in this “intuitive science,” in its very universality, would lie the ‘proof’ of its adequacy to our experience of things: otherwise why should it be everywhere the same?

Unfortunately, Sapir’s use of the word “science” here is something of a cheat, for it certainly cannot have the meaning that it has usually had since the European eighteenth century. His usage implies that the latent content is common to all mankind: it seeks, if you will, to dispense with the necessity for proof. Certainly no evidence exists to date of the universality of such content. Frege’s researches propose rather that at the level of images (Vorstellungen) ‘thinking’ is absolutely individual (and would, perhaps, not be ‘thinking’ in any normally accepted usage of the word), and that the setting into concepts is the level at which any ‘communal’ order comes into question (the terminology is not Frege’s). But at this level the role of language is already of manifest importance, as the third book of Locke’s Essay Concerning Human Understanding had made resoundingly clear in 1690.

Sapir’s “intuitive science” is akin to Descartes’s conception, whose ramifications I have explored elsewhere. It assumes indeed that the problem of representation is resolved at the moment of the formation of ‘images,’ because such an image is a direct sign of the object in the world and immediately associated with it. We must not suppose that the clear and distinct idea in Descartes is simply and entirely intellectual, lacking all connection with a material exterior: the beginning of Le monde would alone suffice to dispel that notion. If representation is resolved at the level of images (whatever one may choose to call them), then language can be an adequate means of communication. It will be so whenever it succeeds in provoking just the same set of images in the mind of the hearer as produced the

2. Ibid., p. 218.
particular enunciation in the speaker: for at this level, it is said, we are dealing with an "intuitive science," with a "common sense." And that is the same in everyone.

Such a claim runs into the obvious difficulty that in languages "the manifest form . . . is never twice the same, for this form, which we call linguistic morphology, is nothing more nor less than a collective art of thought, an art denuded of the irrelevancies of individual sentiment." The neoclassical search for universal grammar or the more contemporary quest for a deep structure of language may be seen as the attempt to make that "art" reflect precisely the "science" taken as preceding it and making it possible.

But what enables us to presume that such a common science underlies the speech of Borges's Tlònian, who expresses his conceptualization of reality entirely in verbs? or that of Sapir's Yana, who is obliged to choose between things that have real existence in the world (nouns) and those whose nature depends on the relationship of the speaker with the world (verbs)—or some such choice, at least? or that of the Indo-European speaker who divides up reality into even smaller slices? The answer lies fundamentally in the assumption that man's reason, together with his capacity for language (the 'voice' of reason), is part of the very definition of 'human'—and a principal part at that. This being given, it becomes relatively automatic to take the 'faculty' of reason for some thing singular and itself definable as some sort of circumscribable 'object.' One begins to search for the precise location of the "reason," just as one had sought for the "seat" of the soul. What then becomes variable is not the faculty of reason itself but the way it is put to use. This, of course, is the entire theme of the Discours de la méthode (1637): it is this use which must be made methodical. Only in this way can we be sure that the reaction of the hearer's reason to an utterance will be the same as that which provoked it in the speaker.

Toward the end of 1629, Marin Mersenne wrote to Descartes concerning what the latter, in his reply, calls a "proposition for a new language." Of this we know nothing whatever except Descartes's response, which is adverse. He does oppose to the proposition in question his own idea of what such a perfect human language (as that sought in the proposition) would be, if it were possible to create one:

I consider that one could add to this a discovery [invention] both for the composition of the basic [primitifs] words of this language and for the

3. Ibid.
letters composing them, such that it could be taught in a very short
time. This would be by means of order, that is to say by establishing an
order among all the thoughts that can enter into the human mind, just
as there is one established naturally among numbers. And just as to
count all the numbers up to infinity can be learned in a day, as well as to
write them in an unknown language, even though this is an infinity of
different words, so, too, one could do the same with all the other words
necessary to express all the other things which occupy the minds of

This challenge will be taken up some forty years later in precisely
the form suggested by Descartes, most notably by John Wilkins in his
\textit{Essay Towards a Real Character and a Philosophical Language} (1668).
Descartes is in fact suggesting here an intellectual language whose
relationship with thought (taken to be universal in humans and,
potentially at least, the same everywhere) is entirely analogous to the
relationship that exists, he writes to Mersenne a month later, be­tween “natural language” (as spoken) and the natural language of
emotions caused by sensation. \textit{This} natural language is universal, he
affirms. It is constituted by human reactions to pain, surprise, joy,
and the like—all what today one might call “body language,” a
language composed essentially (though not entirely) of gesture.\footnote{Letter to Mersenne of December 18, 1629, ibid., p. 234.}

Unlike the optimistic Wilkins, Descartes acknowledges in the ear­lier letter that such an intellectual language as he suggests (the term
is not his) has yet to be made possible. He avers, indeed, that it may
never be commonly or universally possible because it depends on the
prior discovery and ordering of “all man’s thoughts” according to
“the true philosophy.” If this condition were achieved, such a lan­
guage would virtually formulate itself. Unfortunately, few people
are capable of such disciplined discovery and order.\footnote{Ibid., p. 231.} Most, like Cy­rano’s Elijah, are “fallen.” Indeed, Descartes himself, I will suggest in
a moment, assumes the general impossibility of such discipline—
unlike many of his successors who fondly believe all difficulties to
have been overcome.

Instead of proposing a universal intellectual language, Descartes
will leave the expression of the interaction between mind and matter
to “the conventional and arbitrary particularity of representational
languages” (though he does so only provisionally, perhaps, and as a
temporary stopgap, like his \textit{morale}). “Words,” he writes in the more
or less contemporaneous *Monde*, “signify nothing except conventionally, and yet suffice to make us conceive things to which they bear no resemblance.” At this point, Descartes compares the conventionality of language to the sensation of light, which, he affirms, is a sign having no necessary resemblance with what causes it and yet does not fail to give us a correct conception of the nature of light. The assumption that there is a similar semiotic relation in the functioning of language with respect to concepts and in the functioning of objects and events in nature with respect to the images we have of them corresponds exactly to the claim of which we were speaking earlier: that of the relationship between language and a science of experience on the one hand, and between the latter and the world on the other. It also appears to pick up once again the identity of functioning depicted by Bacon and Galileo between letters, words, and sentences, and the “alphabetical” seeds of things and the written book of nature.

Later on Descartes himself seems to lose the optimistic hope of the earlier affirmations, both as they concern a universal intellectual language and as they concern a conventional but adequate *langage représentatif*. It may be that the comparative failure of his own ‘practical’ scientific work is partly responsible for that, but whatever the cause, toward the end of his life he tends increasingly to imply that language is less useful as communication than simply as the manifestation of thought itself. While language is certainly unique in man and linked to reason, he implies that these facts by no means urge that language is any simple help in ‘getting outside oneself.’ Language, and the use of signs in general, is sufficient proof of the existence of reasonable thought in mankind, but beyond that we cannot go with much ease. In a letter to the Marquis of Newcastle at the end of 1646, Descartes links “reflective consciousness of self and of the object of thought” to the use of language, while in a letter of early 1649 to Henry More, he remarks that the use of language and other signs is certainly the principal reason for distinguishing men from beasts. Language is an evidence of reason, that is to say, but that fact is of little help in its use as a methodical tool of knowledge, for that use will depend on a prior discovery of their relationship with one another.

7. Ibid., p. 234; *Le monde ou traité de la lumière*, ibid., p. 317.
Today we would perhaps prefer to say that such use depends only on a definition of such relationship, that any knowledge is reliable (as well as its expression and communication) provided the axioms which control its 'shape' be clearly laid down. The seventeenth century did not yet have this possibility before it. For Bacon and his contemporaries, thought and things occupied their particular places and language had to fulfill a function of mediating between them, of rendering possible a knowledge and a communication of knowledge whose two sides were constituted by human concepts in their expression of things and their order on the one hand, and by the things themselves in the world on the other. If, as Bacon and others have it, writing is essential to the expansion of the new knowledge, then language must be made the 'transparent' bearer of the thought whose evidence it is: "languages have only been invented to express the conceptions of our mind," writes the Abbé Bouhours in 1671.

Such transparency can only be achieved if a correspondence of some specifiable kind may be supposed to exist between language, thought, and things. If this correspondence can be demonstrated then language no longer intervenes as an obstacle, and the three-way division between image, concept/thought, and language is effectively reduced to a dichotomy consisting only of the first two. This is why the occultation of enunciation itself is so important. Such a reduction is one of the main purposes of the logical and grammatical researches of Port-Royal, and its intention will be picked up by many. We can see it at work equally clearly in the development of scientific theory. "Fine language resembles a pure, clear water with no taste," writes Bouhours. And Valincour adds, a little later: "the conformity of a language with the function it is to fill is its precellence."

The function it is to fill is the precise expression of thought, which is in turn the result of the discovery of an intellectual system whose order also controls that of the world. As far as a Bouhours is concerned the French language has already achieved such expression: "In my opinion only [the French language] is able to paint after nature and to express things precisely as they are." With regard to both English and French such claims are rampant in this period.

13. Bouhours, Entretiens, p. 34.
Needless to say, these ideas are picked up without ado in the utopias of the period. Thus, for example, Gabriel de Foigny in *La terre australe connue* formulates a rather simplistic idea of a language intended to overcome all difficulties by *being* at once the thing and the thought capturing it: “The advantage of this way of speaking is that you become a philosopher as you learn the first elements [of the language], and you can name nothing in this land without explaining its nature at the same time [for, he has just observed], they form their nouns so perfectly that upon hearing them you conceive immediately [*aussitôt*] the explanation and definition of what they are naming.” Foigny continues his description of the Australian language by observing that when a child is taught the meaning of the elements of the written language and when he joins them together, “he learns at the same time the essence and nature of all the things he puts forward.” More’s Utopians would have loved this language! But it is not to be confused with the old notion of signatures: Foigny’s traveler is quite clear that humans *form* their language.

Whatever may be the hesitations and ambiguities of the developing notions about the functioning of language, clearly any search for a language that ‘corresponds adequately,’ if not ‘exactly,’ to the thought it expresses presupposes that there is *in fact* a separation of the function of ‘thinking’ from the function of ‘enunciating’—and that the latter is by nature a visible or audible articulation of the former. It presupposes that thinking *comes before* any linguistic system, and that it is therefore possible to conceive of one ‘language’ which *would* correspond exactly to that thinking and would underlie all particular languages. In Cyrano this one language occurs as the *langue matrice*; it is the Australian language of Foigny, the universal intellectual language suggested by Descartes and elaborated by Wilkins in the *True Philosophical Language*, and perhaps it is Chomsky’s deep structure: certainly he himself has claimed that it is.

No discursive (or simply linguistic) model of the type suggested by the foregoing is initially available to Cyrano. He is, as we have seen, in the midst of the developments which lead to these later concep-

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15. In *Cartesian Linguistics* (New York and London, 1966). An apparent exception is Denis Veiras’s *L’histoire des Sévarambes*, in which the philosopher Seromenos makes a remark hearkening back more to the early Bacon than to Descartes, though the latter seems to approach it late in life: language and discourse are the foundation and cause of thought and knowledge. If men “did not have the use of speech, they would have scarcely more light [than animals]. They communicate their thoughts to one another by means of discourse, and most of the arts and sciences owe their origin and progress to the art of expressing oneself by speaking” (Lachèvre, *Successeurs*, p. 197).
tions of language: indeed, he helps ‘create’ the structure that eventually makes analyticoreferential discourse possible. This is a very far cry from being able to rely on the certainty of the model. The many discussions of language that occur particularly in the *Soleil* sometimes seem, therefore, to contradict the reliance of the experimental method on writing and discourse in general. Certainly, the narrator is unable to rely from the outset on a singular discursive model whose domination would never be in question (this, of course, despite its domination throughout at a different level of the novel—hidden, as it were, from the narrator himself). Nor does the narrator in fact conclude with such a sure model, though he travels a long way toward it.

A rather interesting ‘encounter’ between one element of *Cyrano’s* text and a brief passage in the writings of Bertrand Russell (though it is long in its implications) emphasizes *Cyrano’s* inability to rely on any already constructed model. For Russell the model in question goes back by and large to the Greeks. I argued the contrary in Chapter 2, but whether it does so or not is here beside the point, for we are concerned with a particular discursive class and the way in which its inception functions for us: and this inception occurs during the period we are examining.

Russell writes:

> The influence of language on philosophy has, I believe, been profound and almost unrecognized. . . . The subject-predicate logic, with the substance-attribute metaphysic, are a case in point. It is doubtful whether either would have been invented by people speaking a non-Aryan language; certainly they do not seem to have arisen in China, except in connection with Buddhism, which brought Indian philosophy with it. Again, it is natural, to take a different kind of instance, to suppose that a proper name which can be used significantly stands for a single entity; we suppose that there is a certain more or less persistent being called “Socrates,” because the same name is applied to a series of occurrences which we are led to regard as appearances of this one being.\^16

‘This’ very example is ‘used’ by Cyrano to put into question in the *Lune* the very logic with which Russell is here preoccupied, as it also was by Locke in the long discussion (related to *Cyrano’s*) of “personal identity” in chapter 27 of the second book of the *Essay*. The narrator first meets the demon of Socrates—who is not, to be sure,

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the “being called ‘Socrates’”—as an old man whose material existence puts no habits of thought or their expression into question, despite the fact that he has been ‘present’ through the ages to a variety of sages. He is, that is to say, a “more or less persistent being called ‘[the demon of] Socrates.’” It comes, therefore, as a considerable shock to the narrator, even though he had been warned (F 46; E 34), to meet a “very young and tolerably handsome man” who greets him most familiarly and says he is the demon of Socrates: “my amazement was so great that I now believed that the whole globe of the moon, all that had happened to me on it and everything I could see there must be nothing but an enchantment” (F 50; E 38). He is the more amazed because he had by this time been traveling for some way on the lunarian’s back without realizing it to be Socrates’ demon. The experience will be repeated later, when the demon becomes the advocate who saves him from the “inquisition,” and the narrator will be only a little less “astonished” by this second transformation (F 78; E 62).

As we can see from the passage quoted from the first metamorphosis of the demon, the inability to rely on the constancy of the relationship between, in this case, name and material manifestation throws into doubt for the narrator the very reality which he is living, which he is experiencing. That doubt will result from the destruction of the one-to-one relationship between nominal meaning and single entity is, broadly speaking, one of the implications of Russell’s remark. Yet what is indicated here is that after an initial “amazement” a name can be used significantly without standing for a single entity: for, after all, the narrator does continue to treat the demon of Socrates as though it remained always the same being. In a way it is the name that makes the entity significant, rather than the reverse: “I brought my mouth close to his and went in through it like a breath of air” (F 51; E 39), explains the demon.

The narrator is not offering a ‘serious’ choice, but rather discovering that discourse does not function in any self-evident way and that it does not follow any necessary sets of relations. Why indeed should the model of which Russell is speaking be dependent upon some “intuitive science of experience” rather than the reverse (except that, then, the “science” would no longer be intuitive)? Further, why should we suppose not only that such a science exists but that it is singular and underlies such diverse linguistic (let alone discursive) forms as those of the Yana or the Tłòniens, the lunarians or Paracelsus, Russell or the Solarians? If one cannot make such assumptions, then recourse must be elsewhere: to the use of language itself, not to
what it might or might not cover up, block, represent, signify, and so on. Again, in just these terms, the problem was to be posed formally and at considerable length by Locke in the third book of the Essay.

We have already seen the several occasions in the Lune when the narrator finds himself involved in some way in the utterance of apparently inarticulate sounds: first in New France when he cannot comprehend the old savage; second in the moon when the lunarians cannot understand his and the demon's Greek; third at the lunar court when his and Gonzales's Spanish is likewise incomprehensible to the lunarians. Those whose language is not understood are referred to as "mutes" or "animals." And indeed as soon as communication is impossible one is effectively mute. The encounter of two mutually incomprehensible languages merely serves to pose the difficulty of any discursive communication in a more acute manner.¹⁷

In this light we may consider perfectly justified the narrator's astonishment when he and Elijah understand one another without the slightest difficulty. And it is in connection with the difficult question of communication that the narrator first introduces what may be a version of two of Descartes's languages—the universal natural (gestural) and the particular conventional: "I did not know their language and they did not understand mine and you can judge now what similarity there was between the two. For you must know that only two idioms are used in this country, one which serves the great and the other which is peculiar to the common people" (F 48–49; E 36). One of these languages is a kind of "natural" language consisting of gestures and body movements, though it is, the narrator affirms, not quite as simple "as you might imagine it." The description is in fact very similar to the way one might characterize the use of gesture on the oriental stage. The other language, the superior one, consists of music (an idea Cyrano may well have obtained from Godwin's Man in the Moone).¹⁸ Actually it is unclear whether this superior language corresponds to Descartes's conventional one, or to the universal intellectual one he professed once as a possibility, for the narrator goes into no details except to mention briefly the questions debated in it (F 49; E 37). That particular aspect is of small importance. What is more interesting is that this language seems to re-

¹⁷. Saussure has observed that the Greek word bárbaros apparently implied a speech flaw, while the Russian word for Germans is Némts, meaning "mutes." Everyone, he adds, believes in the superiority of his own language: Ferdinand de Saussure, Cours de linguistique générale, ed. Tullio de Mauro (Paris, 1972), p. 262.

spond to the very difficulty posed each time speakers of different languages meet one another: the difficulty of recognizing the articulation of words.

We have already seen the way in which, through the metamorphoses of the demon of Socrates, the relation of verbal significance and material entity is put into question—suggesting perhaps that the relation of mediation does not depend on the stability of the material entity, and that the contrary is just as possible (that is, that the stability depends on the name). Words have meaning and can be used meaningfully regardless of any constant anchor in ‘reality.’ The demon of Socrates is, in a sense, an idea, not a material being. Language is related to that idea, while the relation of that idea to the ‘entity’ in question is no concern of language as such at all. The latter relationship is to be carried out and composed by the structure of the experimental discourse that we examined in the previous three chapters. It is on that supposition that the language used in the experimental structure may be conceived of as a transparent medium, or potentially so. Language will have to be viewed as though it played no role in the performance of that structure.

It is only to be expected, therefore, that the next element of natural language to become a concern is articulation itself: the superior language of the lunar people “is nothing else but a variety of non-articulated notes—more or less like our music when the words are not added to the melody” (F 49; E 37). Such an idea would appear to eliminate the incomprehension that follows whenever an articulate language cannot be made out by the hearer of the sounds of an unfamiliar tongue. Lack of articulation would appear, in fact, to do away with language completely and, at this stage, the narrator has yet to learn what makes this language meaningful (F 67; E 53). Actually, even this language is far from transparent, for the narrator implies that its aesthetic virtues are, indeed, far above its power to communicate meaning: “sometimes a company of as many as fifteen or twenty will meet together and dispute a point of theology or the intricacies of a lawsuit in the most harmonious concert one could possibly devise to charm the ear” (F 49; E 37). Furthermore, this musical language, or something very like it, will be used by the ‘inferior’ nightingale on the sun (F 87, 190–91; E 158, 161–62) and will be replaced by two attempts to ‘situate’ language more satisfactorily. The musical language would not, therefore, appear to have had much success in overcoming the obstacle posed by the mere fact of articulation.

While the narrator is still on the moon he encounters at least two
other indices of such an attempt to ‘place’ language. The first is the suggestion that the contamination of writing may be removed from language, as though writing were no more than a representation of speaking and thus at a further remove from thinking, as though one more form of linguistic obstacle could be done away with. I am referring to the episode of the “talking books,” those boxes in which one simply “turns the needle to the chapter he wishes to hear” (F 108; E 89). This, writes the narrator, removes a considerable block to knowledge: “I am no longer astonished to see how the young men in that country possessed more understanding at sixteen or eighteen than the greybeards do in ours, since, knowing how to read as soon as they can talk, they are never without reading matter” (F 108; E 89).

The notion of referential mediation, the need for articulation, the role of writing have now all been placed in doubt. All these elements concern the use of language as an obstacle to thought and its communication, as a barrier to knowledge. In the Lune, therefore, one further matter remains to be considered: the idea of discursive—or linguistic—meaning. It is true that the matter is raised only briefly and in an oblique fashion. Perhaps it could be brought up in no other way.

Traveling to the court, the narrator’s party stops at an inn. When the time for departure arrives the next day the narrator learns from his demon that the bill is paid in poetic verses (F 55–56; E 42–43). Such a valorization of discourse as currency would appear in a way to remove all meaning from language as the mediator of ideas: its ‘meaning’ becomes its ‘value’ as an object permitting the exchange of other objects. We may argue that this valorization symbolizes, or carries out in a different medium, the exchange of ideas. If it does so, then language has effectively become a counter devoid of any weight in itself: it has become a neutral counter between, in this case, service given and service received. Writing can, it is thus asserted, be made into a transparent mark of exchange involving quite different ‘things.’ The ‘meaning’ of language, its value in exchange, is then assessed by a “Jury of Poets of the Realm” (F 55; E 42). It is given its place in a process of exchange simply by convention, by the public decision of a particular elite.

19. This view of the relationship between the spoken and written language has, one need hardly be reminded, a long and hoary tradition backing it, from Plato to Saussure and beyond. It does not appear to be the unreserved opinion of Bacon, who, as we saw when examining certain of his writings, views writing as essential to the development of the right experimental method.
This writing ‘works,’ of course, in a rather limited arena of sense, and the episode of the verses being used as currency precedes the episode of the talking books, which appear to propose the complete rejection of writing. Indeed, though the poems are apparently written on paper, they would presumably be written in some form of musical notation (since the lunarians possess only the languages of gesture and of music), and would therefore appear as a kind of offshoot of the talking books. In that way their very form may be a devalorization of the writing which composes them. But the relative status of these incidents is of small interest. These questions are merely raised here, not solved. The point is just that they are raised, in connection with all the other matters discussed in the previous two chapters, as part of a nexus of problems whose solution is essential to the functioning of discourse (thought).

The *Voyage dans la lune* seems concerned with language almost by the way: its main preoccupations are aimed rather at the possibility of an (experimental) knowledge of physical reality—with the order of the solar system, with the infinity of worlds and the eternity of the universe, with an atomistic theory of matter (and of the human senses as matter), with the existence of God. The *Voyage au soleil*, on the other hand, gives a greater place to matters ‘spiritual,’ psychological even: the rationality of animals, the nature of justice, of love and friendship, the relationship of knowledge, language, and communication. Certainly, I am speaking of emphasis, not exclusivity, for there is considerable overlap between the two novels: we are not, after all, concerned with learned treatises.

The major preoccupation of the *Soleil* seems to be with language and the communication of knowledge—from the primary language to the voice of reason as animator of the body, from the language of birds to that of trees, to the disappearance of language between Campanella and Descartes and the consequent disappearance of communication. This, clearly, states the final difficulty: if a perfectly ‘transparent’ language were available, one in which concepts ‘sent’ and concepts ‘received’ were identical, one for which concepts and their referents were perfectly adequate to one another, then it would no longer be available for purposes of communication. By very definition, it would no longer be a medium and could carry no message. The result would be silence.

On his trip to the sun, Dyrcona, as the narrator is now calling himself, lands on one of the “little earths” circling the sun, and soon comes across “a little man, stark naked” (F 169–70; E 143–44), who speaks to him in a language he has never heard before yet which he
understands perfectly. This time Cyrano does indeed appear to be echoing the third kind of language we saw in Descartes—the universal intellectual one:

he addressed me for three solid hours in a language which I am perfectly sure I had never heard before and which had no connexion with any in this world, but which, none the less, I understood more readily and more clearly than my mother tongue. He explained, when I asked him about this marvel, that in the sciences there is a truth, outside of which nothing is easy. The more a language departs from this truth, the more it falls short of the concepts it seeks to express and the harder it is to understand. . . . A man who discovers this truth in letters, words, and their sequence can never fall short of his original conception in expressing himself: his speech is always equal to his thought. It is ignorance of this perfect idiom that makes you falter, knowing neither the order nor the words to explain what you have in mind. [F 170–71; E 144]

The little man explains that with this language one could be “universally understood,” because it is “the instinct or voice of nature” (“the intuitive science of experience”?).

How this language (as communication) is bound both to reason and to the material world is expressed later, in a picture. The King of the “tree people” (who first appeared to the narrator in the form of a tree composed of precious stones and metals), once his people have transformed themselves into the shape of a young man, goes in through its mouth. It is as though the mode of transformation of the demon of Socrates were here being repeated. Only after the young man has absorbed the talking King through its mouth does he come to life (F 189; E 160). What is this but speech transforming mechanical existence into reasonable existence? Indeed, when the King comes forth once again from the young man’s mouth in the shape of a nightingale, “the great man collapse[s] at once” (F 197; E 166).

Here, then, is a kind of utopian solution to the problem of winning and communicating knowledge. The hint is perhaps to be found in Bacon when he claims that the order of experimental discourse conforms both to nature and to the mind (though this claim is a cliché of the period). On the moon the narrator had learned that material things, the human senses, and the rational soul itself are simply differing organizations of the fundamental atomic forms which compose the entire universe. Here on the sun he sees the material and apparently senseless tree disgorge a speaking man, prior to its further metamorphoses. He sees the talking trees and the rational birds. He learns from Campanella that to understand some-
one else perfectly it suffices to adopt “the same body”: “I observed that he was imitating my carriage, my gestures, my expression, . . . my reflection in relief would not have counterfeited me better.” Campanella tells him: “I arranged all the parts of my body in a pattern similar to yours. For, being disposed like you in all my parts, I arouse in myself, by this arrangement of matter, the same thoughts that it produces in you” (F 240–41; E 205).

The physical and the mental, says all this, are merely different arrangements of the same material. Sounds, the narrator was told on the moon, are simply the effect of atoms in movement striking upon the ear (F 103; E 84). Speech, too, is therefore nothing but a different arrangement of the same material. And if all this is the case, then language naturally functions simultaneously in the conceptual and the material, it is the same as what it transmits. Language would then be capable of communicating not so much particular ‘things’ as the continual flux of thinking and the world: it would be the “successive, temporal” language of the Tlönian in Borges. Of course, if all this were so, neither verbal nor written language would any longer be necessary at all.

In the land of the philosophers to which Dyrcona is being guided by Campanella on the sun, language is part of the opacity of which the philosophers divest themselves whenever they wish to communicate their thoughts. Language has finally become quite indifferent in this atomistic fantasy world:

We can, however, make ourselves diaphanous by a vigorous effort of willpower, when the fancy takes us, and it is even true to say that the majority of the philosophers do not use their tongues for talking. When they wish to communicate their thoughts, their flights of imagination purge them of the sombre vapour, beneath which they generally keep their ideas hidden. . . . Similarly, when he is communing with himself, one can clearly observe the elements, that is to say the images of each thing he contemplates, imprinting or projecting themselves and presenting to the eyes of the observer not an articulate speech, but the story of his thoughts in pictures. [F 261–62; E 223–24]

Does this mean that in relation to experimentalism, once any utopian solution has been excluded, any ‘truthful’ and accurate communication is finally a failure? that the search for an appropriate speaking or writing is ultimately a vain one? These would, I think, be false conclusions.

The operative phrase in this complete effacement of the instrument of mediation is undoubtedly “a vigorous effort of willpower”
"une vigoureuse contention de la volonté"). Experimentalism did indeed will the disappearance of the double-edged instrument of language as the only possible means to achieve perfect knowledge and perfect communication of knowledge. The occultation of enunciation of which I have spoken several times is one result of this. Cyrano invents an impractical ‘solution’ that is a fantasy. What is significant is that it should have been necessary to do so, and that its achievement results in the silence of the interrupted novel.

This ideal language (or, rather, nonlanguage) has no relation with earlier notions concerning language and discourse. For Cyrano, no possible criticism of analysis could lead to its replacement by some kind of equally illusory ‘language of origin,’ a ‘pre-Babel’ discourse installing some kind of immediate communication. The discourse of analysis and reference may be ‘insufficient,’ and all linguistic mediation imperfect, but, suggest the *Voyages*, it is the only one which carries any hope of an efficacious knowledge. The rest—anything beyond an exchange of arbitrarily and conventionally meaningful signs—is silence. The very order of experimentalism is embedded in the structure of the novels, or their structure in the order of experimentalism. It is perhaps not simply an accident of history that brings the *Soleil* to an abrupt silence when dialogue between Campanella and Descartes remains unheard by any third party and breaks off when it risks becoming audible. It is as if Cyrano had raised a problem he is as yet unable to resolve.

If we align Descartes and Bacon, as we have with certain important reservations, then the silence that falls between the former and the philosopher of the sun is not simply sign of the impossibility of immediate and perfect communication; it is also the mark of the impossibility of any mutual reading by one another of two different classes of discourse. In the novel, indeed, Descartes is criticized in much the same way as the philosophers of the moon mock Aristotle. In the narrator’s view, that is to say, *both* Campanella and Descartes may be reduced to silence. Dyrcona plays Bacon at the level of content, as Cyrano does in the construction of the form.

Together they suggest that in a sense the final silence has no meaning; it bears the trace of the mere possibility of meaning. It is the end of a discourse that has been effaced (the philosophers in the sun are all from the past). But it is also the place of a new instauration, because this silence on the sun has its observer. And this very observer, ‘learning’ a new discourse, passing through the moment of silent noncomprehension accompanying such learning, has already written down the knowledge won in his journeys by the time we, the reader,
reach it. Indeed, it is already contained in the *Lune*, where the
demon had left with him to read a volume entitled “The States and
Empires of the Sun” (F 107; E 87). The silence is an invitation to the
reader/observer: an invitation perhaps to continue writing, to extend
ever further the open-ended series.

It is in response to the establishment of such a discursive order
that a Defoe and a Swift will write, and not as participants in the
establishing of it. Later still, a Rousseau will view the discourse of
analysis as essentially vicious (despite his admiration for *Crusoe*), the
cause, for example, of oppressive societies. But on the other hand,
the same thinker—as the epigraph to Chapter 3 suggests—finds the
mythical discourse of plenitude sought by the Utopians to be no
more than a nostalgic delusion. For Rousseau silence is a *solution*, and
we can understand in these terms Derrida’s remark to the effect that
the *Essay on the Origin of Languages* is a *praise of silence.*

This seems to confirm the analysis I have been making of Cyrano’s
novels: Rousseau’s pessimistic response to the optimism of Cyrano
and his contemporaries. For the late seventeenth century the silence
at the end of the *Soleil* must be viewed as a preliminary, a space
pregnant with the *cogito* and the “works” of the discourse of exper-
imentalism.