

Voyages to the Moon and Sun

About the book

Cyrano's two-volume novel *L'Autre Monde (The Other World)* was published in two steins and is known by various titles. The title that Cyrano gave the work *Les États et Empires de la Lune et du Soleil (The States and Empires of the Moon and Sun)*, was a deliberate parody of a contemporary work of travel writing but this title was not used in the first posthumous publications. The works were also more familiar to Cyrano's contemporaries by the title of each volume: *Voyage dans la Lune (The Voyage to the Moon)* and *Voyage du Soleil (The Voyage to the Sun)*. Although the exact composition dates of both volumes are unknown, the most likely periods are 1648-9, or even 1642-3, for the *Moon* and 1648-54 for the *Sun*. During Cyrano's lifetime they were initially circulated in manuscript form among the underground intelligentsia of his day, and only published after his death in censored versions.

The first edition in 1657 of *The Voyage to the Moon* was heavily censored by Henry Le Bret who was afraid to publish many passages reflecting upon the Church. The early editions - and consequently all earlier English translations - mark the places of some of these omissions with dots or the word 'hiatus'. The original manuscript was recovered and was only used in publications of Cyrano's work by the end of the 19th century. The first printed edition of *The Voyage to the Sun* appeared in 1662. The original manuscript has disappeared.

An English edition was published in 1658 by the bookseller Henry Herringman under the title *Satirical Characters, and Handsome descriptions in letters, written to several persons of quality...Translated by a person of honour*. In 1703, an Englishman named David Russen published a book-length review of Cyrano's *Voyage to the Moon*, entitled *Iter Lunare*. Russen was an enthusiastic admirer of Cyrano, who declared it impossible to read *Voyage to the Moon*, 'without abundance of delight'. He also took issue with the work being labelled as a 'comical history', insisting that, since it contained 'many discourses worth the observation of the most learned', that 'though it be interlaced with much matter of mirth, wit and invention...yet it is throughout carried on with that strength of argument, force of reason and solidity of judgement', that instead of comical it may deserve the Epithet of the *most Rational History of the Government of the Moon*'.

The Voyages by Cyrano de Bergerac belong to the genre of the 'fantastic voyages', of which the oldest examples are the Sumerian epic of *Gilgamesh*, from the third millennium BC, and Homer's *Odyssey*, from the first. It is far less a utopian study in which a new society is explored, such as in Tommaso Campanella's *City of the Sun* (1602), Francis Bacon's *New Atlantis* (1624), or later works such as W.H. Hudson's *A Crystal Age* (1887), Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward: 2000 - 1887* (1888) and William Morris' *News from*

Nowhere (1890). And is more related to other more satirical reflections on society, such as Lucian's *A True Story* (200 AD), Thomase More's *Utopia* (1516), and H.G Wells *The First Men in the Moon* (1901)

Cyrano's works influenced several later writers, among them Thomas d'Urfey's *Wonders in the Sun or the Kingdom of the Birds* (1706) which play is inspired by Cyrano's characters and the main situation of a trial before the court of birds, taken from *Voyage to the Sun*; Jonathan Swift in his *Gulliver's Travels* (1726) which borrowed some general ideas from Cyrano and at least one passage in 'Voyage to Lilliput' is taken from the *Moon*; Voltaire, whose fantastical *Micromégas: Histoire philosophique* (1752) satirized our world from the viewpoint of giant visitors from space; and others like Jules Verne and H.G. Wells.

About the story

Cyrano wrote his novel in the first person and christened his space traveller Dyrcona, an anagram of D. Cyrano. In choosing a version of his own name for his space-traveling hero he identified his protagonist's interplanetary progress with his own terrestrial explorations and adventures. Through Dyrcona's travel to the moon and sun Cyrano gave himself the opportunity to look back at the earth from above and to reflect on the insights to be gained from this extraordinary new perspective. The main premisses being that the moon is another world for which ours served as a moon. This calls to mind Burton's remark: "if it be so that the earth is a moon, then are we also giddy, vertiginous and lunatic within this sublunary maze." (Burton, 1621(2001), p. i.78). We are invited to speculate on the myriads of other worlds extending through space: "Perhaps in the same way, said I, at this moment in the Moon they jest at some one who there maintains that this globe is a world" (*Voyage to the Moon*, p. 32; all citations refer to the translation by Richard Aldington, 2006).

Taking this perspective gave Cyrano every opportunity to satirize the people and politics of his own day: outer space was the only remaining refuge for the freethinker. Cyrano has Gonsales (of Godwin's *Man in the Moon*, see further) lament the impossibility of finding a country on earth where the imagination is truly free. Gonsales explains that his scientific interests had nearly landed him in the clutches of the Spanish Inquisition. He remarks that if an outsider (i.e. not a member of church or university) expresses any interesting ideas he will instantly be dismissed as 'an idiot, a madman or an atheist'. Cyrano was accused at various times of being all three and yet he found a way to use such accusations to his advantage. If only a madman, a fool or an atheist would uphold and explore the possibilities of the new science then the solution was to try to make the repressive censorship of the time work in the author's favor - by penning a text so foolish, crazy and atheistical that the very excesses of his provocation would serve to protect him. It is not for nothing that the first edition of *The Voyage to the Moon* published by Le Bret was retitled *A Comical History* - it was essential to underline the humorous nature of the text in order that the authorities might be tricked into dismissing Cyrano's imaginings as too outrageous to be taken seriously.

Cyrano wanted to satirize existing institutions, humbugs and prejudices, and criticize subtly the anthropocentric view of man's place in creation, as well as the social injustices of the 17th century. He

wanted to mock at a literal belief in the Old Testament; he wanted to hold up to odium the fundamental villainy of man; and he wanted to convey amusingly a number of quasi-scientific and philosophical ideas which it was highly dangerous then to publish and still more dangerous to try to popularize. His characters voice powerful criticisms of the Church, of traditional Aristotelian physics and Ptolemaic cosmology, and of his own society's accepted values. What is right on Earth is often wrong on the Moon, and both are wrong, or at least questionable when seen from the Sun.

In *The Voyage to the Sun* Cyrano reflects that *The Voyage to the Moon* has sparked such controversy that the debate touches every household, dividing families and crossing social divides: 'From the gentleman to the monk ... even women took their part', all joining in the debate about the intriguing possibility of a world in the moon. The reader feels the pleasure in the text this must have given Cyrano.

Cyrano's fable is truly speculative rather than dogmatic: what if there were creatures on the Moon who had never heard of the Gospel, what if respect were paid to youth rather than age? Cyrano's text gives voice to some of the most 'advanced' thinking of his time: the movement of the Earth, the way that suns and their planets may be destroyed and reborn, heliocentrism, atheism, materialism, and various other more or less beguiling -isms, but always in an exploratory, fictitious way. Rather than inventing new stories, Cyrano refashions old ones, and has great fun with the myths and fables he inherited: he relocates the Garden of Eden to the Moon, and rewrites the story of both the Fall and the Flood, bills are paid in poems, the phallus is something to be worn with pride, there is a hymn in praise of cabbages, and he is put to trial for a court of birds. It goes on and on.



Cyrano's hero 'Dyrcona' is on trial in the Republic of the Birds for the crime of being human (*Voyage to the Sun*)

His ideas of the plurality of worlds and the possible infinite extent of the universe, captured in such statements as that there is no microcosmos that is not also a macrocosmos: if the orbits of the planets are like the skins of an onion, the heart of an onion is also a miniature sun, foreshadows with scary detail the ideas of a century ahead of for instance Thomas Wright (*Original Theory or New Hypothesis of the Universe*, 1750), Immanuel Kant (*Universal Natural History of the Heavens*, 1755), James Ferguson (*Astronomy Explained*, 1756) and writings by William Herschell, that the universe was infinite and evidently populated, if not positively crowded with living forms.

There is also an interesting passage on evolution which wouldn't stand out in a piece by Richard Dawkins. It starts off with the question "how could mere chance collect in one place all the things necessary to produce this oak?", and continues with a solid argument about large numbers, chance and the inevitability of things 'forming': "You are surprised that this matter, mixed up pell-mell by chance, should have built up a man, since so many things are necessary to the construction of his being. But you do not know that this matter, moving towards the design of a man, has stopped a hundred million times on the way to form sometimes a stone, sometimes lead, sometimes coral, sometimes a flower, sometimes a comet, according to the excess or deficiency of certain shapes necessary or unnecessary to compose a man. It is not marvelous that an infinite quantity of matter changing and moving continually should have met together to make the few animals, vegetables and minerals which we see, any more than it is marvelous for a royal pair to turn up in a hundred throws of the dice; and it is impossible but that something should be made from this movement. This thing will always be wondered at by a scatterbrain who will not comprehend how nearly it was not made at all." (*Voyage to the Moon*, p. 87).

The *Voyages* are a blend of scientific fantasy and satire, mocking philosophical, scientific and religious certitudes of seventeenth century French society, and promoting the 'heretic' ideas of for instance Galileo Galilei. They have a strong insistence on reason, which put Cyrano rather more at home in the Enlightenment that came a century after his death.

The science fiction in the *Voyages*

Cyrano may not have had any great technical or mathematical abilities but Cyrano had a riotous imagination and so it was that his work saw the description of several devices that were ahead of their time. Most of them have to do with transportation, but he also dreamt up the concept of the mobile home and something along the lines of audiobooks on iPods, and there is a short mention of an "artificial eye to see by night" (*Voyage to the Sun*, p. 125).

In a first attempt to reach for the Moon "I fastened all about me a number of little bottles filled with dew, and the heat of the Sun drawing them up carried me so high that at last I found myself above the loftiest clouds. But, since the attraction caused me to rise too rapidly and instead of my drawing nearer the Moon, as I desired, she seemed to me further off than when I started, I broke several of my bottles until I felt that my weight overbore the attraction and that I was falling towards the earth." (*Voyage to the Moon*,

p. 33). His second attempt is even less successful: "With a machine I had constructed, which I thought would lift me as much as I wanted, I cast myself into the air from the top of a rock; but because I had taken my measures badly I was tumbled roughly into the valley." (p. 39). His machine is confiscated by soldiers who tie rockets (fireworks?) to the machine, which together with the beating of the machine wings would make the machine a 'fire-dragon'. The soldiers set the rockets on fire and Dyrcona hastily cast himself in the machine "the flame had no sooner consumed one line of rockets (for they had placed them in sixes by means of a fuse which ran along each half-dozen), when another set caught fire and then another, so that the blazing powder delayed my peril by increasing it. The rockets at length ceased through the exhaustion of material and, while I was thinking I should leave my head on the summit of a mountain, I felt (without my having stirred) my elevation continue; and the machine, taking leave of me, fell towards the Earth. This extraordinary adventure filled me with a joy so uncommon that in my delight at finding myself delivered from certain danger I was impudent enough to philosophize about it. I sought with my eyes and intelligence the reason for this miracle and I perceived that my flesh was still swollen and greasy with the marrow I had rubbed on it for the bruises caused by my fall. I knew that at the time the Moon was waning and that during this quarter she is wont to suck up the marrow of animals; she drank the marrow I had myself rubbed on myself with the more eagerness in that her globe was nearer me and that her strength was not weakened by any intervening clouds." (p. 39/40).



In this illustration from an eighteenth-century edition of *Cyrano's Voyages to the Moon and Sun* the hero is being carried up into the air thanks to the bottles of dew strapped round his waist.

Another transportation method mentioned is an iron cage used by

Elijah to reach the moon. He casts a loadstone ball high into the air which attracts the iron chariot: “directly I arrived where the loadstone had drawn me I threw up the ball again in the air above me (...) I must tell you that I held the ball in my hand and continued to rise because the chariot rushed always towards the loadstone which I held above it (...) At length after I had many times thrown the ball upwards and had flown after it, I arrived (as you did) at a place where I began to fall towards this world” (*Voyage to the moon*, p. 45/46). And in the *Sun* there is an elaborate description of a machine to fly to the moon which is based on the principle of *horror vacui*, a principle which states that nature abhors a vacuum, and therefore empty space would always be trying to suck in gas or liquids to avoid being empty: “It was a large very light box which shut very exactly. It was about six feet high and about three wide in each direction. This box had holes in the bottom, and over the roof, which was also pierced, I placed a crystal vessel with similar holes made globe shape but very large, whose neck terminated exactly at and fitted in the opening I had made in the top. The vessel was expressly made with several angles, in the shape of an icosahedron, so that as each facet was convex and concave my globe produced the effect of a burning mirror. (...) When the sun emerged from the clouds and began to shine on my machine the transparent icosahedron received the treasures of the sun through its facets and transmitted the light through the globe into my cell (...) I looked through the hole in the floor of my box and saw my Tower already far below (...) [This] did not surprise me, because I had foreseen that the void which would occur in the icosahedron through the sun’s rays uniting by way of the concave glasses would attract a furious abundance of air to fill it, which would lift up my box, and in proportion as I rose up the horrible wind which rushed through the hole could not reach the roof except by passing furiously through the machine and thereby lifting it up.” (*Voyage to the Sun*, p. 124/125). The only miscalculation being that due to the heavy winds a little sail placed around the box is torn off.



Illustration from Lovell’s English edition published in London *The Comical History of the States and Empires of the Worlds of the Moon and Sun* (1687), picturing Dyrcona ascend to the sun.

Another explicitly described piece of technology by Cyrano is that of mobile and sedentary houses: “The mobile, like that in which we are now, are constructed as follows: the architect builds each palace, as you see, of very light wood and inserts four wheels underneath it. In the thickness of one of the walls he places large and numerous bellows, whose nozzles pass in a horizontal line through the upper story from one gable to the other. When it is desired to move the town somewhere (for we change our air at every season), each one hangs out a number of large sails from one side of his house in front of the bellows; then he winds up a spring to make them play and in less than eight days the continuous blasts vomited by these windy monsters against the sails carry their houses, if they wish, more than a hundred leagues. The architecture of the second kind, which we call sedentary, is as follows: the houses are almost like your towers, except that they are made of wood and that in the middle they have a large strong screw which goes from the cellar to the roof to raise or lower them at will. Well, the earth underneath is hollowed out as deep as the building is high, and the whole thing is constructed in this manner so that when the frosts begin to fall cold from the sky, they can lower their houses to the bottom of the hole by turning them; and then they cover the tower and the hollow part about it with large skins and so shelter themselves from the inclemency of the air. But as soon as the soft breath of Spring makes the air milder, they return to the daylight by means of the large screw of which I spoke.” (*Voyage to the Moon*, p. 84/85). This image of houses setting sail can not but remind us of the ‘The Crimson Permanent Assurance’ scene in Monty Python’s *Meaning of Life* (1983), in which a large office building is weighs the anchor and sets sail to leave the city of London (see: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ecFBcpY9NHI>).

Finally there is the imagination of a personal audio device in the context of talking books, which give the people of the moon every opportunity to read and do other things at the same time, thus considerably expanding the amount of time in the day could be devoted to this uniquely enriching activity. Dyrcona receives two books from a host and starts to examine them: “At the opening of the box I found something in metal almost similar to our clocks, filled with an infinite number of little springs and imperceptible machines. It is a book indeed, but a miraculous book without pages or letters; in fine, it is a book to learn from which eyes are useless, only ears are needed. When someone wishes to read he winds up the machine with a large number of all sorts of keys; then he turns the pointer towards the chapter he wishes to hear, and immediately, as if from a man’s mouth or a musical instrument, this machine gives out all the distinct and different sounds which serve as the the expression of speech between the noble Moon-dwellers. When I had reflected on this miraculous invention in book-making I was no longer surprised that the young men of that country possessed more knowledge at sixteen or eighteen than grey-beards in our World. Since they know how to read as soon as they speak, they are never without reading. Indoors, out of doors, in town, traveling, on foot, or on horseback, they can have in their pocket or hanging from their saddle-bows as many as thirty of these books, and they have only to wind up a spring to hear a chapter, or several chapters, if they are in the mood to hear a whole book. In this way you have continually about you all great men,

living or dead, and you hear them viva voce. This present occupied me for more than an hour, and then hanging them upon myself like earrings I went out to walk in the town.” (*Voyage to the Moon*, p. 91).

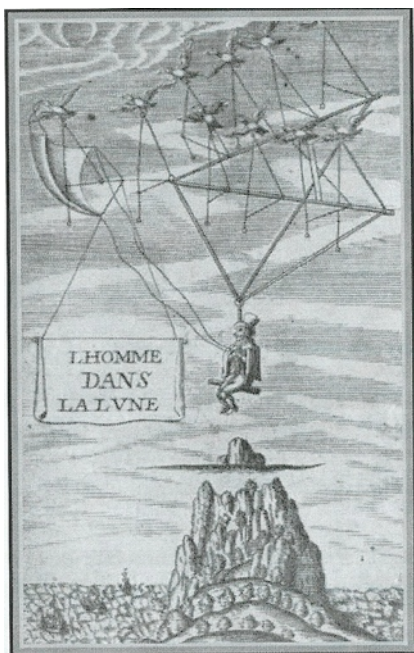
Voyages to the moon

The earliest Moon voyage fantasy is thought to be the work of the Syrian astrologer Lucian of Samosata in the second century AD. His *A True Story* (Ἀληθῆ διηγήματα) is a fantastic travel tale, and is regarded by many as the earliest known fiction about traveling to outer space, alien life-forms and interplanetary warfare (although it was a response to another work which also contained science fictional elements: Antonius Diogenes’ lost *Of the Wonderful Things Beyond Thule*, whose protagonist also reaches the moon). The work was intended by Lucian as a satire against contemporary and ancient sources, which quote fantastic and mythical events as truth.

At the beginning of the seventeenth century, the moon had become the focus of an impassioned debate. Galileo’s telescope had revealed mountains and lakes and other geographical features on the lunar landscape, which seemed to suggest that the moon was a planet like the earth. Johannes Kepler (1571 - 1630) was one of the earliest of many authors to succumb to the allure of an imaginative exploration of the moon. As early as 1610 Kepler wrote: ‘Let us create vessels and sails adjusted to the heavenly ether and there will be plenty of people unafraid of the empty wastes.’ (Johannes Kepler - Letters to Galileo, April 1610). His *Somnium* (*The Dream*) is another of Cyrano’s important influences; it was one of the earliest texts to combine serious scientific thought with vivid speculation about the possibility of life on the moon. The lunar inhabitants are depicted as giant, slimy monsters. Kepler did not publish this work in his lifetime, it was published in 1643, but it did circulate around 1611 fairly widely in manuscript and despite his precautions it almost certainly contributed to his mother being put on trial for witchcraft. She narrowly escaped being condemned to death.

In Cyrano’s time Galileo had already inspected the Moon through his newly invented telescope (1609), but her mystery was still largely intact. When Giovanni Battista Riccioli set about preparing the first lunar atlas three years after Cyrano wrote *Voyage to the Moon*, he thought the shadows he saw looked like seas, which is why we still speak of the Sea of Tranquillity, Ocean of Storms, Lake of Dreams, Bay of Rainbows. The possibility (and proof!) of life on the moon and sun was argued well into the 18th century. William Herschel, one of the greatest astronomers of all time, made several speculations on the moon: the moon craters being artificially constructed circular cities built to harness solar power for the lunar inhabitants, and there being enormous forests. In 1795 he published a paper ‘On the Nature and Construction of the Sun’ with the Royal Society, “suggesting that the sun had a cool, solid interior and was inhabited by intelligent beings. He reiterated his original claim that the moon was inhabited, and added that by analogy ‘numberless globes’ among the stars must support ‘living creatures.’” (Holmes, 2008, p. 199). As late as 1835 “the *New York Sun* ran a huge splash scoop that Sir John Herschel finally proved one of his farther’s most daring astronomical speculations to be true. Herschel had discovered life on the moon! The highly

dramatic story held the front page of the newspaper for four days, doubled its circulation, and set off a frenzy of excitement from the east coast to the west. Each day the New York Sun gave more and more details of Herschel's observations: might forests growing in the lunar craters, strange plants, fishes, beaver-like animals (all enormous because of the low lunar gravity), and finally, small apelike creatures with highly intelligent faces and convenient bat-like wings, flitting through the tenuous lunar atmosphere. Before the Great Moon Discovery story was blown, a mid-West preacher was collecting subscriptions to send a crate of Bibles to the poor benighted lunar men." (Holmes, 2008, p. 464).



Dominique Gonzales, the spanish hero of Bishop Godwin's Man in the Moon, on his flying machine pulled by wild geese.

Cyrano was not the first author to dream of traveling into space. Even in Cyrano's time there was nothing original in a fanciful voyage to the Moon. Pierre Brun in his academic study of Cyrano (1894) quotes a formidable list of predecessors. It is certain that Cyrano copied from Francois Rabelais, his mockery in *Gargantua and Pantagruel* (1632/1634) of anyone with standing, that he took whole paragraphs and many ideas from Sorel's *Histoire comique de Francion* (1623) and several hints from Bishop Godwin's *Man in the Moon* (1638, a French translation was published in 1648 as *L'homme dans la lune*), who was also inspired by Galilee's telescopic observation. Cyrano's borrowing of the latter is considerable. Bishop of Hereford Francis Godwin (1562-1633) describes the adventures of a cocky Spaniard, Domingo Gonsales, who hitches a lift to the moon by ensnaring a flock of gees. Cyrano acknowledged the influence with characteristic flair. In the course of Cyrano's *Voyage to the Moon*, his hero encounters the hero of Godwin's work and the two are imprisoned together by the lunar inhabitants who have mistaken them for monkeys: "The little man told me he was an European, a native of old Castile, that by means of birds he had conveyed himself to the world of the Moon wherein we now were, that he fell into the Queen's hands and she had taken him for a monkey, because it happens they dress their monkeys in Spanish clothes, and that when she found him dressed in this manner on his arrival, she had not doubted he belonged to the species." (*Voyage to the Moon*, p. 60). In

reality what had forced Gonsales to flee across the whole Earth, and eventually to abandon it for the Moon, was the fact that he had been unable to find a single country where the imagination itself was free. Rather than try to hide the debt he owed to Godwin, Cyrano used it as a source of comedy. Cyrano's hero jokingly reproached Gonsales for having preceded him, complaining that in looking for a way to reach the moon he had been forced to take the trouble of building a flying machine because Gonsales had already taken the easy option of flying there by harnessing migrating geese.

Many cosmic travels have followed since Cyrano's space traveller Dyrcona visited the moon and the sun. We have already mentioned Voltaire, Swift and Wells, others that can be mentioned are: *The Consolidator* (1705) by Daniel Defoe, the improbable adventures of Baron Münchhausen (1786), *A Flight to the Moon* (1813) by George Fowler, George Tucker's *A Voyage to the Moon* (1827), Jules Verne's *From the Earth to the Moon* (1865), the short story *Trends* (1939) by Isaac Asimov, and *Prelude to Space*. a 1951 novel by Arthur C. Clarke.

Some hold that with the landing on the moon, in 1969 by Armstrong and Aldrin, the Moon as a metaphor was ruined, as Tom Stoppard's play *Jumpers* (1972) pursues. Also William Empson in his poem 'To an Old Lady' (1928) writes about the risk of demystifying the moon:

"Ripeness is all; her in her cooling planet
Revere; do not presume to think her wasted.
Project her no projectile, plan nor man it;
Gods cool in turn, by the sun long outlasted."

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