

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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## The City of the Sun (1623)

Tommaso Campanella. 1568-1639

**LATE RENAISSANCE IDEALISM** Early modern Europe was marked with intellectual investigation—moves toward empiricism in philosophy and science, toward spiritual vision in painting and music, and toward visionary speculation, as in the utopian thinking of such as Thomas More, whose *Utopia* has drawn our attention, or, now, Tommaso Campanella, a Dominican friar, astrologer and theologian, a man of colossal brilliance, raised by an illiterate cobbler, friend and aid to Popes, and victim of judicial intolerance which kept him imprisoned for decades. His decline from popular estimation began with his rejection of the dominant Aristotelian philosophy of the Italian schools, while increasingly, throughout his life, his preoccupation with astrology drew him into a questionable limelight, in the midst of which he found himself imprisoned for twenty seven years, in various Neapolitan fortresses, where he was tortured repeatedly, and given a life sentence. It was during this turbulent period that he composed his most admired works, including *The City of the Sun*, in which he lets his mind move freely over the ideal society of which he had been so cruelly deprived.

**THE NARRATIVE SETTING** *The City of the Sun* is a thinly framed narrative, purporting to relate the Conversation between a Knight Hospitalier and a sea captain, who has Just returned from a journey to the distant lands lying below the equator. (He has, in fact, been snatched up by a crowd, and forcefully led into an adventurous tour of a vast construction, a visionary city.) The text Campanella presents us with is the narration of the sea captain, to his avidly interested audience. The minimal stage dressing, of the narrated account, signals the avidity of Campanella's audience for those new world adventures so fascinating to Montaigne and Rabelais, not to mention Sir Thomas More, in his *Utopia*.

**THE CITY OF THE SUN** What confronts the captain, as he approaches the megalopolis to which his guide leads him, is a simulacrum of the planets in their motion around the earth. Our eyes travel a vast city of seven rings and seven planets, setting for symbolic actions, in whose sacred space the captain will be guided. (Nothing is without a symbolic significance, in this unfolding megalopolis.) Above seven huge gates rise conspicuous galleries for promenades, ornamented with stunning pictures, artifices layered upon artifice. What the sea captain is narrating, from visual memory, the listener is recreating as though from the inside of this new urban creation.

**ASTRONOMICAL PIETY** At the center of the astronomical structure, stands a tall temple, itself perched on the summit of a pyramid. A single altar is within it, and the vast temple, three hundred fifty paces in width, glistens luminously. (The reader, following the captain's narration, grows increasingly aware of the Pythagorean symbolic of this radiant city into which he is walking; he suspects that every step he takes is being converted into symbolic meaning). The universe shaping into the visitor's imagination is seductive—with profusions of ornamental plants, outspreading galleries for Edenic walks, and interior decoration—elegant portable chairs—on all sides. Around the upper galleries of the temple stretch the cells for the priests, who dress in white gowns, and see to the everyday governing of the religious rites in the temple. in fact see to the governing of the entire polity, which is founded on its identity with the perfect harmony of Pythagorean harmony.

**LEADERS OF THE UNIVERSE** The supreme ruler of the universe worshipped by the temple personnel is Metaphysic assisted by Power, Wisdom and Love. A single book, sprinkled with varied Pythagorean holy formulae, is the sacred bible of the community. On the walls of the holy Chamber of governing, are vigorous paintings of all the finest species of animals and foliage. Frescoes of the most ingenious of the mechanical arts —cannon and typographic devices, for both of which we are indebted to China--stretch from walls to ceilings, and cunningly concealed throughout are dramatic portraits of the saving heroes of mankind—Caesar, Hannibal, Moses, Jupiter, Jesus, --while a diffuse spirit of Love, which generates the human race, hovers over all these individuals.

**SOCIAL AND PHYSICAL HEALTH** The thus inspired race, from which this holy instance of the human condition springs, is originally Indian. In and around the vast holy structures, around which the ship captain has been stunningly observant, lives this ideal as a single communal whole, sharing all possessions in common, and so arranging their goods that no one is denied. (This is the main theme of More's *Utopia*, in which too all is in common, and none wants.) Age differentiations are essential among this otherwise homogeneous folk. All men over twenty-one are fathers, the minimum age for acquired wisdom is thirty-five, the young eat and interact together, men and women are assigned to distinct jobs, peculiar to their gender. Robust health is expected from both genders, while for women special emphasis is placed on clear complexions and sparkling garments.

**STRENGTH, DISCIPLINE, WHOLENESS** Work is not allowed to reach compulsive levels, in this society. Everyone works about four hours a day, the workers are intelligent and precautionary during their non-work time, and, in particular, alert to the every present need of self-protection. They are everywhere on the guard against warring enemies. While they are ready to fight, to protect themselves, and are well armed, with well-cared-for iron weapons, their goal in military matters is rather to humiliate than to crush the enemy. Within their own walls they are free and independent, making no use of money, except for trading at the gates to their city. There they show their ready friendliness to foreigners. They facilitate citizenship for strangers; in fact this robust grasp on life is part of the vitality of the entire culture.

**SKILLS AND INTELLECT** Specialists work toward skill in languages, their own native and 'Arabic,' which is prominently visible. Games are enjoyed, but active ones, no sitting games, like chess, which make for a slothful population. As for foods, no meat is eaten, vegetables and dairy products are freely consumed. Frugality of consumption, added to very limited consumption of alcohol, assures that the society will be little troubled by problems of indigestion or flatulence.

**NATURE AND FREEDOM** By and large the City of the Sun is one in which the presence of nature—good complexion, baths in wine, healthy games, light food consumption, action in daily life, physical fitness and readiness for the rigors of the military, all contribute to well-being and support an environment in which none are made to be the victims of others. Skills, as we have seen, are portals to significant positions in the society, in which justice and honor prevail over personal gain. Thanks to the benign atmosphere thus created, there is no need for a judicial or prison system; instead of a central prison there is a lofty and meditative Tower. It is taken for granted that the World was made, that only God's compassion for mankind permits him to sustain it, and that continual prayer—which is enjoined on the population—is essential to the lasting health of the society. It is in an effort to sustain the health of the whole that prayer is put to work sustaining the made world, to the splendor and power of which the early parts of the text are devoted. What is the magnificent architecture of the astronomical world, to which the ship captain is initially introduced, but a visual hymn to the praise of the supreme Pythagorean metaphysic, around which the planets revolve?

**MORE AND CAMPANELLA: UTOPIANS** Both More and Campanella grew up into a pre-capitalist economy—sixteenth-century Western Europe—in which, although there was no large-scale competition, or any richness of institutions creating wealth and power—there were pockets of wealth among the nobility and the landed gentry, from which alert minds could read the gradual advent of economically competitive society. It was growingly clear that the feudal agricultural underpinnings of mediaeval society were no longer going to define social tone. We read in the early work of Shakespeare (*Henry VI, Part II*) that Jack Cade's rebellion brought a new type of social dissident onto the social consciousness of London. We see, with the advent of increasingly secularized universities and commercial newspapers, the advent of an open society. More and Campanella, working from deep within the assumptions of the Catholic Church, dreamed felicitously of new societies in which humans could claim their natural equality, and live in respect for one another.