CITY OF LIGHTS:
NATURAL AND TRANSCENDENT LIGHT SOURCES FOR
AMBROGIO LORENZETTI'S *GOOD CITY-REPUBLIC*

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Summary: The question of the light source for Ambrogio Lorenzetti's fresco on the east wall of the Sala dei Nove, known as *The Good City-Republic*, has long attracted comment. In this article I argue for two light sources rather than one on the basis of internal evidence, historical contextualizing factors, and the way this theory converges with various critical observations. The two sources represent natural and transcendent light and reflect both Siena's commitment to the Virgin Mary as its patron and the humanistic ideals of republican government.

The question of the light source for Ambrogio Lorenzetti's fresco on the east wall of the Sala dei Nove, known as *The Good City-Republic*, has long attracted comment.¹ Many years ago John White proposed the dancers as the source within the city itself.² Revisionist interpretations have found his suggestion unconvincing and countered with sources somewhere in the fresco on the north wall, among them the gaze of Peace, the figure of Wisdom or, more recently, the shield with the image of the Virgin Mary.³ Still more recently, Quentin Skinner has revived White's thesis, but without satisfactorily addressing the revisionists' hesitations.⁴ The thesis of a light source within the painting on the east wall is attractive because it accounts for certain lighting and shading in two different directions. However, not only does it bear certain inconsistencies in terms of lighting effects, but it also fal-

¹I have adopted the nomenclature of Randolph Starn in his *Lorenzetti*, 29.

²White, *Birth*, 96. Though these dancers were long thought to be female, Jane Bridgeman has argued persuasively that they are men ("Dancing 'Maidens,'" 245-51).

³Respectively Greenstein, "Peace," 497; Frugoni, *Distant City*, 148; Tarr, "Note," 389-90.

⁴Skinner, "Two Old Questions," 19-20. White himself admitted "minor contradictions" to his thesis, which he put down unconvincingly to "clumsy restoration," an explanation upon which Skinner fails to improve ("Two Old Questions," 20).

ters in terms of its proponents' larger ideological commitments to naturalism and pre-humanism. A twofold light source accounts for the main effects commentators have used against rival theories; more importantly, it encourages a reassessment of the integration of religious *and* humanistic elements in the complex environment of mid-Trecento Italy. (Fig. 1)

Fig. 1 Ambrogio Lorenzetti, *The Good City-Republic* (section).
Siena, Palazzo del Comune, Sala dei Nove, east wall
(ART 25878, used by permission of Scala / Art Resource, NY)

For theories positing a sole light source on the north wall, the dark side of the building behind the procession on the left-hand side of the fresco poses a problem. If the castellated walls, including the one with the doorway, to its left were also shrouded in darkness, one could argue that, whatever the light source in "The Virtues of Good Government," its rays have just missed that part of the picture on the east wall as they emanate from the north one. (We need to keep this possibility in mind.) Unfortunately, however, these walls are bathed in light. As regards that portion of "The Good City-Republic," the light would appear to come from the right. The source cannot be set too far back. For example, *Securitas* cannot provide the rays, for ones emanating from her would put more of the wall in dark-

ness.⁵ The light must just be stopped by the front of the building that Starn has suggested might be a tavern, so that its side is darkened, but the wall abutting it is not.⁶

One can see why White, and more recently Skinner, might propose the dancers in the foreground as the light source, for rays emanating from them would strike the tavern at almost exactly the right angle. However, as Roger Tarr has observed, such a source “is not exactly borne out by the way the buildings are lit.”⁷ One problem concerns the cavernous darkness in the tavern. Light from the proximity and angle of the dancers would enter the tavern below the lintel and dispel the gloom within. Light from these figures would also be blocked by the very building illumined just behind them. Certain towers in the background cityscape, and certainly buildings in the countryside *beneath* the city set on the hill, could not receive light from dancers themselves beneath the enclosing city wall.

If one’s eye tracks to the right at an angle perpendicular to the face of the tavern (and the significant shadow it casts), the necessary line eventually leaves the surface of the fresco without having found an alternative possible light source within the scene. The room, however, supplies plausible rays in the south window of the Sala dei Nove itself. Light from the window strikes the scene from a much higher angle, doing justice both to certain shadows and to the sense of a city in full daylight with the sun high in the sky. It is true that light from the south window will change as the sun makes its diurnal journey. Even in agreeing with the flow of natural light, Lorenzetti must freeze it in supplying the shading. The all-important point, however, is that the shading directs the eye to a natural source of light, a window. Lorenzetti appears to have painted the appropriate shading were his buildings to have three-dimensionality and be capable of blocking light from that direction.

The window plays a central role in the overall effect of the room.⁸

⁵I am not suggesting that anyone has claimed *Securitas* as the light source, only pointing out constraining evidence.

⁶Starn, *Lorenzetti*, 74.

⁷Tarr, “Note,” 388.

⁸For Skinner, the best way to view the frescoes in the room is “to stand in front of the one natural light source in the Sala dei Nove, the window in the southern wall” (“Two Old Questions,” 1). Nicolai Rubinstein likewise notes the windows (sic) in positioning the viewer in the room (“Political Ideas,” 180). Both commentators underscore the importance of this location and the window for an interpretation of what Lorenzetti has achieved.

Significantly, many commentators take pains to discount its light for the east wall fresco, as though it were the most natural and expected source, and therefore specifically needs to be explained away. White, for instance, writes that “the pictorial lighting takes no notice of the single natural light source in the window” and that it flows “like a tide against the real light.”⁹ A parenthetical remark by Diana Norman is particularly instructive in this context, for she notes that, in “contradicting the natural flow of light from the window on the south wall,” this fresco is “*unlike the other paintings on the north and west walls.*”¹⁰ Regarding “The Virtues of Good Government,” Nicolai Rubinstein points out that it “occupies the central position among the frescoes” because “it faces the windows (sic), so that it receives the full light.”¹¹ One rightly expects the painter to work with the natural light and it seems odd that, when he turns his attention to the east wall, he would contradict his attentiveness to such light both in the other frescoes and in the effect he achieves for the room considered as a whole.

The argument that Lorenzetti ignores or actively works against natural light in this picture also goes against the tide of the thesis of naturalism.¹² Some commentators attempt to propose both points simultaneously. White takes the position that “The Lorenzetti brothers, Ambrogio, in particular, mark the wave-crest of early fourteenth-century naturalism.”¹³ Yet we just observed that, for White, the pictorial light supposedly flows like a tide *against* the *real* light, White in this way bringing “naturalism” and “real light”

⁹White, *Birth*, 96.

¹⁰Norman, “Love justice,” 161, emphasis mine.

¹¹Rubinstein, “Political Ideas,” 180. Some writers refer to windows, others to one window. I have been in the room, and recall one window, but do not recollect what the source of confusion on this point might be.

¹²Hayden B.J. Maginnis puts Lorenzetti within a tradition of naturalism (“Renaissance Roots,” esp. 236-39). Randolph Starn takes exception to the thesis of naturalism, but only on the grounds that Lorenzetti is using pictorial conventions (*Lorenzetti*, 21-23, 76, 82 *et passim*). He agrees with the central tenet of the naturalism thesis that the pictures are secular rather than religious (8). On secularism specifically, Rubinstein refers to the “process of secularization” in Lorenzetti (Rubinstein, “Political Ideas,” 189); Frugoni writes of “the *secular orientation* which was predominant in Lorenzetti...” (*Distant City*, 158, emphasis hers); Skinner finds “a remarkably secular life” (“Two Old Questions,” 9) in the east wall fresco. Both Rubinstein and Skinner explicitly link this secularization with humanism or pre-humanism (Rubinstein, “Political Ideas,” 206-07; Skinner, “Artist,” 3).

¹³White, *Birth*, 101.

into conflict. Even more unexpectedly, he at one point associates natural light with malevolence. Describing the light in the picture of the effects of tyranny, he states that "it falls upon the devastated country and decaying town as if from the real source of light, the window on the left."¹⁴ Natural light apparently causes decay.¹⁵ Also discounting the south window, Tarr argues that it supplies "the all too inconstant natural light of the temporal world."¹⁶ Like White, he thinks that such a light suits the fresco of tyranny on the west wall, but not that of ideal governance on the east.¹⁷ Unlike White, who otherwise clearly celebrates naturalism, he would oppose the inconstant light of nature to "a constant supramundane light," the source of which is the shield held by the ideal *signore* and bearing the image of the Virgin Mary.¹⁸ Yet Tarr will go on to suggest that Lorenzetti has a pronounced interest in the principles of natural light and the physical processes of seeing. He argues for a relationship between aspects of the frescoes on the north and east walls "in keeping with the ideas of perception or optics current at the time the pictures were painted."¹⁹ Such a commitment to current ideas hardly suggests a profound distrust of natural light but rather its opposite.

Similarly, White's argument that Lorenzetti applies "the Florentine abstraction of essentials and constructional approach to composition" depends upon the painter's embracing of the principles of natural light.²⁰ One of the most abiding observations of the frescoes concerns Lorenzetti's emphasis on this-worldly concerns.²¹ The natural light source enhances

¹⁴White, *Birth*, 98.

¹⁵One might invoke Hayden Maginnis's allowance (after "Renaissance Roots," cited above) that Lorenzetti's works reveal "crosscurrents," a combination of naturalism and artifice that results in at least one picture depicting "a world characterized by amazing spatial inconsistencies and strange puzzles" (*Painting*, 133). Yet the artifice in our fresco is not of the sort Maginnis describes. As Starn observes, it involves the subtle imitation of "realistic" conventions (n. 12 above). Furthermore, Maginnis suggests that Lorenzetti's other works from the period in question, the late fourth decade of the fourteenth century, appear to reject artful artifice. I think critics are right to pursue solutions to the puzzle of shading that imply consistency or coherence on some level.

¹⁶Tarr, "Note," 388-9.

¹⁷Cf Greenstein, "Peace," 496.

¹⁸Tarr, "Note," 388.

¹⁹Tarr, "Note," 391.

²⁰White, *Birth*, 93.

²¹This point applies even if Lorenzetti only achieves the illusion of naturalism

this emphasis. If the natural light fits the west wall and plays a significant role in vivifying the north wall, it can play an equally important role on the east wall, though one modulated by its intermingling with another intimating transcendence.

A light source from off to the right of "The Good City-Republic" alone cannot illumine the fresco. The brilliancy of the left-hand side of the building directly behind three of the dancers suggests a light source to the left, if not from the dancers then from a source on the north wall; the same observation applies to the left sides of buildings higher in the cityscape and elsewhere, including in the country. The shadowed wall of the building to the right of that in which a *magister* is lecturing also strongly suggests a light source to the left of the scene. (The light from the window to the right would be blocked by the city wall, while the russet four-windowed façade above that darkened wall would not). The dancers could supply some of this light, but one would expect certain shadows, given their position on the ground, as has already been observed.

A higher light source, such as any of those suggested on the north wall, could provide a sufficiently celestial light (Fig. 2). Of these, Tarr's argu-

Fig. 2 Ambrogio Lorenzetti, *The Virtues of Good Government*. Siena, Palazzo del Comune, Sala dei Nove, north wall, (ART 94469 used by permission of Scala / Art Resource, NY)

ments for the Virgin Mary are compelling, though they need to be enlarged and applied somewhat differently.²² The Virgin's role in the history of the city of Siena, her transcendence in relation both to the old man holding her, and the position of the shield depicting the image of the Virgin in the general program of the room all associate her with light. The shield, in the form of the Seal of Siena and bearing the image of the Virgin Mary, illustrates the importance of the Virgin in Sienese history and implies luminescence. As is well known, the Virgin played a central role in Sienese culture and identity.²³ The letters C S C V stand for *Commune Senarum, Civitas Virginis*,²⁴ emphasizing the importance of the Virgin for the scene depicted on the north wall and for the prospects of good government. Just as Siena took her as its patron on the eve of a famous battle against the Florentines, so too she appears on a shield here. This illustration evokes a particular militaristic memory; it is a gesture of civic boasting, if not taunting, and also a reminder of the city's allegiance to the Mother of God. The patron of the city, she suggests the radiance of civic power and the illumination of spiritual guidance.

The relationship between the Virgin on the shield and the old man as its bearer reinforces the mutuality of the political and the religious, the earthly and the transcendent. That the Virgin is depicted on the shield of the old man is not a demotion, as has been suggested;²⁵ her place in the psyche of the Sienese was assured and unassailable. Rather, it represents a strategic choice as she provides a transcendent supply of power and light that complements the function of the old man himself.²⁶ One critic has recently argued that the elderly figure is "bi-valent," both a *signore* or old

²¹This point applies even if Lorenzetti only achieves the illusion of naturalism when in fact he deploys a "conventional pictorial repertory," as Starn has argued (*Lorenzetti*, 21), since the effect is still to celebrate aspects of this world: "The seemingly natural and realistic image of city and country life on the east wall served as visual evidence that republican virtues really worked in the world, or at least a simulacrum of it" (*Lorenzetti*, 23).

²²A number of the points discussed in this paragraph Tarr made in proposing the Virgin as the light source ("Note," 389-90).

²³Rubinstein, "Political Ideas," 179; Skinner, "Two Old Questions," 11; Norman, "Love Justice," 162.

²⁴See the discussion in Rubinstein, "Political Ideas," 181.

²⁵As in Rubinstein's assessment ("Political Ideas," 189).

²⁶Tarr, "Note," 388. Tarr also refers to this light as "transcendent" and "divine" (390). I take up below the concept behind this cluster of terms.

judge and the city of Siena itself, both associations of the figure having a secular resonance in accordance with Stoic philosophy.²⁷ Yet, the image of the old man holding a shield with the image of the Virgin on it suggests that, for Lorenzetti, this figure depends upon and integrates the religious.²⁸

The depiction of the Virgin Mary in relation to the old man suggests certain tensions that are never far from view when the earthly and the transcendent are made proximate in medieval culture. The constantinization of Christianity would have helped enable suppression of the paradox of enlisting support of the Virgin in a militaristic enterprise, both in the initial event and in the memorializing of it. Lorenzetti may have observed another ironic parallel that this relationship between an old man and a young virgin might evoke on a naturalistic plane: the folly of an old man (*senex amans*) who pursues a young woman received widespread satirical treatment in medieval literature.²⁹ Lorenzetti has focused the relationship between the two realms, but he has not separated spirituality from the realm of earthly doings. The relationship between city and Virgin instantiates a duality of secular and religious considerations, even as it intimates the importance of transcendence to the well-being of the good city-republic.

The shield itself suggests a source of light on this wall. Its shape and golden colour convey the sense of shining brilliance. All the virtues on the north wall are above the citizenry; they have a stature as of gods and dwell among the heavens, the rich blue behind them representing the sky, with Christ piercing the heavens to communicate with Hope. The "sun-like

²⁷On the first point, see Skinner, "Artist," 44, and "Two Old Questions," 10-11; on the latter point, he observes that the Latin for old person, *persona sena*, contains the form of "old," *senā*, that matches the Latin name for the city, *Sena* (Skinner, "Two Old Questions," 11).

²⁸And although arguments for Stoic influence upon Lorenzetti's program are compelling and irreducibly important, one need not concede that old-man-as-city has strictly secular connotations. In medieval Europe, the idea of the city typically had profoundly religious associations. As Norman observes of the Sieneese context, "The association of the city with the spiritual was a powerful one, which received further impetus from the widely held notion of Siena as a copy of the heavenly Jerusalem" ("Love Justice," 162). Lorenzetti drew upon both Stoic and Christian ideas and appears to have wrestled with their integration all the way down.

²⁹See, for example, the Miller's Tale and the Merchant's Tale in Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. Though writing later, Chaucer draws on a long-standing motif.

Seal” has the appearance of a light in this sky.³⁰ This orb is also directly opposite the window. The correspondence between the shield and the sun in the south window, notably in the middle of the day when the two balance each other with precise symmetry, suggests their mutuality. Together, they suffuse the east wall with transcendent and natural light.

Where the two lights meet, the evidence of the east wall fresco shows that light from the north wall registers as the more powerful source of illumination. Given the city-republic’s foundational commitment to her, light associated with the Virgin Mary can be expected to outshine other sources. This supremacy accounts for White’s observation of the “tide” of light. Artifice in this instance means the presence of transcendent commitments. Where the light from the north wall cannot hit the scene on the east wall, on its very left side, the light from the window makes itself known. Generally, far from battling the changeable light of nature, transcendent light works in concert with it. If anything, the various graces of the north wall, culminating in the shield that catches and perfects that light, augment nature. The virtues are made radiant and exude their transformative presence, while the shield at once reflects the natural light and adds to it superabundantly out of its transcendence. The axis of window and shield is off-centre, near to the east wall and far from the west. The artfully worked-through combination of transcendent and natural light bathes the “Good City-Commune” in beneficence, while the scene of tyranny suffers from its relative distance from the light.

Together, the two light sources achieve the effect, evocatively described by Starn, of “a space that solicits inspection without fixing a set focus.”³¹ Together, they bathe the scene on the east wall in a subtle, complicated light. Few shadows remain for deeds that would not belong in a good commune. All the figures from many different walks of life find themselves in the light. More significant still is the interplay of the natural and the transcendent. Lorenzetti gives expression to the importance of both in the equal, balanced contributions of light from the window and the shield. In an idealized scene, the combination of the sacred and the secular silently achieves a certain quality of light.

The dialectic of light sources on the north and south walls produces a further effect that accords with recent analysis of the room’s dynamics. These

³⁰Tarr, “Note,” 390. As Tarr observes, light from this angle better accounts for “the way the light falls on the buildings” (389) in “The Good City-Republic” than from other posited sources, such as Peace or Wisdom.

³¹Starn, *Lorenzetti*, 31.

two lights meet in the midst of the room. If the light from the window focuses our attention on the north wall, as Rubinstein has pointed out, the shield-sun reciprocally shines light directly into the room. The fusion of transcendent and natural light occurs both on the east wall and in the room itself, filling it with blended light. This effect contributes to a significant Stoic ideal. In his brilliant original analysis of the north wall fresco, Skinner convincingly showed that Lorenzetti has portrayed the Stoic-influenced political theory of the Italian pre-humanists. For Roman authorities, values of particular significance ought to be brought *in medio*, into the midst of the people. Skinner calls this "a distinctive idiom," one which the theorists employ quite literally as opposed to thinking of the virtues as the possession of individual rulers. This idiom has a significant spatial quality.³² Lorenzetti emphasises both the virtues as governing principles and the republican spaces in which they are present. He mediates this political ideology by imagining the mutual participation of the transcendent and the natural in its fulfilment.

If we return to the notion of a viewer beholding the frescoes from in front of the window, a common medieval optical theory reinforces this concept of meeting in the midst. Indeed, one art historian will appeal to this theory to stress "an epistemological attitude based not on objectivity, but on participation."³³ The dialectic of north and south walls harmonizes with this attitude. In the prevalent optical theory, species are emitted from both the object perceived and the viewer's eye, mingling in the air between them. Roger Bacon describes species this way:

Every efficient cause acts through its own power, which it exercises on the adjacent matter, as the light of the sun exercises its power on the air (which power is light diffused through the whole world from the solar light). And this power is called "likeness," "image," and "species," and is designated by many other names, and it is produced both by substance and by accident, spiritual and corporeal....³⁴

Wrestling with the issue of apparent movement and embodiment, Bacon goes on:

There is no change of place, but a generation multiplied through the different parts of the medium; nor is it a body which is generated there, but a corporeal form that does not have dimensions of itself but is *produced according to the dimensions of the air*.³⁵

³²Skinner, "Artist," 32.

³³Biernoff, *Sight and Embodiment*, 87.

³⁴Grant, *Source Book*, 393.

³⁵Grant, *Source Book*, 394, emphasis mine.

For the highly influential thinkers Robert Grosseteste (d. 1253) and the later Roger Bacon (d. 1292/4), both the eye and the object perceived emit these species.³⁶ They fill and meet in the air. Starn hints at this effect when he writes that “From the head of the room painted and real gazes would have intermingled” and that “Light seems to flow out from the central wall.”³⁷ The “real gazes” Starn has in mind are those of the Nove sitting under the fresco. His point supports the notion of mingled gazes filling the room. The gaze of the ideally positioned “real” viewer mingles with the species emanating from the wall. The shield-sun is especially important in terms of the north-south axis of light and vision the painter has established. This commonplace visual theory allows Lorenzetti to imagine the cooperation of the transcendent and the natural in such a way that entirely complements and reinforces the Stoic political notion of being *in medio*. He has modulated a Stoic ideal for a specific medieval setting in which both Christianity in general, and adoration of the Virgin in particular, figure prominently.

R.W. Southern’s description of medieval humanism suggests a context for the dual interest in spiritual and natural light in Lorenzetti’s program. Southern distinguishes between different understandings of humanism. One he calls “literary” humanism, associated with the Renaissance; the other he calls “scientific” and locates in the Middle Ages. In Southern’s definition of “literary” humanism, the emphasis falls upon the humane study of ancient literature, rhetoric, urbanity, and practical relevance as opposed to the self-contained formality and aridity of scholasticism: “the formal and systematic studies of the Middle Ages in scholastic theology, canon law and logic,” he writes, “were thought to have excluded humanity, destroyed style, and to have dissociated scholarship from the affairs of the world and man.”³⁸ Skinner would seem to have such a humanism in mind when he aligns Lorenzetti with pre-humanist rhetorical culture and to distance him from any necessary knowledge of the thought of either Aristotle or Aquinas, both of whom are associated with scholasticism.

In distinguishing “scientific” humanism from the “literary” version just described, Southern argues for the medieval acceptance of the dignity of

³⁶It is true that Bacon incorporated the most recent ideas coming out of Arabia, but he aimed at inclusiveness, at reconciling the various theories as much as possible. For a lengthier discussion of these two thinkers, see Klassen, *Sight*, 45-53; see also Greenstein, “Peace,” 498, Tarr, “Note,” 391-2.

³⁷Starn, *Lorenzetti*, 30.

³⁸Southern, *Medieval Humanism*, 30.

human nature and the dignity of nature itself. For Southern, "The two are linked together by indissoluble ties, and the power to recognize the grandeur and splendour of the universe is itself one of the greatest expressions of the grandeur and splendour of man."³⁹ In this model, medieval humanism conjoins the role of reason, the intelligibility of the universe, and the growing delight in the world for its own sake. Thirty years on, in his *magnum opus Scholastic Humanism and the Unification of Europe*, Southern is expansive about the medieval desire to achieve a comprehensive vision: "The aim now...was nothing less than to embrace all knowledge and every kind of activity in a single worldview."⁴⁰ For him, the medieval vision combined theological commitment with an openness to all kinds of knowledge: "This doctrine would be not only rationally unassailable and doctrinally coherent, but also capable of being given practical application in organizing and governing the whole of western Christendom."⁴¹ Engagement with the world did not evince a widespread process of secularization so much as an effort to apply all-inclusive principles for reconciling Christian belief with commitments *in saeculo* as broadly as possible.

The environment thus described provides a context for a twofold commitment on the part of Lorenzetti. Regarding the great painter's achievement in the Sala dei Nove, Diana Norman makes a claim very similar to Southern's line of argument. First, in assessing the make-up of "The Virtues of Good Government," she insists on the importance of religious concepts in it; she notes that the fresco provides "clear evidence of the constant blurring of the sacred and the secular within fourteenth-century society."⁴² Turning her attention to "The Good City-Commune," having acknowledged the evidence for Lorenzetti's manifold interest in the labours of the months, the mechanical arts, and the Children of the Planets, she argues that such inclusiveness "firmly places Ambrogio Lorenzetti's painting within a tradition of civic artistic enterprise which specifically sought to encompass representations of all branches of human activity and knowledge."⁴³ Norman's emphasis on the blurring of the sacred and the secular, as well as the attempt to encompass all branches of knowledge, attests an environment of humanism marked by the careful engagement of both transcendent and natural elements.

³⁹Southern, *Medieval Humanism*, 31.

⁴⁰Southern, *Scholastic Humanism*, 4.

⁴¹Southern, *Scholastic Humanism*, 4.

⁴²Norman, "Love Justice," 160.

⁴³Norman, "Love Justice," 161.

Lorenzetti's use of light in the frescoes of the Sala dei Nove does justice to the religiously humanistic environment in which he lived. It does not admit of easy, allegorical explanations that reduce the light to one source. Rather, it suggests symmetry and complementarity. It evinces a desire for the full participation of the principles of transcendence and naturalism, both in the frescoes and in the room itself, a desire that attests a comprehensive humanistic vision and hints at considerable artistic self-confidence to achieve the subtle effect.

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