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The Sense of Decline in Johan Huizinga's Thought

ABSTRACT

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The work of Johan Huizinga is appreciated by a heterogeneous array of readers. Yet, it is placed at the margins of cultural history. This article constitutes an attempt to shed light on the role of transcendence in his work, and, more particularly, on the main components of his diagnosis of decline. Our purpose is to highlight the connexions between the notion of decline and Huizinga's metaphysical concerns. By the means of our analysis we also wish to suggest that various practices of emancipation, generally accepted as an expression of cultural advancement, not only have taken the play-form, but also mark the primacy of experience over understanding

KEYWORDS: Johan Huizinga, Decline, Middle Ages, History, Dawn of Renaissance

Introduction

The problem of historical understanding

The basic elements of Huizinga's interpretative approach and his vision of Western civilization's decline appear to be interwoven into the fabric of his work. That is why we deem necessary to address the question of the significance of Huizinga's conception of historical understanding. The Dutch historian is commonly associated with *The Waning of the Middle Ages* (*Herfsttij*

der middeleeuwen, 1919), one of the all-time best-selling books on medieval history, yet rarely used at university level¹. The central idea of this book is that in fifteenth-century Low Countries and Burgundy profound pessimism spread a general gloom over life. The fear of death, sickness, and old age dominated, while hierarchy and chivalry continued to be the two pillars of social life. In Huizinga's view, the light of the rising Renaissance was as faint as the light of the waning Middle Ages, and the appeals to beauty, harmony, and the freshness of youth made by the Humanists were mere stylistic exercises. A peculiarity of the book lies in the fact that it was written not out archival material, but out of an assemblage of a limited number of familiar sources including a few works of court-sponsored history written in Burgundy. A plethora of critics remarked that in Huizinga's hands history turned into a matter of artistic evocation. He is said to have created an imaginative framework in order to sketch out sharp contrasts and vivid surface patterns, which in turn have been used as a tool to make intelligible what he thought to be the uniqueness of the fifteenth-century northern-European sense of crisis and decline, thereby to oppose Jacob Burckhardt and his disciples, who saw the civilization of the Italian Renaissance as the beginning of a new cultural phase in European history².

Historians, it is commonly maintained, must separate ascertaining the truth of facts from the will to defend their own inclination and ideals³. Allegedly, Huizinga undermined the rigorously descriptive character that historical investigation ought to retain in order to safeguard its reliability and impartiality. It is symptomatic that Huizinga deliberately opposed "scientific history", namely the idea that the latter is exhaustive of all historical knowledge and understanding. In his view, history is the reconstruction of the sense that the past has, or may have, for us⁴. In a certain sense, this conception of history does not differ much from the one defended by Burckhardt, who thought that history is «the record of what one age finds worthy of note in another»⁵. In a 1926 article, entitled *The Task of Cultural History* (*De taak der cultuurgeschiedenis*), Huizinga argued that the formation of historical knowledge is always dependent on the wider "historical culture" of a community, which includes its sets of shared values and beliefs. Only the most talented and sensitive historians will be able to reconstruct the main features of a "historical culture". Moral sentiment and historical analysis can coexist. In another 1926 text, entitled *Task and Terms of the History of Civilization* (*Taak en termen der beschavingsgeschiedenis*), Huizinga pointed out that the history of civilization must provide a synthesis of the findings accumulated in the principal cultural sciences, namely ethnology, literature history, and art history. The true historian must do "social morphology", namely he must identify the themes, figures, motives, symbols, styles, images, and sentiments through which social life, art, and thought manifest themselves. Eventually, in *The Sci-*

ence of History (De wetenschap der geschiedenis), one of his 1934 lectures at the University of Santander, Huizinga specified that “social morphology” takes as its focus the “ideal forms” of law, business, religion, art and thought operating in a given society at a particular moment in time. These “ideal forms” are “forms of life”. Their core is never predetermined. Rather, they acquire intelligibility through the historian’s interpretative efforts. Cultural history is necessarily the product of the “free spirit” of researchers and thinkers⁶.

We are not in the position to establish whether Huizinga was familiar with the work of his contemporary Robin G. Collingwood. Making a reference to the latter is worthwhile. Not only both they opposed “scientific history”, but also they shared the same kind of interest for the play-element of culture and for the idea of the decline of Western civilization. *Speculum mentis* (1924) comprises a number of propositions which seem to be in line with Huizinga’s vision of historical research. Yet, like most historians, Collingwood maintained that the business of history is primarily to state what happens, and has happened. If a historian manipulates the facts into drama, he argues, this manipulation may turn him into a great dramatist, but it cannot make him a great historian. At the same time, the true historian is never happy with just stating facts. Rather, he wishes to understand them, and to understand them is to see not only what happened but why it happened. Facts must be grasped not in isolation but in relation to their contexts. The true historian must investigate causes, inquire into motives, and enter into the «the hopes and fears of both parties to every struggle» for the purpose of «discerning the right from wrong». On a parallel basis, on the one hand, Collingwood repeats that «the historian who handles history as if it were mere drama is in a state of deadly sin». History, he warns, «lapses consciously into the aesthetic attitude», that is, mere «picturesqueness». On the other hand, «in superseding and negating the other forms of experience, history does not proceed as if they had never existed». History manages to reconcile drama with hard fact «by finding drama everywhere, just because its drama is the drama of fact as such». Collingwood concludes that unless the historian is enough of an artist to see the dramatic force of history, unless he is «a clear and eloquent writer, easily moved by pity and sympathy», he will never be a true historian. Eventually, history is the «infinite whole whose parts are mutually interdependent and conditioned». Reality itself, in its completeness, is the object which can be sought and found in history alone, but, as soon as it is found, it appears to be a sheer illusion because «in its perfect reality» history «is perfectly unknowable». This situation, which the English thinker called «the breakdown of history», has the power to reveal that the historical is «an unstable attitude which leads either back into science or forward into philosophy»⁷. Huizinga would hardly embrace the vision of history as “absolute object”, namely

the view that history alone «achieves the idea of an object beyond which there is nothing». Yet, he would accept that «to purge history of everything historical» by the means of «historical atomism», which treats each fact irrespectively of all others and of their contexts, is anti-historical. It can be taken for granted that for Huizinga too «science is the question whose answer is history»⁸.

Some critics portrayed Huizinga as “intellectual maverick” in search of easy recognition and rewards. Allegedly, he produced generalizing books of provocative nature for a wide audience. This claim is odd. The Dutch historian was concerned with a field of study that notoriously never attracted a large public of readers, mostly unfamiliar with the debates about method the echoes of which can be detected in the background of Huizinga’s work. Undoubtedly, Huizinga proposed a way of doing history that often made historians, as well as art historians, feel uneasy. From his autobiographical *My Path to History (Mijn weg tot de historie)*, written in 1943 and published for the first time in 1947, we get the impression that he saw himself as an outsider, almost as the “wise fool” of Dutch academia⁹. This text reveals the anxiety of a scholar horrified by the predominance of action over knowledge, a predominance that in his eyes made intellectual labour increasingly more difficult to justify. It has been often claimed that Huizinga’s marginalization has been in fact a matter of self-marginalization. Some of his critics, for example, took his splendid, self-defeating, isolation to be the product of his profound dislike of the allegedly sterile scholarly work conducted by most of his colleagues. Others took it to be the consequence of his elitist, aesthetic and unbridled inter-disciplinary attitude. Frequently, however, Huizinga criticized the “aesthetic attitude”. In one section of *In the Shadow of Tomorrow (In de schaduwen van morgen, 1935)*, for instance, he attacked Burckhardt precisely on account of the latter’s aesthetic admiration for bold action and individual self-reliant determination. Burckhardt’s attitude towards the public is compared with «the disdainful aloofness of the solitary individualist». With «his veneration of the energetic», the Swiss historian was «too much of an aesthetic thinker to create a modern ideal of practical heroism»¹⁰. We must realize that the argument of Huizinga’s self-marginalization is problematic for its circularity. Self-marginalization is presented as both the cause and effect of Huizinga’s peculiar attitude and unorthodox investigative approach.

The critique of the anti-noetic creed

The Waning of the Middle Ages as a whole reveals Huizinga’s moral contempt for the humanist thesis that man is *faber fortunae suae*¹¹. From our point of view, the fundamental question is not establishing whether Huizinga inter-

preted correctly the thesis he attacked. Rather, it is establishing whether there is a logical connexion between his criticism and his metaphysical concerns. We should first point out that Huizinga's moral, or even moralistic, attitude appears also in the portrait of philosophy provided in *Homo Ludens* (1938), where he emphasises the playful, almost silly, nature of philosophical reasoning. There he supports Callicles' opinion, expounded in Plato's *Gorgias*. Philosophy, says Callicles, is a comely thing if one pursues it with moderation in youth, but pernicious if one indulges in its pursuit for too long. In order to prove all the errors and inconsistencies of the sophists, Huizinga notes, Plato employed the dialogic method, which in fact had been inaugurated by the sophists themselves. If both Plato and Aristotle deemed the fallacious arguments of the sophists worthy of so serious a refutation, it could only be because their own philosophy had not yet broken loose from the fancy sphere of play. Evidence of it, Huizinga says, is given by the fact that Plato and Aristotle regarded their labour as both a "youthful distraction" and a "noble game". Huizinga detects the absence of a clear distinction between play and knowledge also in the way in which the Stoics treated the fatuous sophistries constructed on grammatical pitfall and the serious disquisitions of the Megarian school. Eventually, he remarks that even the historian Thucydides handled the issue of might or right, concerning the Athenian breach of neutrality against the island of Melos, in the form of a sophistic game. Not without a degree of sarcasm, the Dutch historian asks whether philosophy can ever break loose from play¹².

The argument of philosophy's futility presented in *Homo Ludens* is rather puzzling because in various parts of *In the Shadow of Tomorrow* Huizinga himself had credited philosophy with the merit of having greatly contributed to the edification of Western civilization's intellectual ethos. Philosophy managed to bring about the essence of the conflict between intelligence and existence since its early days. The resolution of this conflict in favour of mere existence gave input to the process of barbarisation of Western culture and society. Huizinga shows to be particularly worried about the glorification of action and the vulgarization of the heroic ideal, which he considered to be the most telling signs of an unprecedented revulsion from knowledge and understanding. This revulsion is the core of the anti-noetic, or anti-intellectual, attitude towards life that also fed on the clouding and weakening of the critical faculty by the over-stimulation of the will. The primacy of life over understanding entails not only the abandonment of the criteria of understanding, but also of stable moral standards. The defenders of the will to power prove in every possible manner that the greatest aspiration they nurse «is not to think and to know but to live and to do». Huizinga seems to suggest, again, that philosophical thought led the way and society followed. While Kierkegaard is indicated as the modern

thinker who, more profoundly than others, has centered his own philosophy upon the antithesis of existence and intelligence, utilitarianism, pragmatism and Nietzschean thought are presented as the most powerful sources of the widespread conviction that truth is nothing but «what has essential validity for those professing it». A truth-concept reduced to relative value is bound to bring «an abolition of all differences of rank and value of ideas, in its wake». According to the Dutch historian, these mighty streams of thought merged into the historicism of thinkers such as Weber, Scheler, Mannheim, and Spengler. On account of their acceptance of the principle of the environment-conditioned nature of thought, they ended up being labeled as «the next-door neighbours to historical materialism», a current of thought that Huizinga considered to be anti-intellectual. Oddly enough, he affirms that the subjugation of knowledge to the vital impulse is something “truly novel” in the history of human culture. When earlier currents of thought repudiated allegiance to reason, he claims, it was always in favour of the super-rational. By contrast, the culture of today does not only disavow reason, but also the sphere of the knowable as such, the very possibility of knowledge, in favour of the sub-rational, the instinctual. That is why this culture leads to the triumph of the will to power and of the “blood and soil” principle. The sense of Huizinga’s lament that modern culture has severely questioned the very possibility of disinterested knowledge and understanding is clear in the main. Less clear is why Huizinga maintained that the subjugation of knowledge to the vital impulse is a truly novel phenomenon while being convinced that the awareness of the risk of life prevailing over knowledge has been known to the founding fathers of Western philosophy, who brilliantly and worryingly reflected on the matter giving rise to a fruitful tradition of thought. The argument that in the past reason has been repudiated in favour of the super-rational only is not at all convincing. However, Huizinga concludes his digression presenting Sorel as “the spiritual father” of all modern dictatorships, specifying that it is not only the dictators and their followers who desire the subjugation of the will to knowledge to the vital impulse¹³.

Puerilism and decline

Huizinga’s marginalization, or self-marginalization, partially depends on the substantive views which he put forward. He produced statements of cultural critique that many people, including academics and informed readers, may find somewhat disquieting or simply politically incorrect. *In the Shadow of Tomorrow*, for instance, begins with the lament that «we are living in a demented world, and we know it». It would not come as a surprise, he says, if tomorrow

«the madness gave way to a frenzy which would leave our poor Europe in a state of distracted stupor, with engines still turning and flags streaming in the breeze, but with the spirit gone». Like other thinkers, Huizinga too believed that the irrationalisation of social life can be easily accompanied by the highest development of the technical abilities. Since the worship of life, to which the irrationalisation of culture and society has given rise, promotes the cult of the self, it does not matter whether the social organization of the craving for material well-being assumes a capitalist, socialist, or fascist form. It is nothing but “shallow thinking” to assume that collectivism excludes egoism. On a parallel basis, in the domain of aesthetic production the element of reason inherent in the different styles and forms of expression of beauty and sentiment grew progressively weaker. With the increasing worthlessness of the spoken or printed word – another bitter fruit of the anti-noetic creed – the indifference to truth increases in direct proportion. The amount of publicity produced by commercial interests and the craving for sensation turned mere differences of opinion into “national hallucinations”. Finally, Huizinga addresses the question of barbarisation. The latter is defined as «a cultural process whereby an attained condition of high value is gradually over-run and superseded by elements of lower quality». It is open to dispute whether or not the bearers of the higher and the lower elements necessarily confront each other in the same sense in which the élite and the masses do. Following Ortega y Gasset's *The Revolt of the Masses* (*La rebelión de las masas*, 1930), Huizinga specifies that the terms “élite” and “mass” in principle denote “types of mind”, or “spiritual attitudes”. Many would doubt that barbarism can prevail in a liberal-democratic society with a high degree of technical perfection and school education. Huizinga, by contrast, asserts that in disposing of all technical advancements, barbarism becomes all the more powerful and despotic. Basic literacy in no way guarantees the possession of culture, he claims. In particular, he criticizes those pedagogues who advocated upbringing largely based upon the visual. The primacy of the visual marks a stride towards barbarism. A better method of teaching the youth not to think, and of keeping it puerile, he affirms, could hardly be devised. The counterweight to the co-operation of all these destructive factors can only be found in the highest metaphysical and ethical values¹⁴.

The moralists of all times complained about the moral decay of their own time. They thought that the present was bad, and they clung to the idea that the past had been better. As the Dutch historian put it, perhaps it was so, perhaps it was not. There seems to be no valid reason to condemn the present as being of a lower moral average if compared with any previous period. If the present were not of a lower moral average than the past, however, this would not mean that the level of individual morality has risen, but only that «the public order

of today is more effectual in restraining certain forms of popular misconduct than it used to be». In this perspective, one of the many questions about which statistics cannot enlighten public opinion is precisely whether or not the average person of today is more honest than formerly. It is not the number of convictions for theft, perjury, or fraud that is significant, but the innumerable shades of sincerity and loyalty that inevitably evade the observation of those who engage in data-collecting. In addition, Huizinga says that condemning the growing number of divorces and the greater sexual promiscuity, especially among the youth, is to touch the surface of the problem. The modifications occurred in the field of sexual conduct «have gone much further in breaking away from religion than have the precepts of truthfulness and honesty». He believes that without the awareness that lust ought to be resisted, «society becomes prey to sexual degeneration, with destruction as the inevitable result». All in all, even if a comparison with earlier periods in Western civilization would not seem to provide sufficient grounds for speaking of a deterioration of average morality, Huizinga holds that what has deteriorated very seriously is the theory of morals itself. While the average man of today behaves no better and no worse than his predecessors, «the basis of conviction on which moral sentiments and beliefs are founded has become extremely unstable for all who do not feel themselves bound by a code of ethics revealed and incorporated in a religious faith». For a significantly large number of people, the Christian code of ethics has lost its absolute and binding validity. This code has been exposed for a long time to three undermining factors: philosophical immoralism, scientific systems of thought, and sentimentalism. Immoralism has exercised a great deal of influence. Docile as the masses of ordinary people are, he argues, «the knowledge alone that there are thinkers denying the moral order any philosophical *raison d'être* is sufficient to conclude that there can't be much in morality». Again Huizinga suggests, without providing any explanation, that philosophical thought led the way and society followed. Moreover, he does not explain how the ordinary people, who generally despise intellectualism in all its forms, ended up taking certain philosophical models as a source of inspiration. In comparison with the popularization of immoralism achieved through the widespreading of a number of philosophical doctrines, the relativisation of morals implied in scientific systems has proven to be far more powerful in its effects. In the Marxist doctrine, which, like Freudianism, Huizinga assumed to have scientific character, «the domain of moral convictions and obligations can occupy no other place than one of the top shelves of the ideological superstructure, which raises itself on the economic organisation of a particular period and which, conditioned as it is by the latter, is destined to change and to disintegrate with it». For its part, the Freudian system, «which so readily creates the illusion of explaining everything,

has doubtless absorbed vast quantities of moral sentiment in its easily comprehensible notion of sublimation». In setting up the infantile libidinal appetites as the basis of what has been traditionally called "spiritual life", Freudianism placed «the ultimate origins of the recognition of the highest values in the flesh». Huizinga makes no explicit reference to Darwin's theory. Subsequently, he claims that sentimentalism managed to impose itself through literature. On the one hand, literature pretended to unveil «the lack of reality in the current representations of virtue and heroism». Whenever the romantic mood gains ground, he says, the romantic idealization of virtue is blended with a romantic devaluation of it. Virtue and respectability, so long the objects of praise, became outmoded. They are even perceived to be a source of shame. The abolition of censorship left literature «free to allow itself anything and everything». On the other hand, literary realism sought its task in «the unveiling first of the human and the natural, later also of the perverse». So, the will to exalt experience over intelligence found a new powerful vehicle. What remains to direct this will, if guidance is no longer sought in a metaphysical belief centred on an extra-mundane and incorporeal weal, nor in truth-seeking thought, nor in an all-embracing and generally recognised moral order containing such values as justice and charity is only the will¹⁵.

The path which gives access to Huizinga's metaphysical concerns passes through both *In the Shadow of Tomorrow* and *Homo Ludens*, and yet Ernst Gombrich appears to be one of the few interpreters able to emphasize *Homo Ludens's* metaphysical significance. After pointing out that for every ten readers who have been captivated by *The Waning of the Middle Ages*, there may be only one who has really read through *Homo Ludens*, Gombrich suggests starting reading the last chapter of this book and work our way backward in order to find the truly fundamental problem at its heart, which is a metaphysical one¹⁶. In order to shed light on the latter, we will now examine the concept of "puerilism", which, together with the thesis that the confusion of play and seriousness has spiritual or moral nature, constitute the most important links between *In the Shadow of Tomorrow* and *Homo Ludens*. The former comprises the warning against the risk of attaching a psychological meaning to the notion of puerilism. This warning strikes us because we generally assume that the gap between puerilism and infantilism, or even narcissism, is not so large. Yet, Huizinga intended to ascribe puerilism to the sphere of morality, not of psychology. Hence he argued that the causes of regression inherent to puerilism have exclusively spiritual or moral nature. Puerilism and its synonym "permanent adolescence" refer to «the attitude of a community whose behaviour is more immature than the state of its intellectual and critical faculties would warrant». Permanent adolescence, whose rise depends on the weakening of understanding and critical attitude,

is characterised «by the lack of sense of decorum, of personal dignity and by an excessive concentration on self». Modern puerilism manifests itself in two forms. On the one hand, it consists in «activities of a professedly serious nature and universally regarded as serious» coming «to be permeated with the spirit of play and to bear all the characteristics of play». On the other hand, it consists in «activities admittedly of play-character that come to lose the true quality of play because of the manner in which they are carried on». The fundamental features of play are artificiality and separateness. The first feature refers to the fact that the activities that have assumed the play-form are carried on within «an artificial mental sphere governed by rules of its own and temporarily encompassing all conduct in a voluntarily accepted system of action». As long as the play lasts, ordinary life is set aside, «the reality outside the playground is forgotten, and a general surrender to the common illusion triumphs». Where the play was holy this activity became a cult or a rite. The separateness of play implies the end of it. At a certain moment, the play is over. All types of performances end and ordinary life continues. Here, says Huizinga, the evil of our epoch shows itself, because «nowadays play in many cases never ends». A far-reaching contamination of play and seriousness has been achieved, and this is one of the most important aspects of «the malady of our time». Recognised or official play «is no longer able to maintain its true play-character as a result of being taken too seriously and being technically over-organized». In this way the qualities of detachment, artlessness and gladness are lost. Huizinga concludes that «with great numbers of both the educated and the ignorant the play-attitude towards life of the adolescent has become permanent»¹⁷.

In the *Foreword* of *Homo Ludens*, after recalling that the distinction between play and seriousness in culture had been the theme of his address held at the University of Leiden on 8 February 1933 (*Over de grenzen van spel en ernst in de cultuur*), and, subsequently, of a number of lectures held in Zürich, Vienna and London, Huizinga claims that civilization arises and unfolds “in” and “as” play. Play is not a biological function, but a cultural phenomenon to be approached and understood from the point of view of “the science of culture”. He opts for the expression “the play-element of culture” instead of “the play-element in culture”. This expression was repeatedly changed by his translators, but the Dutch historian constantly objected to it because it was not his wish «to define the place of play among all other manifestations of culture, but rather to ascertain how far culture itself bears the character of play». The integration of the concept of play in that of culture constitutes Huizinga’s immediate concern¹⁸. Arguably, the integration of the concept of play in that of culture can be said to have aesthetic character if we assume the perspective of immanence to be the only relevant one. That case, instead, is that immanence is one of the two axes along which

Huizinga's discourse developed. Not for nothing the methodological syncretism that characterizes his 1938 work faced severe criticism¹⁹. The definition of play lets the aesthetic and metaphysical concerns alike appear on the surface of his narrative. Play is «a voluntary activity executed within certain fixed limits of time and place, according to rules freely accepted but binding, having its aim in itself and accompanied by a feeling of tension, joy and the consciousness that it is different from ordinary life». In acknowledging play, «we acknowledge mind, for whatever else play is, it is not matter». From the point of view of a world wholly determined by blind forces, play appears to be superfluous. It only becomes «possible, thinkable and understandable when an influx of mind breaks down the absolute determinism of the cosmos». The very existence of play «continually confirms the supra-logical nature of the human situation». Animals too play, «so they must be more than merely mechanical things». Finally, «we play and know that we play, so we must be more than merely rational beings, for play is irrational». The fun-element in playing «resists all analysis, all logical interpretations» and gives it «a profoundly aesthetic quality». Play is based on the manipulation of certain images, namely on the manipulation of a certain imagination of reality, that is, «its conversion into images». We should be ready «to grasp the value and significance of these images», and «to observe their action in play itself and thus try to understand play as a cultural factor in life». All archetypal activities of human society are «permeated with play from the start». Play is superfluous in the sense that the need for it «is only urgent to the extent that the enjoyment of it makes it a need». It can be deferred or suspended at any time, and it is «never imposed by physical necessity or moral duty». Play is never a mere task. «It is done at leisure», and only when it takes the form of a rite, or of a ceremony, «is it bound up with notions of obligation and duty». Again Huizinga recalls that even if commonly play is the direct opposite of seriousness, this opposition is fluid, neither conclusive nor fixed. The play-concept is absolutely independent from the domain of the great categorical antitheses. It lies outside the antithesis of wisdom and folly, and of truth and falsehood, good and evil. Although play is a non-material activity, it has no moral function, and the valuations of vice and virtue do not apply. Evidence of the fact that Huizinga was not trying to make the sphere of play coincide with that of aesthetics is given by his statement that «the reality of play extends beyond the sphere of human life»²⁰. He does not explain how this result is achieved. Nevertheless, we are dealing here with a first indication that what is fundamentally at stake in *Homo Ludens* is metaphysics, neither aesthetics nor psychology or even morality. Collingwood's *Speculum Mentis* too provides a conception of play that at first sight one feels compelled to qualify as aesthetic. Play is «a form of action in which the will is untroubled by any question as to

right and wrong, expedient or inexpedient, and chooses an end which is an end only because it is this irresponsibly chosen». The end in play is not chosen as right, useful, correct, conventional, or customary, but it is simply chosen. Yet, this conception too cannot be regarded as fully aesthetic. The autonomy of the aesthetic spirit is illusory for «it is rooted in facts of which the aesthetic spirit does not give an explicit account»²¹.

In the last chapter of *Homo Ludens* Huizinga poses three questions, two of which have general character. The first is the question of the extent to which our civilization still develops in play-forms. The second is the question of how far the play-spirit dominates the lives of those who share the same civilization. The third has specific character and is the question of whether present-day puerilism can be seen as having a play-function. Puerilism embodies the mixture of immaturity and barbarity that lies at the bottom of a dangerous twofold tendency affecting present-day Western culture and society. On the one hand, serious occupations more and more degenerate into play, but still being called serious. On the other hand, originally playful occupations increasingly degenerate into seriousness, but still being called playful. This twofold tendency characterizes the life of the modern nations and that is why Huizinga's conclusion is that today civilization is no longer properly played. It is a disaster, he points out, when whole nations turn into "clubs" that, besides promoting the precious qualities of friendship and loyalty, easily act as "hotbeds" of sectarianism and intolerance. They end up propagating illusions flattering individual and collective immoderate self-love. Along this line the nations lose every sense of honour, decency and fair play. In addition, the Dutch historian considers «the entry of half-educated masses into the international traffic of the mind, the relaxation of morals and the hypertrophy of technology», as well as «the insatiable thirst for trivial recreation and crude sensationalism», to be the direct causes of the «bastardization of culture». The metaphysical problem at the heart *Homo Ludens* eventually appears in the very conclusive remarks. The mind of the Western type of man has only one path to move along if it wished to authentically free itself. It can only «disengage itself from the magic circle of play by turning towards the Ultimate». Logical thinking cannot bring us far enough. Whenever we are confronted by ceaseless interrogatives about what is play, and what is seriousness, we find «the fixed, unmoving point that logic denies us, once more in the sphere of ethics». Huizinga repeats that play «lies outside morals», and yet he points out that «if we have to decide whether an action to which our will impels us is a serious duty or is licit as play, our moral conscience will at once provide the touchstone». «As soon as truth and justice, compassion and forgiveness have part in our resolve to act, our anxious question loses all meaning». «One drop of pity – Huizinga concludes – is enough to lift our doing beyond

intellectual distinctions». Springing as it does from a belief in justice and divine grace, «conscience, which is moral awareness, will always whelm the question that eludes and deludes us to the end, in a lasting silence»²².

Conclusion

For Huizinga barbarism does not coincide with dictatorship and collectivism. Technological progress, free market, and liberal-democracy are by no means remedies against it. The barbarisation of society determines the consolidation of an existential regime whereby serious occupations more and more degenerated into play, while still being called serious, and playful occupations increasingly degenerated into seriousness, while still being called playful. This barbarisation is achieved when an attained condition of high value is gradually over-run and superseded by elements of lower value. How difficult is to prove that, whenever a significant change takes place, the superseding elements are of lower value everyone knows. What not everyone knows, perhaps, is that it is relatively easy to assess how radically the very possibility to pose the question of the relevance of the distinction between high and lower value is impeded. Paraphrasing the title of one section of a Nietzschean work²³, we may argue that in “a world that became a fable” barbarism feeds on the difficulty to meaningfully employ the long-standing distinctions that contributed to the edification of Western civilization. Awareness of this difficulty is to be found in the background of the ongoing debates on a number of sensitive issues. If we think, for example, about the managerialization and commercialization of the educational curricula, it is not difficult to realize that, while declaring to foster the increase and consolidation of quality, this type of reform, in fact, deprives quality itself of any substantive significance²⁴. As far as the role of sexuality is concerned, to say that our societies have not become prey of sexual degeneration, as Huizinga predicted, is possible because notions such as “degeneration” and “perversion” have gradually lost acceptance in parlance as well as in thought. Family life too has undergone radical transformations over the past decades. Yet even the very suspect that some of these transformations may have taken a play-form, if not even a totalitarian form, finds no general acceptance. The discouraging, or even the silencing, of the opinions opposing what Huizinga called “the primacy of living over knowing and understanding” is by no means regarded as an assumption of ominous infallibility. In philosophical discourse, as we know, an epochal decision is said to have been made, namely that universals do not exist²⁵. Yet, individual autonomy seeks no other guidance than itself as only, presumably, a universal would do. This monadic, and even solipsistic, construction of in-

dividual autonomy can be meaningfully compared with the type of puerilism that Huizinga focused on. It is unfortunate, however, that in the attempt to emphasise the moral dimension of his discourse the Dutch historian thought his description of puerilism to have nothing to do with the Freudian analysis of narcissism²⁶. Some similarities between the latter and the concept of puerilism, however, can be found in spite of various notable differences. Huizinga claimed that the worship of life, to which the irrationalisation of culture has given rise, promotes the cult of the self. This argument is stimulating but problematic, on account of its circularity. The irrationalisation of culture is presented as both the cause and effect of the worship of life that promotes the cult of the self. The excessive concentration on the self is no longer seen as a sign of immaturity also because the very distinctions between maturity and immaturity, excessive or abnormal and normal, have become difficult to justify. It can be concluded that behind the cult of the self we may still find the sentimental worship of experience described by Huizinga. The new forms of management too, which emerged and imposed themselves during the past decades, indicate that this is the case²⁷. A remarkable number of people seem to be unable to disengage from “the magic circle of play”. If, as Huizinga suggested, play is based on a particular manipulative conversion of reality into images, then, our main intellectual task remains identifying and understanding the ways and conditions through which the value and significance of these images are produced and reproduced.

Note

¹ J. HUIZINGA, *The Waning of the Middle Ages. A Study of Forms of Life, Thought, and Art in France and the Netherlands in the Dawn of the Renaissance*, trans. Fritz Hopman, Edward Arnold & Co., London 1924.

² E. GARIN, introduzione a J. HUIZINGA, *Autunno del medioevo*, trad. it. B. Jasinsk, Biblioteca Universale Rizzoli, Milano 1998, pp. vii-xxxii; F. CHABOD, *Johan Huizinga* in *Rivista storica italiana* 60 (1948), pp. 342-344. *The Waning of the Middle Ages* has been compared with a speculative exercise of the post-impressionist kind of art that painters such as van Gogh, Cézanne and Gauguin represented. See N.F. CANTOR, *Inventing the Middle Ages. The Lives, Works, and Ideas of the Great Medievalists of the Twentieth Century*, William Morrow & Co., New York 1991, pp. 377-381.

³ M. WEBER, *Die Objektivität sozialwissenschaftlicher und sozialpolitischer Erkenntnis* in *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik* 19 (1904), pp. 22-87 now in ID., *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Wissenschaftslehre* (1922), hrsg. J. Winckelmann, J.C.B. Mohr, Tübingen 1951, pp. 146-214; E. NAGEL, *The Logic of Historical Analysis* (1952) in H. FEIGL-M. BRODBECK (eds.), *Readings in the Philosophy of Science*, Appleton-Century-Crofts Inc., New York 1953, pp. 688-700.

⁴ A. VAN DER LEM, *Johan Huizinga. Leven en werk in beelden en documenten*, Uitgeverij Wereldbibliotheek, Amsterdam 1993, p. 238.

⁵ Burckhardt argued that of all disciplines history is the most unscientific because «it possesses or can possess least of all an assured, approved method of selection». Even if historical research may have a very definite method, «its presentation has not». See J. BURCKHARDT, *Judgements on History and Historians*, trans. H. Trevor-Roper, Routledge, London-New York 2007, p. 179.

⁶ J. HUIZINGA, *Verzamelde werken* (eds. L. van Brummel et al.), H.D. Tjeenk Willink & Zoon, Haarlem 1950, vol. 7, pp. 33, 46, 50, 137. Umberto Eco pointed out that Huizinga's writings do not specify how "social morphology" is to be integrated in historical research. See U. Eco, *Introduzione*, in J. HUIZINGA, *Homo Ludens*, trad. it. C. van Schendel, Einaudi Editore, Torino 1973, pp. vii-xxx.

⁷ R.G. COLLINGWOOD, *Speculum mentis or the Map of Knowledge*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1924, pp. 210, 213-214, 216-218, 230-231, 233, 238.

⁸ Scientific history «believes itself to be the apprehension of a real object», whereas «it ignores to be the author of its own abstraction, imposing its abstractness upon a world which was in reality a world of concrete facts». *Ivi*, pp. 189, 201, 220, 232-233.

⁹ J. HUIZINGA, *Dutch Civilisation in the Seventeenth Century and Other Essays*, trans. A.J. Pomerans, Frederick Ungar, New York 1968, pp. 244-276.

¹⁰ J. HUIZINGA, *In the Shadow of Tomorrow*, trans. J. Huizinga, W.W. Norton & Company Inc., New York 1964, p. 163.

¹¹ For example, Huizinga claims that an acute awareness of death's presence is the essence of "the medieval soul". He also claims that the predominant mood at the Burgundian court was as dark as that predominant at the court of Lorenzo de' Medici in Florence. Finally, he asserts that the Humanists' rediscovery of the classics is full of common-places, and there is no *Rinascimento* at all. See A. VAN DER LEM, *op. cit.*, pp. 238-240.

¹² J. HUIZINGA, *Homo ludens. A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*, trans. R.F.C. Hull, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London 1949, pp. 88, 150-152.

¹³ J. HUIZINGA, *In the Shadow of Tomorrow*, *cit.*, pp. 99-104, 165-166, 169.

¹⁴ *Ivi*, pp. 15, 212-215.

¹⁵ *Ivi*, pp. 128-139. In the opening essay of *Symboles de la Science sacrée*, published posthumously first in 1962 and in a revised edition in 1977, René Guénon argued that the decline of modern civilization has come about due to a gradual loss of true intellectuality that in turn has made possible the two errors of rationalism and sentimentalism. The latter affected the sphere of religion too. «For most people religion is only an affair of sentiment, without any intellectual import. They confuse religion with a vague religiosity, reducing it to morality». The place of doctrine, which is what is essential, is diminished as much as possible, despite the fact that «it is from doctrine that all the rest should logically derive». Being no more than moralism pure and simple, Protestantism is seen as «representative of the tendencies of the modern mind». See R. GUÉNON, *Symbols of Sacred Science*, trans. H.D. Fohr, Sophia Perennis, Hillsdale (NY) 2004, pp. 2-3.

¹⁶ E.H. GOMBRICH, *Huizinga's Homo Ludens* in «Bijdragen en Mededelingen betreffende de Geschiedenis der Nederlanden» 88 (1973), pp. 275-296, 276-277.

¹⁷ J. HUIZINGA, *In the Shadow of Tomorrow*, *cit.*, pp. 170, 173, 176-178.

¹⁸ According to van der Lem, *Homo Ludens* is an attempt "to bring all that exists between heaven and earth to one starting-point", that is, play. See A. VAN DER LEM, *op. cit.*, p. 251.

¹⁹ *Homo Ludens* has been put under attack also on account of its questioning of the historicist world-view, of the emphasis put in it on the different linguistic usages of the concept of play, and of the mixture of high culture and everyday life. For exactly the same reasons, perhaps, the book has been enthusiastically received, yet by a limited number of experts.

²⁰ J. HUIZINGA, *Homo Ludens*, *cit.*, pp. 2-6, 8, 28.

²¹ R.G. COLLINGWOOD, op. cit., pp. 102-103.

²² J. HUIZINGA, *Homo Ludens*, cit., pp. 195, 197, 199, 205-206, 213.

²³ F. NIETZSCHE, *The Twilight of the Idols*, trans. D. Large, Oxford University Press, Oxford-New York 1998, p. 20.

²⁴ H. MARTINS, *The Marketisation of Universities and Some Cultural Contradictions of Academic Capitalism* in «Metacritica. Revista de filosofia», I; 4, November 2004; G. LOCK-C. LORENZ, *Revisiting the University Front* in *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 26/5 (2007), pp. 405-418; S. COLLINI, *What Are the Universities For?* Penguin Books, London-New York 2012, pp. 115-177.

²⁵ M. FOUCAULT, *The Birth of Biopolitics. Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978-1979* (ed. A.J. Davidson), Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke 2008, p. 3.

²⁶ S. FREUD, *On Narcissism: an Introduction* in *The Penguin Freud Library* (eds. A. Richards- A. Dickson), Penguin Books, London-New York 1984, vol. 11, pp. 59-97.

²⁷ M. MARZANO, *Extension du domaine de la manipulation de l'entreprise à la vie privée*, Editions Grasset & Fasquelle, Paris 2008.