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JOHAN HUIZINGA AND DANTE: POETRY, HISTORY, CIVILITY¹

Throughout his life the Dutch historian Johan Huizinga (1872-1945) felt an intense and extraordinary bond, which almost took the form of a dialogue, with the Italian poet Dante Alighieri. In his long career as a linguist, orientalist and historian, Huizinga often looked at Dante for inspiration and insight, company and consolation. From the mid-1890s until Huizinga's death in 1945, Dante Alighieri was one of his 'companion-guides' on his travels to Italy and his explorations of medieval thought and culture. Huizinga's use of Dante's poetry and philosophy was an important instrument in his construction of cultural history and his attempt to come to grips with the relationship between life (eros, death) and culture, between poetry, art, culture and history.

Poetry

Huizinga's interest in the work of Dante went back to his student years. In 1938 Huizinga mentioned Dante as one of the writers who had been of overriding importance in the formation of his moral concepts and worldview. 'I was "influenced" by French modern literature of the time, the "sunbeam" of the Eighties Movement, and soon after by Upanishads, Buddhism and Dante'.² In 1900 his friend André Jolles wrote to him from Florence, in flamboyantly evocative terms about 'a man wrapped in a wine-red cloak', whose robe in twilight takes the color of 'coagulated blood'; he is standing motionless with his 'fiercely curved nose' and 'his slowly moving eyes that never dwell', staring from under the 'angularly overhanging eyebrow [...] in a acute aware-

¹ With thanks to Florike Egmond and Hans Zegerius who read an earlier version of this article.

² Johan Huizinga to Menno Ter Braak, who, in a review of Huizinga's *Homo Ludens*, accused him of being a representative of typical 'Dutch preaching culture' (Domineesland), see letter 29-XII-1938 (1374), *Briefwisseling*, Veen, Utrecht 1991, vol. III, p. 269.

ness of hate'. He was apparently alluding to Dante.³

Huizinga himself followed in Dante's footsteps, when he visited Italy in 1902 on his honeymoon.⁴ Poetry was for Huizinga the best gateway to the spiritual reality of a foreign country, a people, a civilization. And of all poets Dante in particular fulfilled Huizinga's need for 'historical sensation':

No poet is as inseparable from the country and the people who produced him as Dante. He brings us into contact with Italy in a much stronger way than Shakespeare does with England or even Cervantes with Spain. Is there one poet who leads you, when you cross his path, as Dante does in Florence, Verona, Ravenna? Italy is the world's joy for a thousand other reasons; we can get acquainted with it through numerous other expressions of its rich mind, but the essence of its spirit understands only he who loves Dante.⁵

Thus it was through Dante that Huizinga admired Giotto in Florence and enjoyed panoramic views and scenery: 'Fiesole church entirely beautiful; climbed to St. Francesco – Dantesque view over *fonte lucente*, *Monte Rinaldi* already in the shade, Vallombrosa in sunshine – all of a sudden a view of Florence'.⁶ It corresponded to his idea of 'historical sensation': his almost mystical formulation of an immediate contact with the past, 'unspoiled' by mediation through cognitive or scientific categories. In such a contact a detail of a historical event or an object of the past became tangible and palpable for the present observer of that past.

At the end of the nineteenth century, Huizinga's reading of Dante was embedded in a more general revival of Dante's writings, which involved not only his *Divina Comedia*, but also his contemplative-philosophical works, the *Monarchia* and *Convivio*. Their 'rediscovery' in Holland initially provoked mainly moralizing, often theological comments, but by the end of the century the aesthetic and poetical interest in Dante's work was growing.⁷ Like Jolles, Huizinga was influenced by

³ Letter of André Jolles to Johan Huizinga, 27-III-1900, part of no. 22, in Johan Huizinga, *Briefwisseling*, Veen, Utrecht 1989, vol. I p. 43.

⁴ Travelling by train through Switzerland - Basel - to Italy, Huizinga and his wife visited Milan, Florence, Ravenna and Bologna. He took notes of all the important works of art they saw in his diary. On their way back via Como, Lugano they stayed a few days in Basel to look at the paintings of Holbein, Witz and Grünewald before travelling back to Haarlem (Holland) where Huizinga lived at the time.

⁵ Johan Huizinga, 'Dante', *Nieuwe Rotterdamse Courant*, 13 sept. 1921, now in *Verzamelde Werken* (V.W.), Tjeenk Willink, Haarlem 1948-1953, vol. IV, pp. 141-143.

⁶ Johan Huizinga, *Travel-diary*, manuscript, note of Saturday April 5th, 1902; with thanks to Anton van der Lem for giving me a copy of the diary.

⁷ See J. Terlingen. 'Profilo dell'interpretazione e della critica dantesca nell'area linguistica olandese', in *Miscellanea Dantesca. Edita dalla Società dantesca nei Paesi Bassi nella ricorrenza del settimo centenario della nascita del sommo poeta*, 1965, Het Spectrum, Utrecht/Antwerpen 1965, pp. 9-58.

the Symbolist movement in art and literature in the 1890s. He often displayed an ironic, sometimes militant attitude towards Dutch culture which he considered dull, moralistic and 'calvinist'. He was attracted by the bizarre and the grotesque in literature and art: elements which he also recognised in Dante, especially in his *Divina Comedia*. In 1921, looking back to the Dante 'revival', Huizinga stated:

The rejection of Shakespeare, Rembrandt and Dante is based on one and the same fundamental principle: the aversion to extravagance, the fear of closeness. Extra-vagant in the Latin sense of the two separate words: an extraordinary experience, an almost spiritual dwelling of the mind. In Dante we find what we lack in ourselves: perfection, of judgement, philosophy, grasp of poetic language, perfect imagination. In Dante the poetic language is perfect. Confronted with Dante all differences (of opinion) in the history of literature lose their meaning: [...] relation between subject and enunciation, [...] form and content, [...] reality and fiction. Dante never distinguished between different fantasies: biblical, classical, romantic, between which later poetic generations were to waver and were to choose. They are subjected to his discernment and it compels them to harmony.⁸

It was this preference for the plastic, directly poetical representation of the bizarre and of evil which attracted Huizinga in Dante. It suited his idea that history should be 'visual' and 'tactile' (aanschouwelijk), concrete instead of abstract, academic or merely systematic: 'Dante has touched the darkness of hell with beauty: Farinata and Ugolino are heroic, and Lucifer is majestic.'⁹ What Huizinga also admired in Dante was the placid, serene, poetic quality. In his *The Waning of the Middle Ages* he expressed his disappointment at the quality of his sources, French-Burgundian chronicles. Ideas and forms of expression did not come up to his standard. Discussing the bitterness in Eustache Deschamps' description of life and old age, Huizinga recalled the 'serene ideality' of Dante:

The poetry of Eustache Deschamps is full of petty reviling of life and its inevitable troubles. Happy is he who has no children, for babies mean nothing but crying and stench; they give only trouble and anxiety; they have to be clothed, shod, fed; they are always in danger of falling and hurting themselves; they contract some illness and die. When they grow up, they may go to the bad and be put in prison. Nothing but cares and sorrows, no happiness compensates us for our anxiety, for the trouble and expenses of their education. [...] In old age the poet sees only evil and disgust, a lamentable decline of the body and the mind, ridicule and insipidity. It comes soon, at thirty for a woman, at fifty for a man,

⁸ Johan Huizinga, 'Dante', cit.

⁹ J. Huizinga, *The Waning of the Middle Ages* (first Dutch edition 1919, English translation 1924), quotation from the 1985 Penguin edition, pp. 208-209.

and neither lives beyond sixty, for the most part. It is a far cry to the serene ideality of Dante's conception of noble old age in the *Convivio*.¹⁰

Once more, it proved to Huizinga that there was no trace of true inspiration in declining Burgundian culture, that it was 'the pastime of an exhausted mind.' And 'though the authors always place their action in the setting of a dream, their phantasmagorias never resemble real dreams, such as we find in Dante and Shakespeare.'¹¹

Admiration for Dante's poetical achievement, made Huizinga defend Dante in Dutch cultural debates. Several times he felt a calling, almost a vocation, to save Dante from academic culture which he considered too severe, too sterile or too hostile. Criticism of Dante by the well-known Romanist Salverda de Grave, for instance, was a thorn in Huizinga's flesh, as became clear in 1921 during the commemoration of the 600th anniversary of Dante's death. In one of Huizinga's articles, that was published in the special edition of *De Gids* dedicated to Dante,¹² he characterized Salverda de Grave's appreciation of Dante as too 'cold'. He disagreed with Salverda de Grave's opinion that the *Vita Nuova* and the *Convivio* were 'outdated', that these writings were appreciated only out of snobbery. To Salverda they were products of the 'sentimental religion of the time' (de gevoelsgodsdienst van de tijd), of 'dreamy infatuation' (dromerig dwepen).¹³ But many elements in Dante which Salverda de Grave considered old fashioned and which he didn't appreciate – such as lyrical courtly love, dreaming, utopia, return to the past – were for Huizinga the backbone of his idea of culture and cultural history. In his conception the most important conditions for 'civilisation' and 'culture' were abstinence, asceticism, spiritualization. In 1921 he wrote:

We shouldn't judge Dante's love [for Beatrice] according to the standard of ordinary life or bourgeois romanticism but to that of mysticism. From the strongest soul that ever lived, *we* have to learn how passion becomes superterrestrial'.¹⁴

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 34.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 304.

¹² Huizinga wrote a lot of articles for the commemoration of Dante in 1921: he wrote about Dante in the *Nieuwe Rotterdamse Courant*; for the special edition of *De Gids*: 'De figuur van de dood bij Dante', 'Welke voorstelling heeft Erasmus omtrent Dante gehad?' (Italian translation in *Dante Alighieri, 1321-1921. Omaggio dell'Olanda*, Martinus Nijhoff, The Hague 1921) and 'Erasmus en Dante'; moreover a bookreview of I. Van Dijk, *Dante's Vita Nuova*, Groningen 1920, and of J. Salverda de Grave, *Dante*, Meulenhoff, Amsterdam 1921. In 1922 he wrote 'An early reference to Dante's canzone "Le dolce rime d'amor" in England', in *Modern Language review*. Now all in *V.W.*, IV.

¹³ Salverda de Grave's vision of *Vita Nuova*, expressed in 1906, and repeated, though modified, in his book *Dante*, cit.; cf. Huizinga, in *De Gids* (sept. 1921), special edition on Dante, pp. 489-490, now in *V.W.*, cit., pp. 143-144.

¹⁴ Huizinga, *V.W.*, cit., pp. 144-146, on occasion of Van Dijk on *Dante's Vita Nuova*, cit.

History and 'historical ideals'

Huizinga went through an important shift in his professional career between 1897 and 1905. Distancing himself more and more from his early work as a linguist, Sanskrit and Oriental scholar, he threw himself into research on the origins and nature of European medieval and renaissance culture. This transition was partly caused by a total lack of professional perspectives as a linguist or Orientalist, partly by a disappointment in the abstract world and ideas of Indian literature.¹⁵ He was increasingly attracted by the more tangible, proximate world of early Christian medieval culture. His need for closeness, plasticity, aesthetics was nourished by walks in the Maas (Meuse) valley in the Southern Netherlands, Belgium and Northern France, where he visited medieval churches and Catholic cult places – an exceptional occupation for a non-catholic Dutchman. At the same time he grew tired of both the negativity of the Buddhist worldview, with its orientation towards death, and the fashionable Oriental objects and ideas (from Oriental poetry and literature to all kinds of fashions in trade, theatre, exhibitions). In 1903 he argued for the adoption of Oriental culture not in a purely aesthetic way, worshipping isolated artefacts and ideas (in opposition to decadent uses of the Orient), but in an attempt to understand these 'products' in the context of culture, philosophy and history.¹⁶ At the same time he was puzzled by the possibility of connections between the world of antiquity and early Christianity, in which he considered Dante an important chain. Briefly, he believed in the vitality of Western civilisation, and searched for life and culture close at hand:

In any period of civilization with a strong yearning for the absolute, such as the early period of Buddhism or the Christian Middle Ages, concepts of the hereafter naturally predominate emphatically over all cultural ideals. Such periods are focused on death, not on life. But no one forsakes the world and life so strictly, and the hope of immortality can never absorb an inexhaustible residue of vital energy seeking happiness and perfection on earth.¹⁷

Again he was attracted to Dante. To create culture – he stated in 1915, during the Great War – one has to be convinced that life is

¹⁵ See Huizinga, 'Mijn weg tot de historie', in *V.W.*, I, pp. 11-42, esp. pp. 32-33; see also W.E. Krul, *Historicus tegen de tijd. Opstellen over leven & werk van J. Huizinga*, Historische Uitgeverij, Groningen 1990. Anton van der Lem, *Joban Huizinga. Leven en werk in beelden & documenten*, Wereldbibliotheek, Amsterdam 1993.

¹⁶ Huizinga, *Over studie en waardering van het buddhisme*, Tjeenk Willink, Haarlem 1903, in *V.W.*, I, pp.148-172.

¹⁷ Huizinga, 'Over historische levensidealen' (1915), in *V.W.*, IV, pp. 411-432, English translation 'Historical Ideals of Life', in *Men and ideas. History, the Middle Ages, the Renaissance*, Princeton 1959, pp. 77-96, here p. 82.

'makable' and one has to cherish 'cultural ideals'. The first occurrence of such an ideal that he was able to discover was in Dante's *Monarchia*, in the idea of *civilitas humani generis*. Before Dante nobody had ever imagined a universal ideal of civilisation, the notion of a common goal of human activity (doel van 's werelds bedrijf).¹⁸

[...] A belief in the perfectibility of culture was alien to the men of the Middle Ages: there was no attempt toward gradual evolution on the basis of the social situation, and the sense of constant transformation which constitutes the driving force of all present-day social and political desire did not animate him. The only Medieval ideal of bliss which can be called a cultural ideal in the true sense of the word was that of world peace, Dante's ideal.¹⁹

One has to fantasize and to dream in order to escape from the chains of primitive, biological life. One of his favorite expressions was that life, matter has to be filled with spirit. That is why the idea of asceticism plays a key role in Huizinga's concept of culture. Asceticism, linked to love, particularly courtly love, and death were, in his opinion, an important incentive for culture. Huizinga also recognized the unsatisfied desire and self-sacrifice that the troubadours of Provence placed at the centre of the poetic concept of love, which he considered the basis of chivalrous life and ideals. He described it several times as a '[...] spiritualization that took place in the ascent from the poetry of the troubadours to Dante's *Vita nuova*',²⁰ which towards the end of the thirteenth century, 'in the *dolce stil nuovo* of Dante and his friends' attributed to love 'the gift of bringing about a state of piety and holy intuition.'²¹

But to arrive at reality, that is to say history, – according to Huizinga – Dante took an other important step. While in the Middle Ages symbolism and allegory were the main forms of thought and expression, representation and the symbolic mentality remained an obstacle to the development of causal thought, in changing the human world:

[...] the sacred symbolism of the two luminaries and the two swords for a long time barred the road to historic and juridical criticism of papal authority. For the symbolizing of Papacy and Empire as the Sun and the Moon, or as the two swords brought by the Disciples, was to the Medieval mind far more than a striking comparison; it revealed the mystic foundation of the two powers, and established directly the precedence of Saint Peter. Dante, in order to investigate the historical foun-

¹⁸ Ibid., pp. 489-490.

¹⁹ Huizinga, 'Cultural ideals', in *Men and ideas*, cit., p. 82.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 87.

²¹ Huizinga, *The Waning*, cit., p. 104.

dition of the pope's primacy, first had to deny the appropriateness of the symbolism.²²

In this sense Dante escapes from all kinds of attempts to conceive a 'typical' medieval culture. In the Twenties Huizinga polemicized in several articles against Burckhardt's thesis on the Italian Renaissance. Huizinga did not agree that 'realism' and 'individualism' were the decisive features of the Renaissance, as he refused to create a sharp contrast between late medieval and Renaissance life, both in Italy and in other European countries. To Huizinga it was clear that 'beneath the glory of the Renaissance genuinely medieval popular life continued in Italy in the same forms as in France and the Germanic countries.' Moreover, the new life whose advent Burckhardt hailed in Italy, was also emerging in other countries, where he could detect nothing but age-old repression and barbarism. So he criticised Burckhardt's chronological delimitation of the Renaissance:

What lay before 1400 was for him a betokening, a hopeful seed. The position he assigned to Dante and Petrarch was still that of 'precursors' of the Renaissance, just as Michelet – and to a certain extent even Voltaire – had seen them. The notion of 'precursors' of a trend or movement is always a dangerous metaphor in history. Dante a precursor of the Renaissance – in the same way I might with certain justification call Rembrandt a precursor of Jozef Israels, but no one would follow me. By marking someone as a precursor one lifts him out of the framework of his own time, within which he should be understood, and in doing so one distorts history.²³

Huizinga located the origins of many features of culture which – after Burckhardt – were attributed to the Renaissance, in medieval culture. The Middle Ages as a whole did not profess a *contemptus mundi*, nor was it the case that in the Renaissance 'the full orchestra suddenly struck up a jubilant arrangement of the theme *iuvat vivere*, it is a joy to be alive'. The truth, according to Huizinga, was very different. In the first place, medieval Christian thought never rejected the world in its beauty and its pleasures as completely as was usually assumed. An optimistic, aesthetic view of the world began to break through the old negation, even among the intellectuals who represented scholasticism at his height: Thomas Aquinas and Dante.²⁴

In the medieval spirit, scholasticism had instilled a belief in realistic composition, as the principle of imitation pointed beyond nature to

²² Ibid., p. 205.

²³ Huizinga, 'The Problem of the Renaissance', in *Men and Ideas*, cit., pp. 260-61.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 283.

God. Aristotle's 'ars imitatur naturam in quantum potest' was not praise of mere aesthetic realism as we conceive it today. For Thomas Aquinas 'it is natural for man to be pleased with representations' and by placing 'imitation' within the concept 'representation', in the full sense of that word within medieval thought, 'he suddenly gave a much deeper note to aesthetic realism itself'.²⁵ As medieval culture developed, realism began to appear here and there, not at all as a deliberate artistic technique, but as a random trait:

Then suddenly Dante provides an emphatic realism that is so tremendously piercing, so alive, and so visionary that his work supplies the very criterion with which to measure the concept of literary realism. In his godlike work he delineates and brings to life figure and gesture, movement, conversation, and landscape alike. Dante, like all truly great men, rather seems to upset our theories than to confirm them. Unless it is that he demonstrates that realistic composition as such has nothing to do with the Renaissance, but not in the absolute clarity of his view, which no one has equalled, or the pithy pointedness of his words.²⁶

Yet it is quite wrong to detect the arrival of the Renaissance in every realistic trait, so Huizinga refused to call Dante a 'precursor' of the Renaissance as Burckhardt and Michelet had done. However, it was clear that Franciscan preaching and Franciscan poetry and mysticism had spread the idea of the *renovatio vitae* among wider circles, with a stronger emphasis on the inward renewal of the individual person than on the expectation of an actual secular event that would bring spiritual renewal. '*Renovatio, reformatio*, became a spiritual watchword of the thirteenth century.'²⁷ In this sense, it had repeatedly announced itself: '[...] in the twelfth century with the *chanson de geste*, Abelard, and Abbot Joachim; in the thirteenth with the *Evangelium aeternum*, the polemic pamphlet of the radical Franciscans; in the fourteenth with Dante'²⁸. That is why Huizinga considered it absurd to call the 'Renaissance' exclusively anti-Christian and once again he found evidence in Dante. The custom of satirizing the Church and churchmen was not at all a theme specific to the humanists. It had been very widespread ever since the days of scholasticism.

Even in the thirteenth century Averroism flourished alongside Thomas Aquinas, in the auditoria of the University of Paris and in the towns and the courts of Italy there was a generation of parlor heretics who prided themselves on their rejection of immortality and who were able to

²⁵ Huizinga, 'Renaissance and realism', in *Men and ideas*, cit., p. 298.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 295.

²⁷ Huizinga, 'Problem of Renaissance', in *Men and Ideas*, cit., p. 275.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 262-63.

maintain a cautious peace with the Church. They are the ones who Dante condemns to hell as Epicureans. As is known, even Giotto was suspected. Nowhere it is as clear as here how difficult it is to draw sharp lines in cultural history. Dante himself, who had seen the father of his friend Guido Cavalcanti in the flaming sepulchers next to Farinata degli Uberti, saw the master of Averroism, Siger de Brabant, in the celestial paradise next to Thomas himself among the lights of theology. If this could happen to Dante, then we must be on our guard and not label the Renaissance as unchristian on the basis of a bit of satire and frivolity.²⁹

This idea of *renovatio* and *reformatio* was taken up by Dante. In the *Commedia* the concept of renewal was broadened to acquire a political and a cultural significance alongside its religious meaning. The Christian idea of rebirth encountered a purely classical concept of revival: that of Vergil's *Fourth Eclogue*. According to Huizinga, even the earliest Christian theologians had interpreted these words as a prophecy of Christ's birth, but now Dante associated them with the political renewal he so fervently desired and the aesthetic renewal he clearly detected in his day. The symbol of the world looking for renewal and liberation was for Dante (and for Petrarch) lamenting Rome. It was a fruitful symbol, because Rome could be seen in any number of roles:

[...] as the capital of Italy, subjected to the pressures of factional controversy and violence; as the centre of the Church, which needed to be purified and reformed in head and body; as the setting for classical civic virtue and classical culture: 'Rome, that the good world made for man's abode[...]'. The basis of the image was always the thought that a return to old times would bring salvation.³⁰

In Huizinga's opinion, this 'cultural ideal' was not limited to the specific historical moment in which it was conceived, but it became a dream, an 'eternal' or 'pan-temporal' ideal, a driving force in Italian history. After Dante's death it remained topical, because the designations Rome and Italy never lost the resonance of a glorious past. At all times classical tradition was stronger in Italy than anywhere else, and that tradition implied unity.

[...] the note of an Italian patriotism and nationalism sounded in Dante's voice. It was a minor key, for it lived in repression: 'Ahi serva Italia, di dolore ostello' [...] The idea of a liberated and reunited Italy became associated with the old dream of Roman universal dominion. [...] World dominion, *monarchia*, was the order God willed on earth.³¹

²⁹ Ibid., p. 272.

³⁰ Ibid., pp. 275-76.

³¹ Huizinga, 'Patriotism and nationalism in European History', in *Men and ideas*, cit., pp. 113-14.

Civility

Again and again, Huizinga's re-reading of Dante led him from poetry and philosophy to history and civilisation. The problem of culture, cultural ideals, civilisation and *Kultur* puzzled him right up to his death in 1945. Initially it appeared in a rather neutral form as a merely historical problem. But after the period of the First World War, in the Twenties and Thirties, it gradually became a problem of great concern, almost an anxiety about the future of Western civilisation.

In his critical reflections on the problem of Western culture, Huizinga leaned on Dante again. In 1937, when he lectured on 'Der Mensch und die Kultur' for a German-speaking audience, he stated that 'culture' always implies an orientation of collective energy at a higher aspiration (die gesamte Energie soll auf ein hohes Ziel gerichtet sein). This aspiration he called *civilitas humana* 'um sie mit dem eigentlich nie übertroffenen Namen zu nennen, den ihr Dante in seiner *Monarchia* gab'.³² For Huizinga the concept was linked to 'eternal peace' (ewige Frieden). 'Die Italienische Sprache ist zu beneiden, weil sie für das immer verschwommene "Kultur" das klare "Civiltà" gebrauchen kann'. For him *Civilitas* was 'the general condition of an organized State and personal behaviour of every individual as a cultivated, free and responsible *Civis, Polites*.' The state had to be the framework for 'culture', but *Civilitas* had to be *humana* and had to embrace *Humanitas* and should include peaceful coexistence.³³

In his last book, on the crisis of European society,³⁴ he attempted to define the concept of 'culture' and 'civilisation'. In an examination of terminology in several West European languages, he showed a strong preference for words that came close to the Latin *Civilitas*. In the late eighteenth century dispute in English about whether to choose 'civility' or 'civilisation' (which was settled in favour of 'civilisation' because it was already part of the common language), Huizinga preferred the linguistically simpler and purer 'civility'. And again his discourse led him to Dante, because Dante had formulated its twofold objective: 'civilisation' and the notion that it is not a mere necessity, but a universal goal that had to bring happiness:

Dante in his early work *Il Convivio* [...] starts with the monumental opening lines: 'Lo fondamento radicale della imperiale maestà, secondo il vero, è la necessità della umana civiltà che a uno fine è ordinata, cioè a vita felice'.³⁵

³² Huizinga, 'Der Mensch und die Kultur', *V.W.*, VII, p. 452.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 459.

³⁴ Huizinga, *Geschonden Wereld* (Damaged World), Tjeenk Willink, Haarlem 1945, *V.W.*, VIII.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 483.

Huizinga agreed with Dante completely that *vita felice* was not a trivial ideal of pleasure, of ease, nor cheap cultural optimism on eudemonic foundation, but that it was directed towards a moral, religious and intellectual ideal. Related to *Civilitas* or *civiltà*, it expressed one of the most essential features of 'culture' and 'civilisation', i.e. awareness of 'full citizenship', 'so purely that it has to be considered as one of the most felicitous terms for this phenomenon'.³⁶

They were the last words and reflections of his life and, at the same time, one of the last signs of his interest in Dante. The letters he wrote to his friends from De Steeg, the village in the eastern part of the Netherlands where he lived as a refugee, reveal how, as his life slowly faded away, it still remained related to Dante. In February 1944 he wrote that he fortunately had a quiet life which was 'kept at a certain level by a regular and intensive reading of Dante'. A month later he wrote: 'It gets more difficult to find good books to read. Our reading of Dante, we reached *Paradiso* VII, gets more and more tiresome in the evening'.³⁷ Some months later, after the liberation of the south of the country, though the north still suffered war and starvation, Huizinga died. At the end his reading of Dante was almost religious and biblical. Science and history could not give him any support for the needs and suffering that he and humanity went through. 'With all our philosophy and science we always turn back to the modest warnings of Dante, who learned them from Aristotle: *state contenti umana gente al quia*'.³⁸

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³⁶ Ibid., p. 489.

³⁷ Letters to resp. to his friend Van Eysinga (no. 1521) and his friend Barge (no. 1531), *Briefwisseling*, cit., vol. III.

³⁸ Huizinga, 'Hoe bepaalt de geschiedenis het heden' (1940), *V.W.*, VII, p. 219.