

Thor Rydin: *The Works and Times of Johan Huizinga (1872-1945): Writing History in the Age of Collapse* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2024, 298 pp., ISBN 9789463724593, <https://doi.org/10.5117/9789463724593>).

The life and works of the Dutch historian Johan Huizinga have been reread and studied several times since Anton van der Lem, Wessel Krul, and Léon Hanssen published his letters in the early 1980s. They also offered studies on Huizinga's relation to culture in general, cultural and intellectual history, philosophy, art, patriotism, and international relations. In his doctoral thesis, Thor Rydin uses a new approach to analyse Huizinga's academic works: the experience of loss in his life and times. In his writings, Huizinga clearly reflected on the major developments of his time such as industrialisation, the two world wars, and national socialism. Apart from the loss associated with these developments, he endured some personal losses as well: the death of his wife and his son, to give just two examples. An academic study on how all these contextual and personal events influenced Huizinga's writings is both interesting to read and difficult to undertake.

'To Huizinga, loss was a teacher', Rydin states at the very beginning of the monograph (16). To substantiate this claim, he compares several aspects of Huizinga's books with the publications of other influential writers of the nineteenth and twentieth century in successive chapters: those of Jacob Burckhardt in chapter 2, Karl Lamprecht in chapter 3, Anton Pannekoek, Frederik van Eeden, and Alexis de Tocqueville in chapter 4, Oswald Spengler in chapter 5, and Carl Schmitt in chapter 6.

Comparing Huizinga's *Herfsttij der middeleeuwen* with Jacob Burckhardt's *Die Kultur der Renaissance in Italien* is an obvious choice. Yet, Rydin emphasises that the two books 'are empirically too distant from one another' to compare them directly (94). Instead, he analyses Huizinga's critique of Burckhardt's 'Renaissancebegriff', which was 'steeped in fin-de-siècle experiences of disappearance and loss' (69). Rydin locates the main opposition 'on an anthropological level': the difference between 'creativity in terms of "creation"' for Burckhardt and the 'creativity in terms of its ability to "recreate"' for Huizinga (94), which reflected Huizinga's 'experience of loss in response to the transformation of Dutch cityscapes' (100) in the early twentieth century.

Rydin's argumentation is also partly based on an analysis of links between Huizinga's writings and his private life. Rightly so, as it seems intuitively obvious that his wife's death in 1914 and the tragic events of the First World War must have had an impact on his historical writing (107).

This, however, is empirically hard to prove. Rydin observes a 'turn towards a virtue-ethical, stoic understanding of the purpose of historical inquiry in the course of 1914 to 1919' (116). Moreover, as early as 1874, Rydin argues, the loss of his mother and Huizinga's 'inability to arouse interest and competence' in his father's scientific world (157) encouraged him to develop his particular understanding of the term 'mechanisation' when he dealt with cultural and social life in the United States. Similarly, the lectures of Anton Pannekoek revealed to him 'the loss of ideals' (154) brought about by mechanisation, while Frederick van Eeden presented a view of the modern world that stood in opposition to his father's. As a result, Huizinga's understanding of the United States showed Huizinga's 'mechanical estrangement' (178) in times of industrialisation and World War I.

At least one aspect of Huizinga's long-cherished ideals, according to Rydin, was not yet lost to him, though he was aware of the risk of losing it. The Peace Palace, built in The Hague in 1913, was a symbol for international cooperation to Huizinga (192) and prompted him to launch 'what was at heart a moral attack' (198) to defend freedom and internationalism against the historical analysis of Oswald Spengler's *Der Untergang des Abendlandes*. Rydin then turns to developments in the Netherlands and across Europe during the 1930s. The works of Carl Schmitt, Hitler's *Kronjurist*, convinced Huizinga that 'a state and its politics *cannot* stand above morality' (259). This realisation fostered in him a strong appreciation of the concept of 'play' between 1933 and 1938, on which he elaborated in his anthropological book *Homo Ludens* and which he 'tied straight into his defence [...] of "democracy", "academic freedom" and the culture of internationalism' (259). Rydin relates two aspects of the 'experience of loss' to *Homo Ludens*: the loss of the world of his childhood and youth through industrialisation and the loss of democracy through fascism and national socialism. According to Rydin, in the end the 'losses' of his life taught Huizinga that 'history could itself become a way of living' and 'opened up a world that was dialectically opposed to contemporary life' (276).

To me, there is no doubt that Huizinga's writings on history, culture, and anthropology contain personal, emotional and intuitive aspects. This is one particular reason why he is reread over and over again even eighty years after his death in 1945. Simultaneously, analysing these aspects in an academic study is a difficult task. Rydin took up this challenge and he accomplished it very well. I would specifically like to point out the chapters on Tocqueville and Schmitt, that are very elucidating.

Furthermore, I would like to point out that the sheer breadth of ideas in this book is not only impressive, but that they are also very well-structured. Rydin paints a clear and comprehensive picture of Huizinga from a new perspective, with the accuracy of a scholar and the passion of an artist. The author's passion is most obvious, first, when he compares, for example, Huizinga's and Burckhardt's interpretations of the paintings of Jan Van Eyck, Huizinga's and Lamprecht's perspectives on the Thomas

Church, or Huizinga's and Spengler's views on Rembrandt van Rijn. Secondly, this passion becomes apparent in the digressions on the circumstances of Huizinga's life and family, and their impact on his writing. I agree with Rydin that it is necessary to emphasise these aspects of Huizinga's writing if one is to understand the nature of his thoughts and writings. Yet, occasionally, Rydin's interpretative enthusiasm perhaps leads him to a degree of exaggeration – for instance, when he characterises 'Huizinga's understanding of "mechanization" [as] a symbol of "the loss of his mother" and a "monument of a maternal past in a paternal world"' (161). To me, these statements wander too far into the academic field of psychology.

Rydin's book is primarily about the writings of Johan Huizinga. He looks at several incidents of Huizinga's life and finds them reflected in his books. Methodically, Rydin leaves one question unanswered: is it possible to learn so deeply about the inner emotional life of a person mainly through his published academic studies? Even if it is not entirely convincing, I find Rydin's book to be very intelligent and valuable. First and foremost, he characterises Huizinga as an intellectual revisiting established connections while forging new ones between the Dutch historian and his contemporaries. That is why and how Rydin fully delivers on the promise implied by his very wisely chosen book title.

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