

8. Huizinga's *Homo ludens*

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To the memory of Rosalie L. Colie (1925-1972)

When I was honoured by the invitation to share in this tribute to a great and noble historian of culture I had no doubt in my mind as to the aspect of his rich and varied oeuvre I most wanted to examine and discuss. Like all of us who are interested in cultural history I have had frequent occasion to remember that inspired coinage of Huizinga's who matched the idea of *homo faber* with that of *homo ludens*. Long ago I wrote a little essay entitled *Meditations on a Hobby Horse or The Roots of Artistic Form* which developed into a book entitled *Art and Illusion* largely concerned with that most elusive of mental states, that of fiction. Later, when I studied the idea of personification of such entities as Fama or Fortuna¹ I remembered the pregnant pages Huizinga devoted to this strange twilight of ideas between mythology and abstraction in his study of Alanus de Insulis and again in *Homo ludens*. Now I am once more in the orbit of his problems in a study on which I am engaged that is to deal with decoration, ornament and the grotesque.

But I had an even more personal reason for my choice. The only time I was privileged to see and hear Johan Huizinga was in February 1937 when he came to England to present his ideas on culture and play in a lecture at the Warburg Institute which had only recently arrived in London. When, in the autumn of 1933, Huizinga had reviewed the edition of Aby Warburg's *Gesammelte Schriften* with much sympathy and understanding he had also paid tribute to Warburg's foundation and expressed the hope 'that this beautiful plant should not perish in the storms of our harsh times'. (IV, 560) What was more natural than that Fritz Saxl, Warburg's successor, who had piloted the Institute through the storm from Hamburg to the provisional haven of a London office block had not delayed long till he invited the greatest living representative of *Kulturwissenschaft* to give a lecture.

Like Huizinga, Warburg had been entranced by the complex tensions between the culture of Burgundy in the fifteenth century and the dawning Italian Renaissance, and Saxl hoped that the author of *The Waning of the Middle Ages* would lecture on a subject of this kind. Huizinga replied on November 15th 1935 that he could not do this. 'Leider bin ich von den burgundischen Sachen und auch von der Renaissance seit vielen Jahren entfremdet, so dass ich kaum auf diesem Gebiet ein Thema

1. 'Personification' in R. R. Bolgar, ed., *Classical Influences on European Culture* (Cambridge, 1971) 247-257, and 'Icones Symbolicae' in *Symbolic Images* (London, 1972) 123-195.

finden werde, das ich ohne zu grossen Aufwand an Arbeit bewältigen könnte'. Naturally Saxl replied that he left the choice to Huizinga, who still expressed doubts whether his theme would fit into the programme of the Warburg Institute: 'Ich glaube nicht dass ich Ihnen ein Thema bieten könnte, das genau in Ihr Programm passt. Am liebsten spreche ich über das Spielelement der Kultur'. Saxl of course not only accepted the choice, he and his colleagues built the entire programme of lectures for the term around this important topic, and we all were looking forward with tremendous anticipation to the great occasion when the admired historian would speak to us about what he insisted to call *the play element of culture* rather than *in culture* as had been originally announced. I was at the time a very junior research fellow at the Warburg Institute and I do not think that I was introduced to the distinguished visitor. What has remained in my mind of this occasion is the elusive image of a gesture, the way he acknowledged a greeting or perhaps applause with that mixture of shyness and aloofness we associated with the old-fashioned eminent Professor. Maybe this impression remained in my mind because, if the truth is to be told, it was also my reaction at that time to the lecture itself. I tremendously admired Huizinga's art of evoking the images of the past and I had evidently hoped and expected that the theme of human play and human culture would offer him scope to display this mastery. Instead, as those will realize who know the book that grew out of this lecture, or the text of the Leiden address of 1933 (V, 3-25) on which it was based, we were to be plunged into philological investigations into the various words for play in many languages, the elusiveness of the concept of play and of our customary distinction between *spel* or *ernst*, playfulness and seriousness. There was an overwhelming range of examples culled from anthropology, literature and history, and an almost defiant refusal to accept the aid of psychology in coming to terms with this category of behaviour. Quite obviously Huizinga's confession that he had moved far away from the *matière de Bourgogne* had not been a polite excuse for choosing a different topic; it was a different Huizinga we met on that occasion, not the author of a historical best-seller, but the deeply troubled critic of civilization who felt the urge to return to fundamentals and to draw his personal conclusions from a life-time of study.

The book *Homo ludens*, which came out in 1938, confirms this impression.² I think it is fair to say 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

2. I have normally quoted from the text of the English edition (London, 1949) 'prepared from the German edition published in Switzerland, 1944, and also from the author's own English translation of the text which he made shortly before his death'. The English translator remarks that 'comparison of the two texts shows a number of discrepancies and a marked difference in style' and expresses the hope to have achieved 'a reasonable synthesis'. I have checked the extracts against the Dutch original cited in the references. In the case of relevant divergencies I have either substituted my own translation or drawn attention to the differences.

Homo ludens. True, its title is widely known. We all know from introspection and from observation that this designation illuminates an important aspect of life and culture, we do play and we do play-act, we indulge in tomfoolery and we step into roles, we wait for the sports results and we attend conferences. Indeed like Huizinga himself, we would so often want to be sure whether we are serious or merely playing a game.

Light is indeed thrown on these questions by the book, but it is mostly indirect light reflected from that extraordinary array of variegated facts Huizinga had assembled in years of reading and through his many academie contacts. They are spread out for our inspection in chapters headed Play and Law, Play and War, Wisdom, Poetry, Philosophy, and Art; and in more general reflections on the play function, on philology, myth, and on the role of play in the history of Western civilization. Vedic riddles and Eskimo drumming contests, potlatch feasts and initiation rites, university examinations and the swagger towers of Florence are all adduced as instances but only rarely does Huizinga permit himself to slacken the pace and to dwell on an aspect of his material with all that immediacy and vividness that marked his earlier masterpieces. The pages he devotes to the history of the wig in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (V 215-17) are such a gem which deserves a place in an anthology of cultural history. Even so, I hope I shall not cause offence in advising those who wish to come to terms with this strange book to start with the last chapter and work their way backward. It is in the last chapter that Huizinga reveals what his problem really is and why he undertook the labour of surveying so large and diverse a field for manifestations of play. He sees human culture against the awe-inspiring backdrop of a metaphysical problem; deeply religious as he had become,³ he was concerned with the ultimate questions of the justification of culture in the eyes of God. 'The human mind', we read, 'can only disengage itself from the magic circle of play by turning towards the ultimate'. (p. 212; 'het allerhoogste': V, 245) It is in this thought that Huizinga's questioning comes to rest. He told in his lecture how he had explained his ideas about *Homo ludens* to a colleague who bluntly asked him whether he thought of his own work as a noble game? 'The question shook me. I replied with a half-hearted 'Yes', but inside me there was a shout of 'No''. (V, 24) This agonized shout reveals the heart of Huizinga's conflict that is finally laid bare in the last paragraphs of *Homo ludens*:

Whenever the perpetual transformations of the concepts of play and of seriousness send our minds into a dizzy spin, we find that fixed point that logic denied us in ethics ... As soon as our decisions for action are influenced by the feelings for truth and justice, compassion and forgiveness, the question loses all meaning. A single drop

3. G. J. Heering, *Johan Huizinga's religieuze gedachten als achtergrond van zijn werken* (Lochem, 1948).

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of pity suffices to lift our actions beyond the distinctions of the thinking intellect. For any moral consciousness that rests on an understanding of justice and of grace, that whole question of play and of seriousness that had appeared to be insoluble is silenced for ever. (V, 246). (My translation)

I have placed this noble conclusion so near the beginning of this enquiry, because I think it offers a key not only to this difficult book, but to a much wider range of Huizinga's thoughts and convictions. For though I have stressed the apparent contrast between *Homo ludens* and Huizinga's more popular books, notably his *Waning of the Middle Ages* and his *Erasmus*, I should still like to demonstrate the impressive unity of Huizinga's oeuvre as a historian and cultural critic. The approach he had chosen and the books he had written led him inexorably to the asking of the questions we find in *Homo ludens*.

Huizinga himself remarked in the Preface to his book that traces of its thesis could be found in his writings ever since 1903. He was probably referring to his inaugural lecture on Buddhist studies (I, 148-172) which already testifies to his interest in riddles and other contests in knowledge and power. Had he written about another historian he would certainly have checked his facts more thoroughly. As it is, he gives us the pleasure of saying like the proverbial German pedant, 'Hier irrt Goethe'. For it is six years earlier, in his Doctoral thesis of 1897 dealing with a comic figure in Indian drama, that we read the following anticipation of Huizinga's life-long problem:

It is a delicate task when confronted with an ancient and remote literature to say where the frontier lies between seriousness and non-seriousness. It is even frequently pointless and wrong to insist with an arrogant zeal on a conscious distinction between the two spheres of expression so as to force ideas so remote from us into the orbit of our own preconceptions. For it is precisely where these two states are kept together and are fused even unconsciously that the most moving expression of the innermost thoughts becomes possible to those individuals whose life exhibits a balance between action and thought in the full flower of a cultured age. (I, 126)⁴

Here we find it all, very compressed and encapsuled, hard to understand in all its implications. There is another piece of evidence, less theoretical and more vivid, that takes us back beyond this formulation of the twentyfive years old. Other contributors have referred to the episode to which Huizinga himself assigned such a crucial importance in his beautiful essay 'My Way to History'. (I, 11-42) What he

4. Het is een hachelijk pogen, om in een oude, ver van ons gelegen letterkunde aan te wijzen, waar de grens ligt tusschen het ernstig en het niet-ernstig bedoelde. Het is zelfs dikwijls nutteloos en verkeerd, om met een onbescheiden naarstigheid die bewuste onderscheiding in twee staten van uitdrukking, buiten den kring onzer eigen ideeën te willen toepassen. Want juist om, zelf onbewust, die beide staten saam te houden en te vermengen tot de aandoenlijkste uiting van de innigste gedachten, is het vermogen van enkelen die in evenwicht van doen en denken leven in den vollen bloei van een cultuurtijdperk.

calls his 'first contact with history' happened when he was a boy of six. He was impressed by a pageant representing the entry of Count Edzard into Groningen in 1506, a procession that lingered in his mind as the most beautiful thing he had ever seen up to that time, (I, 11) with the Count in shining armour and the flags waving in the wind. It was history in a pageant and as a pageant, and it was also a game of make-belief. Indeed we hear that when it was over, the small boys also wanted to dress up and march through the streets, but here for the first time little Johan encountered the figure who was to turn up again in *Homo ludens* - the spoilsport. The Mayor of Groningen apparently considered it a breach of decorum for little folk to parade through the town in fancy dress and so their show had to be held indoors in the local theatre. Who knows whether this rebuff may not also have led him to reflect on that clash between the world of hard reality and the attractions of a world of fancy? Huizinga himself has characterized the spell that history continued to exert on him less as an intellectual interest than 'a kind of *hantise*, an obsession, a dream as it had been since the days of my boyhood'. (I, 29)

He also tells us that he succumbed to the romantic attraction of heraldry and genealogy and confesses that it made him a little susceptible to the glamour of noble birth. (I, 13) How easily these leanings might have turned him into a typical romantic, writing nostalgic history or even novels and plays full of pageantry and dreams. Only, if that had been the whole of Huizinga's mental make-up we would scarcely have come from all parts of the world to pay tribute to his memory. What made him great was an element of conflict, an awareness of values that transcend romanticism. Truth must not be tampered with, and the greater the nostalgia, the more is the scholar in honour bound to remain critical, to probe, to find out, to consult the sources and to respect the evidence. (VII, 26) Far from succumbing to romanticism he turned his own leanings into a problem with which he wrestled. Maybe it was this distrust of his own inclinations that made him first seek the sterner discipline of comparative philology. We learn from his autobiographical sketch that his philological interests led him to a psychological problem he proposed to tackle, it was the problem of synaesthesia, the tendency of all languages to mix up the sense modalities so that sounds can be described as bright or light as soft. (I, 27) He himself was no doubt a very strong visualizer and the connection of this topic with the main preoccupation of his life is easy to understand. The way the word is wedded to the image (*verbeelding*) intrigued him all the more as he valued the capacity of the historian to see the past with the eyes of his mind.⁵ But as we know, he also realized the dangers of such automatic associations. How seriously should we take them? If there is one aspect of linguistic study which raises this question of playfulness - as Huizinga was to acknowledge in *Homo ludens* (V, 166)

5. Kart J. Weintraub, *Visions of Culture* (Chicago, 1966) 228-9.

- it is surely the problem of metaphor. Not surprisingly, perhaps, the young student was disappointed in the guidance he had expected from psychologists and linguists and so he abandoned the topic.

It was in the lecture of 1903 on Buddhism (I, 148-172), which I have mentioned before, that he turned to the problematical nature of visualizing in the context of cultural history. He suspected that the appeal which Buddhism exercised on the West around the turn of the century was aesthetic rather than intellectual. The visual image of the mysterious East had more to do with its hold on the fashionable world than the mixture of asceticism and magic he had found in the authentic texts. (I, 157) And so the stern scholar reveals himself for the first time also as the anti-romantic critic of his age.

There is another ingredient here in Huizinga's intellectual formation to which he has also drawn our attention. He was captivated by E. B. Tylor's *Primitive Culture* (1871), the first book, I believe, which formulates the demand for a science of culture. (I, 17)⁶ The vistas which this book opened to him, we read, remained for ever the germs of his scientific ideas. Now what Tylor had in common with other early students of the subject is a tendency to speak of 'primitive culture' or of the 'primitive mind' as a definite well-defined entity. For Huizinga the interest of Buddhism lay partly in the fact that it was much closer to the primitive mind than its modern admirers realized. (I, 169) Even its images of bliss with their emphasis on sensuous pleasure belied the ascetic impulse and revealed that same primitive mentality (I, 171) that expressed itself in the enjoyment of riddles.

But though he was attracted by the vivid picture Tylor had drawn of primitive mentality he was unwilling to accept the more ambitious claims of the rising discipline of social psychology. He must have frequently heard these claims debated in Leipzig where he studied in 1895 and where he consulted Wilhelm Wundt, then at work on his *Völkerpsychologie*; for there the most combative champion of this movement Karl Lamprecht also held a chair since 1891.⁷ When accident and inclination had finally turned him into a historian Huizinga decided to respond to this challenge in his Inaugural Lecture on 'The Aesthetic Components of our Historical Ideas', (VII, 3-28) which is the subject of Professor Oestreich's searching contribution to this volume. What had repelled Huizinga was the arrogance with which Karl Lamprecht claimed to make history 'scientific' by operating with psychological laws of evolution. Granted that some of Lamprecht's observations about the mentality of the German Middle Ages, his concepts of 'Typismus' and 'Konventionalismus' were not uninformative, how scientific were they really? He did not object to their having been established *a priori*. 'Which categories of this

6. E. H. Gombrich, *In Search of Cultural History* (Oxford, 1969).

7. E. Rosenbaum, 'Johan Huizinga', *Die Zeitung* (London, 11th May, 1945).

kind had ever been found by induction?' The danger lay in the fact that such auxiliary constructs which the historian should be able to use and to discard at will were presented as ultimate realities. (VII, 8) I believe that Huizinga's intervention in this famous debate is memorable less for the use he made of the methodological theories of Windelband, Rickert, Spranger and Simmel than for the way he attempted once more to formulate his personal problem as one of historical method - the need to see the past in terms of vivid images, and the duty to search for the truth, even if this means correcting or discarding the original vision.

I do not think it is claiming too much to suggest that Huizinga's masterpiece is constructed around the tensions created by these opposing tendencies. What could be more characteristic here than the passage in the opening paragraph of the third chapter of the *Waning of the Middle Ages*, the chapter that deals with the hierarchical conception of society. 'Romanticism', he says, 'was inclined to identify the Middle Ages with the age of chivalry. It saw there mostly helmets with nodding plumes ('wuivende vederbossen'). And however paradoxical this may sound today, to a certain extent it was right in doing so'. (III, 66)⁸

It was right, we may continue, not because all was chivalry in the Middle Ages, but because chivalry was an expression of the aspirations of the age. However much we may know of the realities of the period, its greed, its squalor, its cruelty and its coarseness, the historian of culture is not only concerned with these realities, he is concerned with collective dreams, with the fiction that is inseparable from civilization, in other words with chivalry not as an institution but as a game which nobility played and the others watched. There are many passages in which Huizinga recurs to this image of a game that was played in war, in diplomacy, in courtly love and in the whole fabric of life. But at that time he had not yet rejected psychology as an aid to the understanding of this phenomenon. I am referring to the second chapter of the book which follows his famous dramatic picture of the harsh realities of life in the period. These realities aroused a longing for a more beautiful life and such longing, we read, will at all times find three possible paths towards fulfilment. (III, 40)

The first leads out of the world through a denial of all earthly pleasures for the sake of heaven, the way of asceticism, Buddhist or Christian; the second leads to an improvement of this world, it is the way of reform and progress that was chosen by the modern age. Maybe it was precisely because this way was unknown to the Middle Ages that the third was of such importance, the way, in Huizinga's words, into a dreamland, the way of illusion. Granted that this way was fundamentally un-Christian, it was the way chosen by the majority of the elite.

8. The passage is omitted from the English translation, on which see Weintraub, *Visions*, 212.

The whole aristocratic life of the late Middle Ages ... is an attempt to play a dream, always the same dream of ancient heroes and sages, of the knight and the maiden, of simple and contented shepherds.

True, Huizinga concedes in a significant aside,

I know that all this is not specifically mediaeval, the seeds are found in primitive phases of culture, we may also call it Chinoiserie or Byzantinism, and it does not die out with the Middle Ages as the *roi soleil* testifies. (III, 46)

There is little in the book itself that explains how Huizinga sees the distinction between the game played in the late Middle Ages and that of other civilizations, but I think what struck him was the accentuation of the game, its exaggerations which so blatantly contrasted with the unseemly realities of life. 'Everywhere', he writes in a pregnant phrase, 'did the lie peep out of the holes of the ceremonial garb of chivalry'. (III, 123)

There is more than one hint here that the dream is always more conservative than reality. What may have begun as a serious institution became a pretence, a mere game. Now E. B. Tylor had included in his book on *Primitive Culture* a most interesting discussion of games, games of grown-ups and nursery rhymes, pages which one might not have expected to find in a Victorian classic. Tylor looks at the game in the context of his theory of survival. There is an inertia in human civilization that secures the survival of beliefs and rituals into periods in which their meaning is long forgotten. Superstitions have always been recognized as such survivals, as their name indicates. Many games are of a similar character. They reflect old rituals and beliefs which have vanished from serious life and only live on as pastimes. If I am right that this interpretation of games influenced Huizinga this would help to explain his whole reading of the period. This reading, as we know from the title of the book, postulates that the period can only be understood as an end, an autumn, not as the birth of something new. Elsewhere⁹ I have criticized this emphasis on the autumnal character of the period, and I now know that Huizinga himself came to regret the title he had chosen as too metaphorical. (IV, 450) In his last book, *Geschonden Wereld*, he even explicitly rejected the metaphor of rising and declining civilizations. (VII, 511) But if at the time when he worked on his masterpiece he saw games largely as survivals, he was bound to emphasize the lateness of a period in which people appeared so eager to play roles or to play at roles which no longer had a serious function in a changed reality.

This interpretation of certain playful forms of life as survivals of earlier phases which is so characteristic of Tylor's approach comes to the fore, for instance, in Huizinga's reflections on what he calls the epithalamian style, the bawdiness and coarseness in erotic matters that he observed in mediaeval marriage customs.

9. Gombrich, *Cultural History*, 29.

These matters become intelligible if they are seen against their ethnological background, as ... weakened survivals of the phallic symbolism of primitive culture. Here the dividing line between play and earnestness had not yet been drawn across culture and the holiness of ritual was linked with the unbridled enjoyment of life ... (III, 132)

But Huizinga would not have been the deeply conscientious scholar he was if he had been satisfied with pat solutions. Once in a while the assured narrator gives way to the baffled historian. Discussing the *Mirror of Marriage* by Descamps the author interrupts himself to ask:

Did the poet mean all this seriously? One might also ask whether Jean Petit and his Burgundian protectors really believed in all the atrocities with which they defiled the memory of Orleans or whether the princes and nobles really took seriously all the bizarre fantasies and the play-acting with which they embroidered their plans of campaign and their vows. It is extremely difficult within the realm of mediaeval thought to arrive at a neat distinction between what is play and what is earnest, between honest conviction and that attitude of mind which the English call pretending, the attitude of a playing child which also occupies an important place in primitive culture. (III, 296-7)

Here, of course, is one of the roots of *Homo ludens*. But only one, I believe. We know that for Huizinga the problem became urgent only when it became a moral problem.

I should like here to offer a very tentative hypothesis about the way this moral question increasingly obtruded itself, tentative all the more as Huizinga's autobiographical essay offers no hint in this respect. I refer to Huizinga's unexpected interest in American civilization. He must have worked concurrently on the completion of the *Waning of the Middle Ages* and on his four essays on *Man and Mass in the United States* (V, 247-417) which were published before the other book saw the light in 1919. At that time Huizinga had never yet been to the States, but he was rightly convinced that Europeans knew far too little about that new civilization across the Atlantic. He was attracted by the challenge of describing a culture which, as he said, could not be encompassed in one of the few traditional forms that offered themselves to the historian as a framework of description. (V,251ff) Even that convenient formula of a conflict between the old and the new nearly broke down there, because in America the old lacked the strength it always had in our history. The real conflict in America was between man and nature; in other words here was the model of a civilization that exemplified man's desire to improve this world rather than concern himself with hopes of the beyond or with the re-enactment of past glories.

If I am right in my surmise that Huizinga planned at the time to exemplify his conception of the three possibilities open to man in his reaction to the sufferings of life we might expect him also to have planned a study of a strictly religious ci-

vilization. Buddhism had failed to hold him and he seems to have settled on a study of what he calls the pre-Gothic twelfth century. According to P. Geyl it was to be called 'The Spring of the Middle Ages' and to form a counterpart to *Herfsttij*.¹⁰ The project was only partly realized in the form of essays and lectures on Alanus de Insulis, John of Salisbury and Abelard (IV, 1-122) which clearly show how much Huizinga was attracted by the age. It fits my interpretation of this abortive project that Huizinga treated John of Salisbury's book *De Nugis Curialium* as an early attack on that courtly culture that flourished so exuberantly in the late Middle Ages. (IV, 102ff.) The trifles of the courtiers, the *nugae curialium*, are precisely the games courtiers play instead of concerning themselves with their salvation.

Not that these three figures represent the extreme of Christian asceticism. In the concluding words of the last of these lectures, Huizinga points to the hatred Abelard aroused in men such as Bernard of Clairvaux. He speaks of the contrast that pervades the history of Christian thought, between those who, like Abelard, appealed to the cultural ideal of St. Jerome who, for all his asceticism, was open to cultural values, and those who followed St. Augustine, 'the man with the flaming heart'. 'Whenever a great crisis of faith occurred', he writes, 'the words of St. Augustine weighed more heavily in the scales of the ages than those of St. Jerome'. (IV, 122) Is it not likely that Huizinga had once planned also to portray for us this great current of culture? However much he owed to the tradition of St. Jerome, he clearly felt the attraction of the opposite camp.

Nothing would be more misleading than to represent Huizinga's rich and varied life-work as the arid illustration of one particular thesis, but nobody who submits to the spell of this great man can miss the note of personal concern in nearly everything he wrote. The concern became more urgent when he had actually visited America in 1926 and had found it impossible to reconcile himself to what he had found there. In the 'Unsystematic Jottings', *Losse Opmerkingen*, (V 418-89) he published in the subsequent year his personal reaction breaks through the detachment of the observer and tells us of his growing estrangement from the course of Western civilization.

What appears to have hurt him quite particularly was the way in which the various dominant schools of American psychology and sociology interpreted all art and all religion as forms of escapism, 'evasive satisfactions, compensatory fabrications'. (V, 481) Maybe this attitude disturbed him all the more profoundly as it bore more than a superficial resemblance to his own metaphor of the three paths out of the misery of this world. Not that Huizinga was inconsistent in his rejection of what we now call reductionism. For him man's urge to transcend reality was always creative. Far from being a sign of weakness it was a sign of strength. He

10. P. Geyl, 'Huizinga as an Accuser of his Age', *History and Theory*, II (1963) iii, 231-262, 255. (No source is given).

tells of a conversation he had with a young sociologist who was ready to admit that our present civilization was no longer capable of creating great art. Great art after all arose precisely as an escape from this world, it was no more than a morbid symptom. Huizinga countered by telling the story of the Friesian King Radbod who was about to be baptized and asked the Bishop where his ancestors were. When he was told that they were in hell he got out of the font and declared that he preferred the abode of his ancestors to the new paradise. (V, 482) He, Huizinga, preferred to dwell among the terrors and delusions of an ancient civilization rather than in the promised land of social perfection. He knew it was an inadequate answer. He knew that the sociologist could have replied: 'Take care what you say, you cannot eat your pie and have it'. But he confesses that he was confused and depressed by these encounters. He tells us of a visit to Cologne when he felt annoyed by the way the city had been spoilt and trivialized. By accident almost he had found his way into the ancient church of St. Maria im Kapitol where offices were being read. Suddenly he seemed to grasp the meaning which a true ritual had for a community quite apart from its religious significance. I sensed 'the tremendous seriousness of an age in which these things were what mattered to everyone. I had the feeling as if nine tenths of our present culture were strictly irrelevant'. (V, 480)

Here, I believe, is the new element, the experience that turned Huizinga from a calm historian of culture into a passionate critic of his own times and, if the truth must be said, into a *laudator temporis acti*. That romantic aestheticism he had always tried to keep under strict control offered itself as the only refuge from the modern world from which he felt increasingly alienated. Harsh words have been said about Huizinga by such penetrating critics as Pieter Geyl¹¹ and Rosalie Colie¹² because of his refusal to come to terms with the realities of his time. I feel it would almost be an impertinence even to try to defend him, because if he had been more realistic he would also have been less interesting. I have found¹³ that it is from those who react to the problems of their time in an intensely personal way that we can generally learn much more than we do from the well adjusted. I venture to think that none of Huizinga's critics I have read have quite confronted the agony of his position. What had sustained him throughout his life, indeed what had prompted him to reject romantic aestheticism in favour of an uncompromising search for truth, was a faith in absolute values, the values of Christianity and the values of rationality. What so deeply upset him was the spectacle of reason undermining rationality. His stand was to be against relativism in all forms. Whatever we think about individual arguments he employed, it was a noble stand in a important cause.

11. *Ibidem*.

12. 'Johan Huizinga and the Task of Cultural History', *American Historical Review*, LXIX (1964) iii, 607-630.

13. See my *Aby Warburg. An Intellectual Biography* (London, 1971) 9.

The two books which were the most immediate expression of his position are *In the Shadow of Tomorrow*¹⁴ and *Homo ludens*. It has rightly been said by Gustaaf Renier¹⁵ that they belong together, indeed neither can quite be understood in isolation. The more topical book explains the author's deep anxieties about the future of Western Culture, the other tries to reinforce the argument by explaining what we have lost since the eighteenth century.

The central tenet that holds the wings of the diptych together is Huizinga's conviction that 'Culture must have its ultimate aim in the metaphysical, or it will cease to be culture'. (VII, 333)

By opposing metaphysics the modern spirit has abolished culture. It has done so precisely because it tries to explain away such essentials of culture as morality, law or piety as just so many taboos. (VII, 331)

Several of Huizinga's critics have expressed surprise that his book on play does not even so much as refer to Freud; the question misses the point that Freud's attitude - or what Huizinga took it to be - was precisely one of the main targets of the twin books. Freudianism, as he calls it, had familiarized whole generations with the notion of sublimation, an attempt, in other words, to explain the origins of culture and of art through the transformation of 'infantile appetites'. Huizinga calls it 'essentially even more anti-Christian in its implications than the ethical theory of Marxism'. (VII, 374) For his most vehement pronouncement on the latter we must turn to a passage in *Homo Ludens* which sums up the other book in a few hard-hitting lines against the nineteenth-century belief in technical progress.

As a result of this luxation of our intellects the shameful misconception of Marxism could be put about and even believed, that economic forces and material interests determine the course of the world. This grotesque over-estimation of the economic factor was conditioned by our worship of technological progress, which was itself the fruit of rationalism and utilitarianism after they had killed the mysteries and acquitted man of guilt and sin. But they had forgotten to free him of folly and myopia, and he seemed only fit to mould the world after the pattern of his own banality. (V, 223. The word 'Marxism' is added in the English edition, 192).

This tone of contempt for the present age owed something to the book by Ortega y Gasset, *The Revolt of the Masses*, in which a warning is sounded against the 'primitives' within the gates of Western Civilization.¹⁶ Huizinga alludes to this book in his open letter to Julien Benda of December 1933 in which he diagnoses three failings of our time: puerility, superstition and insincerity. (VII, 271) Among

14. My quotations are generally from the English translation by J. H. Huizinga, London, 1936 but references here as always are to the *Collected Works*.

15. Quoted by Geyl, 'Huizinga', 239.

16. English translation, London, 1932, after the Spanish original of 1930, Chapters ix and x.

the symptoms of the first he cites the antics of mass movements with their uniforms, their marches and their chantings. In his original Leiden lecture on play in February 1933 he still thought that playfulness might be cited here as an extenuating circumstance, (V, 24) but in the course of that fateful year he changed his mind. This was not real play. It was what he called puerilism. Did he perhaps remember his own boyish desire to march through the streets of Groningen in fancy dress and had he come to side with authority, as we so often do when we grow older? Be that as it may, he minced no words about onlookers who are impressed by such spectacles 'This seems greatness, power. It is childishness ... those who can still think know that all this has no value whatever'. (VII, 394)

Those who can still think. For what disturbed Huizinga at least as much as the efforts to explain too much was the trend of irrationalism, the worship of life and of thinking with the blood that was the other side of the medal. Once more Huizinga has been criticized for not attacking National Socialist and Fascist ideologies for what they were, political movements, and rather treating them as symptoms of the sickness of our culture. But this is how they appeared to him, he was less interested in the causes of these movements than in the response they had met with, and his strictures were all the more effective at the time because they were not uttered in a political context. Those of us who still remember the nightmare of those years will also recall how grateful one was for this stern voice of reason. For Huizinga felt committed to reason, but it had become a difficult commitment.

These are strange times. Reason, which once combated faith and seemed to have conquered it, now has to look to faith to save it from dissolution. For it is only on the unshaken and unyielding foundation of a living metaphysical belief that the concept of absolute truth with its consequence of absolute validity of ethical norms can withstand the growing pressure of the instinctive will to live. (p. 92). (VII, 364)

But why and how, we may ask, did this insistence on faith lead Huizinga back to his life-long interest in what he called the play-element of culture? I hope my answer will not be found shocking, it is not intended to be. Playing a game implies unquestioning acceptance of rules. If you do not, you are the spoilsport, that figure of whom Huizinga has so perceptively harsh things to say. The spoilsport, we remember, 'shatters the play-world itself. By withdrawing from the game he reveals the relativity and fragility of the play-world in which he had temporarily shut himself with others. He robs the play of its illusion' and must be cast out as a threat to the play community. (V, 39) The more one reads Huizinga the more one comes to see that it was this character of common consent, the agreement to refrain from certain questions, that constituted for him an important condition of civilization. 'Civilization', he says towards the end of his book, 'will in a sense always be played according to certain rules, and true civilization will always demand fair

play. Fair play is nothing less than good faith expressed in play terms'. (V, 244)

The context in which these words stand leave no doubt about their significance. Huizinga was appalled by the book of a National Socialist, Carl Schmitt, *Der Begriff des Politischen*, which he summed up in the formula that *pacta non sunt servanda*. (V, 243) He fastened on the German euphemism for war, 'Eintreten des Ernstfalls' (the advent of a serious contingency), to remind his readers that the serious business of mankind is peace. Such peace demands the recognition of rules, of common ground. It almost looks like an oversight that he omits to mention the most palpable link between games and peace recorded in history, the traditional truce between the warring Greek states at the time of the Olympic games.

In a sense Schmitt's cynical reasoning appeared to Huizinga merely as an extreme example of the dangers inherent in any type of argumentation that ignores the existence of values embodied in rules. His reading of the crisis of our time suggested to him that an unquestioning acceptance of such rules is of the essence of the game we call civilization. No wonder he looked with a certain nostalgia back to a time where such questionings lay outside the range of possibilities, simply because the distinction between playfulness and seriousness had not obtruded itself on the language and the mental horizon of the civilizations concerned.

Within the continuity of Huizinga's interest in the subject there is thus a distinct shift of emphasis between *The Waning of the Middle Ages* and *Homo ludens*. What had intrigued him in his earlier work was the phenomenon of 'pretending', the flight into a world of fantasy that had much in common with the attitudes of a child at play. There is little of this element in the initial definition of the phenomenon which he proposes in *Homo ludens*.

Play is a voluntary activity or occupation executed within certain fixed limits of time and place, according to rules freely accepted but absolutely binding____(V, 56)

It is (in English terms) a shift from 'play' to 'games'. This change of accent which accorded so well with Huizinga's moral preoccupation was certainly also facilitated by the conception of culture Huizinga found in the posthumous work of his great predecessor Jakob Burckhardt, *Griechische Kulturgeschichte*.¹⁷ In his famous characterization of the flowering of Greek culture of the fifth century Burckhardt had coined the word *agonal*, agonistic, and had shown how this ideal had penetrated the whole of life. Not only athletes and the arts were conceived as contests, even lawsuits and philosophical dialogues partook of the character and concept of the *agon*. Burckhardt contrasts this striving for fame with our modern striving for gain, but here as always he retains his critical detachment. The cult of the *agon* was to him something peculiarly Greek, based as it was on the importance the Greeks

17. I am indebted to Prof. A. Momigliano who made me see the importance of this shift.

attached to the opinion of others. This trait was clearly rooted in the social situation of the *polis*. In the East the institution of castes and the weight of despotism would have stifled such a love of free contests between equals.

It is natural that Huizinga could not accept this interpretation. Burckhardt, he reminds us, had composed his work in the eighties 'before any general sociology existed to digest all the ethnological and anthropological data, most of which... were only coming to light then'. (V, 100) It was this limitation that accounts for Burckhardt's picture of Greek culture developing in comparative isolation from the phase he called 'heroic' to that he called 'agonistic'. But there was no such excuse, in Huizinga's view, for a classical scholar to repeat this theory in 1935 and to present the transition from the heroic to the agonistic, from battle to play as a form of decadence. (V, 103) For in this respect, too, Huizinga's standpoint had somewhat shifted. He no longer appears to have endorsed Tylor's conviction that certain forms of play had evolved from activities once meant in earnest. Neither in Greece nor anywhere else, Huizinga stresses, was there such a transition from battle to play or from play to battle. 'The play element' was present from the beginning.

Our point of departure must be the conception of an almost childlike play-sense, expressing itself in various play-forms, some serious, some playful, but all rooted in ritual and productive culture by allowing the innate human need of rhythm, harmony, change, alternation, contrast, and climax, etc. to unfold in full richness. Coupled with this play-sense is a spirit that strives for honour, dignity, superiority and beauty. Magic and mystery, heroic longings, the foreshadowings of music, sculpture and logic all seek form and expression in noble play. A later generation will call the age that knew such aspirations heroic. (V, 103) (The last sentence only in the English edition).

It is a beautiful passage and a beautiful vision, but one that does not disguise its romantic origin. Was there ever such a Golden Age? For once in this book Huizinga ignores the insistent question after the relation between dream and reality. The horrors, brutalities and insanities of past cultures are hidden in the golden mist of that idyllic dream which Huizinga himself had once analysed as a projection of desires.

Remember Huizinga's story of the Friesian King Radbod who chose hell rather than paradise out of loyalty to his ancestors. What is troubling in Huizinga's later books is his refusal to acknowledge the reality of that hell. True, he might have countered this criticism by the reminder that he was speaking of aspirations rather than of realities. What he emphasized in both books was what he called 'a harmonious balance of material and spiritual values and a more or less homogeneous ideal in whose pursuit the community's various activities converge'. (VII, 332) But it is far from easy to make this idea of balance that had already occurred in 1897 fully intelligible in concrete terms. It is clear from *Homo ludens* that, hu-

manist as he was, Huizinga primarily thought of classical Greece and perhaps twelfth-century France. In ancient Rome that balance was already gravely upset. He finds suspicious emphasis in the grandeur of Roman art and the meretricious glitter of Roman decoration.

The whole betrays the would-be playfulness of an unquiet mind troubled by the dangers of a menacing reality but seeking refuge in the idyllic. The play element is very prominent here, but it has no organic connection with the structure of society and is no longer fecund of true culture. (V, 208)

It is a charge which is often levelled at the culture and art of the rococo, but Huizinga loved the eighteenth century and commended it precisely for its playfulness. It is hard to deny the element of an almost defiant subjectivity in Huizinga's evaluations of cultural elements past and present. Sometimes, indeed, he comes close to the stereotype of the old man out of tune with youth. Having rightly exalted the dance as an expression of culture he hurries to say that not every form of dancing shows this play quality to the full. 'This supercession of the round dance, choral, and figure dances by dancing a *deux* ... or the slitherings or slidings ... of contemporary dancing is probably to be regarded as a symptom of declining culture'. (V, 196. The Dutch is less emphatic than the English version) More surprising still, we read that 'realism, naturalism, impressionism and the rest of that dull catalogue of literary and pictorial coteries were all emptier of the play spirit than any of the earlier styles had ever been'. (V, 224, as above) Is Renoir really less playful than Pontormo?

What is surprising here is not that Huizinga, like all of us, had his prejudices and pet aversions. What calls for comment is rather a shift in his philosophical attitude towards the use of concepts. Huizinga repeatedly denied that he had philosophical gifts or interests and here, as always, we must believe him; but this did not prevent him in his earlier years from taking a determined stand against the attitude of mind that we now call 'essentialism'.¹⁸ It may be remembered that he had criticized Lamprecht for believing in the reality of his concepts rather than regarding them as auxiliary constructs. Later, in his beautiful essay on the Task of Cultural History he had devoted a whole section to this issue when he came to discuss the vexed problem of periodization.

The only deliverance from the dilemma of an exact division by periods lies in the considered abandonment of every requirement of exactitude. The terms should be used, in moderation and modesty, as historical custom provides them. One should use them lightly, and not build structures on them that they cannot support. Care should be taken not to squeeze them dry ... One should always be aware that every term

18. K. R. Popper, *The Poverty of Historicism* (London, 1957) 27 ff, and *The Open Society and its Enemies* (London, 1945) ch. xi-2.

pretending to express the essence or the nature of a period is prejudicial by that very fact ... One should constantly be prepared to abandon a term ... (VII, 92-3)¹⁹

To those of us who share this anti-essentialist approach, which is certainly also the approach of the natural sciences, it comes as a surprise to find the Huizinga of *Homo ludens* firmly entrenched in the essentialist camp. It is obvious that he knew what he was doing.

From a nominalist point of view we might deny the validity of a general concept of play and say that for every human group the concept 'play' contains what is expressed in the word - or rather words. (V, 56)

But now the whole structure of the book is designed to exclude this argument. Like a Scholastic 'realist' or any Aristotelian, Huizinga starts with a definition designed to capture the 'essence' of the play concept and only then scrutinizes the words used in various languages to express this essence. The burden of his second chapter is that some languages 'have succeeded better than others in getting the various aspects of play into one word'. (V, 56-7) It is obvious that the failure of Greek to do precisely this in using different terms for contests and for childish play (V, 57-58) disturbed him no less than the tendency of so many languages to speak of loveplay in erotic contexts. (V, 71-2) This, he felt, must be a mere metaphor for it fell outside his definition. What he was concerned with was 'play as a primary datum of experience' (V, 234) and it is also clear why he took this line. He had found in this somewhat authoritarian approach a defence against those dangers of 'reductionism' which had come to preoccupy him. Play could not be explained. He speaks of 'that irreducible quality of pure playfulness which is not ... amenable to further analysis', (V, 34) of the 'absolute independence of the play concept'. (V, 34; English edition p. 6) In other words, play has become for him what Goethe would have called an *Urphänomen*. Goethe had used this strategy to preserve his notion of colour from the analysis of Newtonian optics. Huizinga withdrew into a similar fortress to ward off the onslaught of psychology and the study of animal behaviour.

It is for this reason, I believe, that *Homo ludens* raises so many questions and offers so few answers. The notion of play as an irreducible fact could not but rule out any attempts at explanation. I hope to have shown that Huizinga was consistent in adopting this attitude, and it can certainly not be the purpose of this paper to enter into the vast range of problems he so deliberately excluded. But enough must be said to indicate why I do not believe that his strategy was either successful or necessary. As far as the concept of play is concerned the anti-essentialist case has meanwhile been put in a famous section of Wittgenstein's *Philosophische Unter-*

19. I quote from the English translation by J. S. Holmes and H. v. Marle in *Men and Ideas* (Meridian Books, 1959) 74.

suchungen,²⁰ in which it is argued that the various meanings of a term need not all have something in common; sometimes their likeness, like family likeness, may only link neighbouring applications without extending over the whole of the field. I am not sure that Wittgenstein's example was happily chosen, precisely because 'Spiel' (he was writing in German) can always be opposed to 'Ernst' like 'disease' to 'health'. What has to be demonstrated (and curiously enough has been demonstrated by none other than Huizinga) is that the distinction itself is fluid and, up to a point, a matter of convention. Naturally this does not mean that we are debarred from adopting such a convention when discussing behaviour, we only must not attach more weight to the words we use here than in the case of historical periods. Least of all must we allow an *a priori* definition to block any further analysis. Some of the problems that interested Huizinga have indeed acquired a different look since 1938 when *Homo ludens* was published. One such example must here suffice. In the first paragraph of the book he invites us to watch young dogs

to see that all the essentials of human play are present in their merry gambols. They invite one another to play by a certain ceremoniousness in attitude and gesture. They keep to the rule that you shall not bite, or not bite hard, your brother's ear. (V, 28)

The observation is correct but nobody who has read the writings of Konrad Lorenz²¹ or of Huizinga's compatriot Niko Tinbergen²² will be content any longer with describing such behaviour as an Urphänomen. The science of ethology has introduced us to the development of what is called ritualization²³ and to the importance of the achievement of dominance, of ranking, indeed since Huizinga the term 'pecking order' has become part of common parlance.²⁴ We can guess at the importance of these mechanisms in the animal world. After a brief trial of strength every animal in the flock or the herd learns to know its place and does not expend unnecessary energy in fighting a stronger member of its group. Only at certain moments of crisis as the strength of the dominant animal fails will there be contests for a place at the top of the ladder and these contests will end as soon as victory is

20. L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophische Untersuchungen* (Oxford, 1953) 31 ff.

21. Konrad Lorenz, *Das sogenannte Böse. Zur Naturgeschichte der Aggression* (Vienna, 1963).

22. N. Tinbergen, 'On War and Peace in Animals and Man', *Science*, CLX (28th June, 1968) 1411-1418.

23. W. H. Thorpe, 'Ritualization in ontogeny, I, Animal Play', in J. Huxley, ed., *A Discussion on Ritualization of Behaviour in Animals and Man*. Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society of London, Series B, No. 772, CCLI (1966).

24. Thanks to the kindness of the editor of the Oxford English Dictionary Supplement I have been allowed to see their collection of references from which it appears that the German term *Hackliste* was used by T. J. Schjelderup-Ebbe in *Zeitschrift für Psychologie*, LXXXVIII (1922) 227. The earliest non-scientific usage there recorded is in A. Huxley, *Point Counter Point* (1928) 48. Could the novelist have taken it over from his brother, the biologist? W. C. Allee, *Animal Aggregations* (Chicago, 1931) and *The Social Life of Animals* (London-Toronto, 1938) appears to have made the term more popular, though its real vogue dates from the post-war period.

conceded. Lorenz has shown that the same is true of the fights for territory or for mates. As a rule animals of the same species do not kill each other. Once the outcome is clear and dominance established the contest is over. The defeated submits and slinks away. Even in the animal world there is no absolute distinction between the sham fight and the real contest. Both are rule governed. Once we grant that these restraints are of the utmost importance for the survival of the species we are surely entitled to ask for the fate of these tendencies in human communities. In one sense man is less lucky than animals. Endowed as he is with what we call reason he has invented tools and weapons, ruses, stratagems and traps. A human contest is no longer a simple trial of physical strength and the loser, instead of acknowledging defeat, may poison a well or dig a ditch to catch his stronger opponent unawares. There are two ways out of this new situation. Either the victor can kill his adversary to remain in safe possession of his rank or territory, or the group can impose explicit rules for the contest which disallow hitting below the belt, poisoning wells or digging ditches. We are on the way to the rules of contests that interested Huizinga. He knew, of course, that there was a link between the craving for dominance and the role of contests.

The urge to be first has as many forms of expression as society offers opportunity to it. The ways in which man competes for superiority are as various as the prizes at stake. Decision may be left to chance, physical strength, dexterity, or bloody combats. Or there may be competitions in courage or endurance, skillfulness, knowledge, boasting and cunning. A trial of strength may be demanded, or a specimen of art; a sword has to be forged or ingenious rhymes made. (V, 134)

What these and the countless other examples we find in *Homo ludens* suggest is precisely that a competition or contest must be in something, in a definable achievement which allows of an unambiguous decision like climbing up a greasy pole or putting a man on the moon. Granted that Huizinga is right and that even a learned symposium partakes of the character of play, it would become a game only if we introduced some arbitrary criterion of what constitutes winning. A contest might be arranged as to who can place most quotations from Huizinga's *Collected Works*, a contest in which I would certainly lose. The point is always to define precisely beforehand what it is that is to be tested. The need to do so is perfectly rational if you are aiming at a ranking order. What is irrational is the implicit assumption that victory in one type of contest betokens superiority in other fields. The fact that the boat of the Cambridge crew arrives at the winning post before that of Oxford is taken to mean that Cambridge is the better University. I confess I suffer from a rare disability in this respect. I find it hard to understand the feeling that 'we have won' merely because someone has won. Huizinga would of course have dismissed this vulgar reaction as part of the puerilism he did not want to be confused with 'noble play'. It is certainly understandable that he tried to isolate his

ideal which he saw as a vital constituent of all culture, from anything he disliked, but in a sense the creation of this negative category of puerilism only serves to cut play loose from that anchorage in the emotional life he had once acknowledged and described. 'Pretending' is surely deeply rooted in our need to find an outlet for our emotions. To learn to play is to learn that such outlets can be constructed in safety.²⁵ I know of a little girl who plagued her mother every night with fearful howls when she made any attempt to leave the room- But one night the little horror commanded: 'Mummy, go away, I want to cry for mummy' - a textbook example of the pleasures of domination in more than one sense of the term. Watch any baby playing peep-a-boo. It will expect the grown-up to ask loudly 'Where is baby? I can't find baby', and to burst into delighted cries when baby is 'found'. Surely the moment comes very soon when the child knows very well that we are pretending, but only a spoilsport would then say 'I have seen you all along'.

Huizinga had the right instinct in focussing attention on the spoilsport as a key to our understanding of what play is about. But here as elsewhere his wish to isolate play from the study of the human mind deprived him of some of the fruits of his insight. Remember Albee's play 'Who's afraid of Virginia Woolf' where the husband takes his revenge by 'killing' the son who never was.

Is there really no transition from such abnormal states to some of the phenomena of culture that interested Huizinga? Need we be afraid of investigating these pressures, for fear of debunking man's stature? Does the fact that cathedrals were built to proclaim not only the glory of God but also the power of the Bishop make them less beautiful? Are they not in any case astounding structures which we can admire for their own sake? I believe with K. R. Popper that what is called 'reductionism' need not make us retreat into a refusal to consider questions of origins.²⁶ The scientist must indeed frame hypotheses concerning the physical and psychological causation of phenomena, but that need not commit him to denying their autonomy in what Popper likes to call the Third World, the world of problem solutions which is also the world of culture and of art.

An illustration is close at hand: I have tried myself to explain some of Huizinga's preoccupations in terms of his psychological development from the time he first experienced the thrill of history in the form of a playful pageant. But I would never claim that I could reduce Huizinga's oeuvre to mere epiphenomena of such psychological pressures. His books stand up, as do the Cathedrals, as beautiful structures, they have solved certain problems and posed many new ones which demand

25. J. S. Bruner, 'Nature and Uses of Immaturity', *American Psychologist*, XXVII (8. August 1972) 1-22, which also offers an excellent point of entry into the bibliography of the problem of play. See also Maria W. Piers, ed., *Play and Development* (New York, 1972).

26. K. R. Popper, *Objective Knowledge, an Evolutionary Approach* (Oxford, 1972) (see Index under Reduction).

solutions. And though I cannot accept the method adopted by Huizinga in *Homo ludens* I am sure we have not yet absorbed enough of what the book can teach us.

In my own field, the history of art, we have become intolerably earnest. A false prestige has come to be attached to the postulation of profound meanings or ulterior motives. The idea of fun is perhaps even more unpopular among us than is the notion of beauty. Huizinga's analysis of culture as a game, moreover, exposes the fatal weakness of that cult of change and of dynamism that has taken hold of our world in the wake of the triumphs of science.²⁷ Marking examination papers in the history of art I have often been struck by the frequency with which the term 'revolutionary' is employed simply as a term of praise for an artist or a stylistic change. Whether a master invents perspective or discards it, whether he paints meadows green or red, if only his art can be seen in terms of a break with conventions it is revolutionary and therefore good. If *Homo ludens* had done nothing but remind us of the fact that conventions belong to culture and to art much as rules belong to games, the book would have done a service to this hectic age of ours. It was precisely this hectic character of our civilization Huizinga deplored. He wanted to persuade his contemporaries to exercise restraint, to practise austerity and to seek the simple life. Nothing appeared to them more unrealistic than this plea for renunciation. Unrealistic it may still be, but by now the call has been taken up by the young who are more critical of the pursuit of profit and power than he could ever have hoped. What attracted him in the model of the game was precisely this element of self-imposed discipline. But he also knew that human life is not a game. There can be no room in a game for pity. Imagine a goalkeeper letting the ball through because he is sorry for the other side. In life pity must be allowed to break all the rules, for without charity all culture is nothing but sounding brass and tinkling cymbals. Huizinga did not quote the Epistle to the Corinthians, but it cannot have been far from his mind when he wrote the last pages of *Homo ludens*. For as the book grew under his hands it changed from a book about man and play to a meditation about man and God.

I have mentioned a game that might be arranged, a competition in spotting quotations. Here is a description of a hunting ritual:

Only a gentleman has the right to carve wild game. Bare-headed, on bended knee, with a special sword for the purpose (it would be sacrilege to use any other), with ritual gesture, in a ritual order, he cuts the ritual number in due solemnity, while the crowd stands around in silence.

Where does it come from? Not from *Homo ludens*, nor indeed from the *Waning of the Middle Ages*. It is to be found in the *Laus Stultitiae* by Erasmus.

27. M. Peckham, *Man's Rage for Chaos. Biology, Behaviour and the Arts* (Philadelphia-New York, 1965) and my review in *The New York Review of Books* (June 23rd, 1966).

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Naturally Erasmus here ridicules the folly of man's propensity to indulge in this kind of game, he goes through the various aspects of life to make fun of the irrational things done by lawyers, teachers, theologians and philosophers while *Homo ludens* describes similar specimens of human behaviour as evidence of the link between culture and the play instinct. But when in his original lecture Huizinga spoke of the danger of looking at civilization *sub specie ludi* he warned his audience that 'play is a category that devours everything, just as folly, once it had taken hold of the mind of Erasmus, had to become the Queen of the whole world'. (V, 23) To quote Huizinga's words from his essay about the *Praise of Folly*:

He [Erasmus] had measured all the values of the world against the length of his fool's bauble, and everything of that world was found to be folly by that measuring rod. Wisdom was folly, folly was life. But when in the end he finally also used this measuring rod to gauge the things of heaven everything once more turned round. The figures on the scale of the rod now read in the other direction. Folly became wisdom. Here he had stepped one further step beyond himself. The word had passed from the humanist wit with his wealth of erudition and his noble social sense to the inner man, and he pointed beyond the consequences of an anti-intellectualism that remained within this world to a sphere in which the contrast between intellectualism and its opposite is dissolved. (VI, 234)

It is impossible to miss the resemblance between this reading of the *Praise of Folly* and the concluding page of *Homo ludens* which I quoted at the outset of this enquiry. (p. 277) I believe that the parallel extends much further. To appreciate Erasmus' idea of Folly we do not turn to the debates of modern psychiatrists about the nature of mental illness. In the last analysis the discussion by modern psychologists and anthropologists about the nature and the definition of play²⁸ are no more relevant to Huizinga's real concern.

I know that Huizinga was sometimes nettled when it was assumed that he identified with Erasmus. (I, 41) Somehow the great humanist aroused in him all the ambivalent feelings that sprang from a life-long fight against the temptations of cultured aestheticism. We are reminded of the distinction Huizinga drew between St. Jerome's and St. Augustine's style of religiosity. He returned to this theme in his centenary address on Erasmus delivered in the Minster at Basle.

These are neither the accents of Luther nor those of Calvin and St. Theresa. The religious sentiments of Erasmus appear to us frequently removed into the middle sphere of poetic erudition instead of calling to heaven from the depths. (VI, 207)

Reading *Homo ludens* with sympathy and understanding even those of us who cannot share Huizinga's philosophy can hear that voice *de profundis*.

28. I. Heidemann, *Der Begriff des Spieles* (Berlin, 1968) and Volker Harms, *Der Terminus 'Spiel' in der Ethnologie. Arbeiten aus dem Institut für Völkerkunde der Universität zu Göttingen, Band 4* (Hamburger Philosophische Dissertation, 1969).