

Review
Peter Arnade, Martha Howell, and
Anton van der Lem (eds):
Rereading Huizinga: Autumn of the Middle Ages,
a century later

Amsterdam University Press, 2019. 363 p.
ISBN 978 94 6298 372 4 / e-ISBN 978 90 4853 409 8 (pdf)

Reviewed by Koen B. Tanghe



Edited by Peter Arnade, Martha Howell, and Anton van der Lem

Rereading Huizinga

Autumn of the Middle Ages,
a Century Later

Amsterdam
University
Press

The year 2019 was the centennial of the publication of one of Johan Huizinga's (1872-1945) best known works: *Herfsttij der Middeleeuwen* (1919), translated into English as *The waning of the Middle Ages* (1924) and *Autumn of the Middle Ages* (1996). As its subtitle indicates, this masterpiece of Western medieval scholarship is a study of the forms of life, thought and art in France and the Netherlands in the 14th and 15th centuries. This was a hinge period between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance: the Middle Ages came to an end, while at the same time, the seeds of the Renaissance were sown.

Huizinga denied, though, that it can or should be considered as a prelude to the Renaissance, as the Swiss historian of art and culture Jacob Burckhardt (1818-1897) had assumed in *Die Kultur der Renaissance in Italien* (1860). As he put it in the preface of *Autumn*: "When studying any period, we are always looking for the promise of what the next is to bring. [...] So, in medieval history, we have been searching so diligently for the origins of modern culture, that at times it would seem as though what we call the Middle Ages had been little more than the prelude to the Renaissance" (Huizinga 1924, 7). Rather, he wanted to present the late Middle Ages as an epoch in its own right, one that was foremost characterized by a marked waning: medieval life forms (stories, rituals, paintings, and so on) were becoming, or had become, meaningless and empty. In this, Huizinga seemed to follow the organicist philosophy of history of Burckhardt's teacher Leopold von Ranke (1795-1886). The latter had always insisted upon treating every historical epoch in its own right instead of as a prelude to a later epoch. He also assumed that at critical junctures in the European past, cultures had dissolved.

Huizinga's Rankean study of the Middle Ages was at the same time also Burckhardtian, though, as he focused on the visual arts, in the same way that Burckhardt in his study of the Italian Renaissance had relied heavily on visual culture. As Huizinga explained in an article published in 1916 on the art of the Van Eycks:

The notion came to me that the late Middle Ages were not the herald of something that was to come, but the fading away of something that has passed. This thought, if one can speak of it as a thought, revolved above all around the art of the Van Eycks and their contemporaries, which considerably occupied my mind at the time.

(cited in Arnade et al. 2019, 125)

On the eve of the centennial of the publication of this melancholic masterpiece (November 10, 2016), Columbia University's Dutch studies program hosted a workshop of scholars in history, literature and art history at Flanders House New York. Participants aimed at assessing Huizinga's arguments, considered the intellectual culture in which he wrote and examined the impact of his work on

subsequent scholarship. In particular, they tried to develop a better understanding of what might be called the enigma of *Autumn*: it is deeply flawed, yet at the same time, it is also widely popular and remarkably enduring as a work of scholarship. Logically, that is also the main goal of the book that followed from that workshop: *Rereading Huizinga* tries to explain, “why, despite all the book’s flaws, all its omissions and unevenness, *Autumn* is considered one of the masterpieces of Western historical scholarship” (13). Unfortunately, nowhere in *Rereading Huizinga* are the various strands of the answer to that conundrum woven together, not even in the epilogue “Reading together” by Willem Otterspeer.

The enigma of its success reminds me of another eclectic and remarkably successful 20th-century non-fiction work: *The structure of scientific revolutions* (1962), written by Thomas S. Kuhn (1922-1996), a physicist turned historian and philosopher of science (Huizinga was a Sanskrit scholar turned historian). The resemblances between both works are manifold and striking. For example, due to the various academic fields that inspired *The structure* and the background of its author, it became a work which was difficult to categorize. As two of the editors (Peter Arnade and Martha Howell) of *Rereading Huizinga* point out in the introduction, *Autumn* also “seems to fit nowhere” (12). As a work in the history of science, *The structure* tried, with its atypical and largely ignored general developmental pattern of sciences (modern historians rather focus on specific episodes or figures in the history of science), to contribute to “a historiographic revolution in the study of science [...]” (3). Instead of seeking “the permanent contributions of an older science to our present vantage” (3), modern historians attempt “to display the historical integrity of that science in its own time” (3). This anti-Whiggish approach evidently resembles the way Huizinga interpreted the late Middle Ages as an epoch in its own right. Secondly, as a philosopher, Kuhn tried, but failed, to provide the modern, critical and non-Whiggish history of science with a fitting, post-positivist philosophy of science.

Nevertheless, *The structure* became enormously influential. Also, like *Autumn*, it was widely read and very popular in non-academic circles. The most specific and also most surprising resemblance is that, like *Autumn*, *The structure* was inspired by the domain of art, more particularly by an analogy that Kuhn had discerned between the history of art and the history of science (Pinto de Oliveira 2017). Both were characterized by what might be called “punctuated equilibria,” a phrase that was coined by the palaeontologists Stephen Jay Gould and Niles Eldredge (1977) for a discontinuous interpretation of macroevolution that was partly inspired by *The structure*: periods of stasis (an artistic style and “normal science”), punctuated by rapid transitions (artistic and scientific revolutions).

Like *The structure*, *Autumn* was also in several ways a flawed analysis. Its main claim – the late Middle Ages did not herald the Renaissance – is unconvincing. Also, as Peter Arnade and Martha Howell point out, Huizinga’s sources were too homogeneous (French language, literary and narrative) and his references to late medieval art idiosyncratic and selective. He focused on Burgundian court culture and paid little attention to civic life and particularly to commerce in what was one of Europe’s most densely urbanized and commercial regions, a shortcoming that is highlighted in Jan Dumolyn’s and Élodie Lecuppre-Desjardin’s contribution “Huizinga’s silence.” Even the religious fervour of the day, harbinger of the Reformation to come, was depicted “as a calcified expression of decayed spirituality” (13). Further, he referenced few secondary historical studies and little of the important contemporary work in sociology and anthropology. Lastly, he did not follow the modern principles of original corpus analyses. No wonder that Huizinga’s colleagues – medievalists and art historians – largely ignored *Autumn*.

So whence, then, its huge popularity and influence? The short answer is that, with his powerful evocation of the Burgundian splendour and mentality and his literary style, Huizinga brought medieval history to life as few writers had done before or have done since. Also, as a scholar, Huizinga was, in several respects, ahead of his time. Here again, he resembles Kuhn, who also foreshadowed and stimulated several later developments in the study of science (it would lead us too far astray, though, to discuss this important aspect of *The structure* in detail).

This is the *file rouge*, the leitmotif, of *Rereading Huizinga*. For example, Andrew Brown (“Huizinga’s Autumn”) states that “the ‘cultural turn’ since the 1970s and attempts to build integrated narratives of cultural manifestations and to understand societies from a multiplicity of viewpoints, have given *Autumn* renewed currency” (27). Jun Cho (“The forms behind the vormen”) attributes *Autumn*’s enduring attraction to two characteristics of this work. He offered a view of the late Middle Ages that was not distorted “by a modernizing lens” (87) and that was “akin to the new concerns of the post-1960s, especially the ‘cultural turn’” (87). This anti-Whiggish perspective of *Autumn* is also highlighted by Carol Symes (“Harvest of death”). It criticized traditional, nationalist medievalism that claimed that modern nations and national sentiments could be traced back to the Middle Ages.

Walter Simons (“Wrestling with the angel”) examines how several key themes of *Autumn* have found their way “into the new approaches to religious history developed from the 1960s onward by historians associated with the French Annales school, charmed by Huizinga’s inroads into historical psychology” (41). Myriam Greilsammer (“A late and ambivalent recognition”) analyzes in more detail how, with *Autumn*, Huizinga “attained, in a little less than 60 years, his

rightful place in the pantheon of the pioneers of the Annales school” (306). Diane Wolfthal (“Art history and Huizinga’s *Autumn of the Middle Ages*”) points out that “Huizinga foreshadowed the recent art historical turn away from positivism and toward a broader range of study objects and an embrace of interdisciplinarity, the new materialism, emotions, and erotica” (140). One could say that this post-positivism of *Autumn* offers yet another resemblance to *The structure*. Peter Arnade (“Huizinga: anthropologist avant la lettre?”) states that Huizinga’s anthropological leanings “seem to anticipate the emergence of symbolic anthropology, especially the work of Clifford Geertz” (271). Lastly, Birger Vanwesenbeeck (“Huizinga, theorist of lateness?”) positions *Autumn* with regard to the modern debate on late style and lateness.

Of course, *Rereading Huizinga* offers the reader much more than an analysis of the reasons why *Autumn* is considered to be one of the masterpieces of Western medieval scholarship or why it was ahead of its time. For example, two contributions examine Huizinga’s methodology (“The making of *The Autumn of the Middle Ages I*” by Graeme Small, and “The making of *The Autumn of the Middle Ages II*” by Anton van der Lem), while Larry Silver (“Did Germany have a medieval Herbstzeit?”) examines the adoption of Burgundian court culture as an instrument of statecraft by Emperor Maximilian I (1459-1519), whereas Marc Boone (“Yet another failed state?”) reconsiders the controversy between Huizinga and the Belgian historian Henri Pirenne (1862-1953) on the question whether a “Burgundian state” existed. Not surprisingly, Huizinga believed that the notion of a Burgundian state was a creation of modern historiography and that a true Burgundian nation existed only between the death of Duke Charles the Bold (1433-1477) in 1477 and the start of the revolt of the northern provinces against King Philip II of Spain (1527-1598) in 1572.

One fears that the general reader may occasionally get lost in these and countless other erudite meanders and esoteric digressions in *Rereading Huizinga*. For the serious Huizinga scholar, however, it is an indispensable work. Lastly, historians of various stripes will find much of use and interest in this rich volume.

References

- Arnade, Peter, Martha Howell and Anton van der Lem, eds. 2019. *Rereading Huizinga: Autumn of the Middle Ages, a century later*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.
- Burckhardt, Jacob. 1860. *Die Kultur der Renaissance in Italien: Ein Versuch*. Basel: Schweighauser.
- Gould, Stephen Jay and Niles Eldredge. 1977. Punctuated equilibria: The tempo and mode of evolution reconsidered. *Paleobiology* 3.2:115-151. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2400177>. Accessed July 9, 2021.
- Huizinga, Johan. 1919. *Herfsttij der Middeleeuwen. Studie over levens- en gedachtenvormen der veertiende en vijftiende eeuw in Frankrijk en de Nederlanden*. Haarlem: Tjeenk Willink.

Huizinga, Johan. 1924. *The waning of the Middle Ages: A study of the forms of life, thought and art in France and the Netherlands in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.

Huizinga, Johan. 1996. *Autumn of the Middle Ages: A study of the forms of life, thought and art in France and the Netherlands in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Kuhn, Thomas Samuel. 1962. *The structure of scientific revolutions*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Pinto de Oliveira, José Carlos. 2017. Thomas Kuhn, the image of science and the image of art: The first manuscript of *Structure*. *Perspectives on Science* 25.6: 746–765.

About the reviewer

Koen B. Tanghe is a postdoctoral researcher in the history and philosophy of the life sciences at the Department of Philosophy and Moral Sciences at Ghent University (Belgium). He earned his Ph.D. at Ghent University in 2013 and has previously written about Johan Huizinga's work.