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This paper explores Johan Huizinga's cultural pessimism and the developments in his thought during the 1930's. It will contextualize the evolution of his methodology in relation to perhaps the most exemplary cultural pessimist of modernity, Oswald Spengler. This paper traces the evolution of Huizinga's thought, from his initial refutation of Spengler's 'romantic and metaphysical' outlook on world history in a book review, to his eventual assimilation of similar methods and ideas.

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The intellectual debate at the beginning of the twentieth century is frequently associated with a turn in thinking about the emergence of cultural progress in Western societies. The twentieth century, especially after the First World War took place, also birthed a tradition of cultural pessimism across the whole of Europe and the United States: some famous international examples of such critics of progress include W.B. Yeats, T.S. Eliot, José Ortega y Gasset, Arnold J. Toynbee and Pitirim Sorokin. While many Western philosophers and poets of the nineteenth century are known for their melancholic outlook on society, mankind or even life itself, 'cultural pessimism' as a subgenre of cultural criticism is strongly associated with modern and post-modern times.

Although several authors created a clearer understanding of the underlying premisses of cultural pessimist thought, less has been written about the distinction between cultural criticism in general and the specific genre of cultural pessimism. These terms are frequently used as literary classifications in a similar way. This paper will elaborate on the features of the specification 'cultural pessimism' by describing the intellectual transformation of the Dutch historian Johan Huizinga, and by comparing his writings to one of the most exemplary thinkers of this genre, Oswald Spengler. Huizinga openly criticized Spengler's work in the 1920s. However political and personal matters pushed him towards the subsequent development of pessimistic ideas. Huizinga's later publications (from the 1930s on) on contemporary society are regularly described as sharp pieces of criticism, yet they have not hitherto been understood as the beautifully written but bitter fruits of cultural pessimist thought.

Johan Huizinga (1872 – 1945) is now probably best-known for *The Waning of the Middle Ages* (1919) and *Homo Ludens* (1938). These works are considered outstanding for their historical analyses — seemingly irrelevant details are unexpectedly brought together in philosophical and anthroposophical demonstrations, put into words in a meandering literary style. Huizinga is also known for his remarkably broad knowledge of the humanities and arts in general, and for studying art and literature as a reflection of the collective psyche of an era. The modern reader is still enchanted by his eloquent observations and Huizinga's legacy is still omnipresent in the Netherlands. After 'the father of historiography' Leopold Von Ranke, he is probably the first scholar discussed by new students of history. There is the national Huizinga Research Institute for cultural historians, an annual Huizinga-speech at the historian's alma mater, the University of Leiden, and to this day new biographies are still being published. Nonetheless, Johan Huizinga is possibly more famous outside the Netherlands than he is in his own country.

Huizinga was the son of a professor of Medicine at the University of Groningen. He began his academic career as a student of linguistics and in addition attended lectures on Dutch history. At the age of 24, he earned his doctorate with a thesis on the role of the *vidusaka* in Sanskrit drama.¹ Afterwards, he started teaching history at a secondary school in Haarlem, returning to academia in 1903 to deliver lectures at the University of Amsterdam and from 1905 at the University of Groningen. In 1914, he became Professor of General History in Leiden and quickly gained a reputation as a teacher and historian, especially after the publication of *The Waning of the Middle Ages* in 1919.² He published most of his major works on cultural history in the 1920s. However, in the 1930s he made himself known as a critic of modern politics, society and culture. This newer phase has already been described and commented on quite elaborately by his contemporaries, former colleagues, and doctorate students, amongst others Henk Wesseling, Pieter Geyl and historian Henri Baudet. Although his 1935-work, *In the Shadow of Tomorrow*, became his biggest bestseller and was subsequently translated into eight different languages, it was the most criticized and even denounced publication of Huizinga's amongst his fellow scholars and intellectuals.

While nowadays Huizinga is mainly known for his historical works, in his own time, he acquired more attention for his work as a cultural critic. Until the 1960s, new commentaries on his cultural criticism from fellow-historians were regularly published in several journals. Thereafter, his pessimistic outlook on contemporary society was somewhat forgotten until Henk Wesseling's lecture on the subject in 1996. (Wesseling was an influential professor of contemporary history at Leiden University.) When discussing Huizinga's elaborate review of Oswald Spengler's, *The Decline of the West*, it is interesting to study which elements of modern cultural pessimism Huizinga typically condemns. As usual, Huizinga's style of writing is meandering and aesthetic, which makes it difficult to structure his argument logically. (This might also explain why Huizinga oddly decided to publish his reviews in a cultural magazine, instead of a historical journal.)

In 1921, Johan Huizinga reviewed the first part of Oswald Spengler's *The Decline of the West* in a prominent literary journal, *De Gids*.³ This review appeared two years after the publication of his book *The Waning of the Middle Ages* – in Dutch 'Herfsttij der Middeleeuwen' (*The Autumn of the Middle Ages*). Historian N.F. Cantor suggests that the title may have been translated this

¹ Anton van der Lem, *Johan Huizinga: Leven en werk in beelden & documenten* (Amsterdam: Wereldbibliotheek 1993), 29, 48.

² H.L. Wesseling, "From cultural historian to cultural critic: Johan Huizinga and the spirit of the 1930s," *European Review* 10/4 (2002): 485-499; 486.

³ Johan Huizinga, "Twee worstelaars met den engel," *De gids* 85 (1921): 454-487; 468. www.dbnl.org/tekst/_gid001192101_01/_gid001192101_01_0063.php (accessed June 27, 2006).

way to avoid associations with Spengler's work.⁴ *The Waning* is unique in its focus on human relations and on the role of arts and literature as a reflection of *Zeitgeist* in late medieval Burgundy. It is a speculative work, and historical causality or the reconstruction of events are not prioritized. This book is predominantly praised for the brilliant mind of the historian who wrote it, for its wit and creativity, and is commonly viewed as a work of art rather than as an academic historical work.⁵

In Pieter Geyl's well-known reaction to Huizinga's cultural criticism ("Huizinga as accuser of his age"), he observes that the theme of cultural decay is already omnipresent in earlier works like *The Waning*. "It thus became a vision deepened and enriched by many years of study [...] all of it seen throughout in the tints of decline."⁶ Geyl emphasises Huizinga's way of studying a culture in an isolated way, as a system that exists on its own. In Carol Symes's article about the function of decay in *The Waning*, she notes how Huizinga's ideas of decline are influenced by the political events at the time that Huizinga wrote this piece.⁷ Decline was already an important theme in *The Waning*, and Huizinga was less interested in actual political or economic structures than in the understanding of the psyche and culture of his subject.⁸

In his review of Spengler's work, Huizinga begins by describing the book as "unique and characteristic." Huizinga is intrigued by Spengler's broad and immensely curious mind (a remark people also make about Huizinga's own books), which maybe explains why he lectured about the book at the Leiden University in 1919. Biographer Carla du Pree writes: "He was fascinated by the thinker-poet. It touched his own belief that humankind could understand the meaning of life and history intuitively and by experience."⁹ After the praise, criticism follows. Huizinga starts questioning Spengler's 'larger-than-life' project to fathom the underlying structures of world history, discerning "a glimpse of madness is gleaming in the philosopher's eyes." The popularity of *The Decline*, according to Huizinga, can be explained by the crisis-like political climate in Germany. The book for him serves as an explanation and a confirmation for the collective delusion. Its analysis of the cultural climate is ambiguous and most of all a cry of despair, Huizinga states in 1921.¹⁰

Huizinga's decisive commentary is about what Spengler describes as *Schicksal*, a term that can be loosely interpreted as 'the fate of history.'⁷ It represents Spengler's anthropomorphic idea of history, which describes a culture as a living organism, determined to grow old, to get sick and to perish. For Huizinga, speaking of history in terms of *Schicksal* is the result of a romantic way of thinking about history, and this idea of cultural evolution distorts the historical facts, even if they seem to be organized in various tables and schemes. Most of the review is about Spengler's remarks on art history and philosophy, by which Huizinga wants to show that Spengler's categorization of *Natur* and *Geschichte* creates faulty generalizations or even substantial mistakes in his understanding of the historical facts.¹¹ For Huizinga, this

⁴ N.F. Cantor, *Inventing the Middle Ages. The Lives, Works, and Ideas of the Great Medievalists of the Twentieth Century* (William Morrow & Co., New York 1991), 377-381.

⁵ Sean Farrell Moran, "Johan Huizinga, The Waning of the Middle Ages, and the writing of history." *Michigan Academician*, vol. 43, no. 3 (2016): 410-423.

⁶ Pieter Geyl, "Huizinga as Accuser of His Age," *History and Theory* 2-3 (1963): 231 – 262.

⁷ Carol Symes, "Harvest of Death. Johan Huizinga's Critique on Medievalism," in *Rereading Huizinga*, ed. Arnade, Howell & Van der Lem (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2019), 242.

⁸ For instance, Carol Symes elaborates on the theme of death and decay in *The Waning* in her chapter "Harvest of Death: Johan Huizinga's Critique of Medievalism," in *Rereading Huizinga*, ed. Peter Arnade, Martha Howell, Anton van der Lem (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2019), 229-244.

⁹ Carla Du Pree, *Johan Huizinga en de bezeten wereld*. (Leusden: ISVW 2016), 11.

¹⁰ Huizinga, "Twee worstelaars met den engel."

¹¹ Spengler uses the category *Natur* to describe what can be known, that which is measurable, rational and factual, whilst *Geschichte* refers to that which is organic, non-causal and unique.

categorization also causes Spengler to misunderstand his contemporary historians.¹² By stating that scholars (historians amongst them), are used to “mechanical thinking” (which belongs to *Natur* and the natural sciences), Spengler tries to convince the reader that most historians are obsessed with causality and a technical understanding of history — as an example he points to the popularity of historical materialism.¹³ Huizinga contradicts this statement and argues that Spengler himself is more obsessed with categorization than most historians.

In the context of the reception of Huizinga’s later work, it is intriguing that Huizinga underlines the ‘Germanness’ of Spengler’s works. This vision on history can only be the work of a German, and “the thoughts that seem calming to other peoples, agitate the Germans.”¹⁴ This great, romantic, Faustian *Lebensgefühl* can only be formulated by a German thinker, Huizinga states, and Spengler’s book is full of experiences that can only be expressed in the German language. (For example: the ‘spaciousness’ of Faustian culture.) Huizinga’s frequent critical references to Spengler’s ‘Germanness’ are rather ironic when one considers that in the reception of his own *In the Shadow*, and in his later letters and lecture *Nederlands Geestesmerk*, commentators repeatedly wrote about the ‘Dutch’ character of Huizinga’s cultural criticism. Huizinga was known as a patriot and was in favour of typical Dutch values like moderation, soberness, and reasonableness. In the political sense, Huizinga advocated for federalism, European co-operation, multilingualism, and civil society.¹⁵

Huizinga concludes by saying that Spengler’s book cured him from his own “dark desperation about the future of our society,” because he “had gathered enough hope to embrace not-knowing.”¹⁶ However this no longer seems to be the case in the 1930s, when Huizinga started to formulate more melancholic and conservative thoughts himself on the state of Western culture.

An important change in Huizinga’s tone and output is a result of his transformation from a scholar to a ‘public intellectual.’ Particularly from the beginning of the 1930’s a clear change can be seen. Not only did Huizinga start to publish works criticizing the current state of contemporary Western societies, but at the same time he also started corresponding and debating with other cultural critics, like Julien Benda and Aldous Huxley, regarding the contemporary state of culture and speaking out publicly on these matters. From a political perspective, this change of course is not inexplicable. In the end of January 1933, Huizinga spent several months in Germany where he saw all the condemnable elements of modern civilization represented in Hitler’s fascism, as described in *In the Shadow of Tomorrow* (1935). One day before Hitler became *Reichskanselier*, he was providing lectures on the role of The Netherlands as political and economic mediator in Europe at the university of Berlin.¹⁷

Henk Wesseling underlines the influence of Huizinga’s personal situation on his general outlook in the 1930’s in his article “From cultural historian to cultural critic” and lecture “Zoekt Prof. Huizinga eigenlijk niet zichzelf?” (‘Is Prof. Huizinga just searching for himself?’). Huizinga’s critical works were published in times of personal problems: in the year Hitler took power, his good friend Cornelis van Vollenhoven died. In the same year, he lost a good friend and colleague because of an academic affair and lost an old friend to national

¹² Huizinga, “Twee worstelaars met den engel,” 459.

¹³ Ibid., 460.

¹⁴ Ibid., 486.

¹⁵ H.L. Wesseling, *Zoekt Prof. Huizinga eigenlijk niet zichzelf?* *Huizinga en de geest van de jaren dertig* (Bert Bakker: Amsterdam, 1996), 31-32.

¹⁶ Huizinga, “Twee worstelaars met den engel,” 487.

¹⁷ Du Pree, *Johan Huizinga en de bezeten wereld*, 118.

socialism.¹⁸ Besides daunting personal and political affairs, Wesseling suggests that Huizinga consciously decided to let go of his academic image and to step up as a public intellectual, because his academic inspiration had run dry.¹⁹

In his *Shadow*, Huizinga's tone is more resolutely pessimistic than usual, which is illustrated by its opening statement: "We live in a demented world," in some English translations. (In Dutch the first sentence states "We leven in een bezeten wereld," which could be translated literally to "We live in a haunted/manic world.") The English translation of the first sentence makes sense when analyzing the rest of the book: the theme of 'cultural dementia' is preeminent. Cultural dementia can also be related to Huizinga's use of the word "puerilism," a word to describe the 'adolescent state' of politics and popular culture in general. An older civilization marked by puerilism is getting rid of historical awareness and its connection to the roots and history of its culture. *Shadow* is a book about Huizinga's vision on the problems of modern Western culture, written in a conservative fashion and regularly idealizing elements of the 'olden days,' mainly the first half of the nineteenth century.

His critique concerns itself mainly with the effects of thinking of history as a teleological process towards a better world, and his concerns are related to two topics: firstly, the state of modern thought. Huizinga writes about the disappearance of critical thinking. Derationalization and superstition are byproducts of the degradation of the humanities, he argues, caused by both the idealization of natural sciences and the focus on technological advances which Huizinga viewed as the root causes of what he saw as the crises in the humanities. For Huizinga, the misuse of science, for example in racial theories, serves as an illustration of what he terms the humiliation of academia, a situation in which popular theories triumph over thorough research. The second part of his critique relates to the consequences of modern consumerism, which he connects to modern man's habituation to being constantly entertained. Modern politics and media outlets are more and more transformed to be exciting and entertaining, which gives room to populist narratives and makes nuance disappear. He problematized the inexhaustible desire for 'play,' which Huizinga studies elaborately in his later work *Homo Ludens* (1938) and the debasement of moral norms.

This section asks whether *Shadow* be seen as a cultural pessimistic work, and if so, which criteria does it have to meet in order to qualify as such? Although a range of publications on cultural pessimism as a genre itself has appeared over the last decades in the Netherlands, there has not been made a difference between the two. The only modern publication that speaks about both categories yet, is *De pijn van Prometheus (The pain of Prometheus)*, which was published in 1996. In his introduction "Prometheus and Pandora," Remieg Aerts differentiates between cultural criticism and cultural pessimism, as two ways of reflecting on contemporary culture that frequently accompany one another "Crisis, criticism and pessimism do not form a trinity, but still get used as interchangeable phenomena."²⁰ The fundamental difference between cultural critics and cultural pessimists lies in their views on the occurring cultural crisis: cultural critics can be moralists and hope they can contribute to more self-insight and positive changes than cultural pessimists, who are not necessarily alarmist.²¹ Cultural pessimism is more sombre and deterministic about culture: the problems it analyses can be caused by the nature of the culture itself, and decay is roughly inevitable.²² In Aerts's

¹⁸ Wesseling, 'Zoekt Prof. Huizinga eigenlijk niet zichzelf?' *Huizinga en de geest van de jaren dertig*, 29.

¹⁹ H.L. Wesseling, "From cultural historian to cultural critic: Johan Huizinga and the spirit of the 1930s," *European Review* 10/4 (2002): 485-499; 491.

²⁰ Remieg Aerts, "Prometheus en Pandora. Een inleiding tot cultuurkritiek en cultuurpessimisme," in *De pijn van Prometheus*, ed. Aerts & Van Berkel (Groningen: Historische uitgeverij, 1996), 31.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 34-35.

²² *Ibid.*, 38.

account, Spengler's *The Decline* is probably a textbook example of cultural pessimism in that decay is part of the essence of a culture, and its destruction is inescapable. On Huizinga, he states: "Huizinga's cultural criticism was not deterministic but does not give the impression that the author really believed in a [positive] turn."²³

Remarkable about Huizinga's rhetoric in his 1935 work is his attempt to order his historical observations within a conceptual framework of cultural progress. The shortcomings of modern society are both a result of historical processes that have been going on since antiquity (he perfected this analysis in *Homo Ludens*) — and at the same time of the belief in history as progress with positive outcomes from the nineteenth century and the first decade of the twentieth century, the thought that society could only improve by the cultural, political, and technological advancements of modernity. On Huizinga's account this belief in progress had disappeared in his own time, and in the preface of *Shadow* he already points out that most people are living in fear of the future, believing that total decay is inevitable. (He ends his preface by stating: "It would be curious if man could see in a curve how fast the word "progress" disappeared out of our discourse."²⁴)

Writing about contemporary times while continually using terms like "decay" and "puerilism" raises some questions about his former criticism on Spengler's anthropomorphic manner of structuring history. Spengler, as a prime example of the essence of twentieth-century cultural pessimistic thought, compares the decay of civilization with an organism in the last phase of its life. While cultural criticism is primarily about naming and analyzing the cultural, political, and intellectual problems of an age, cultural pessimism can be related to the judgement that a civilization will be torn down anyway. Transforming "puerilism" into a term to describe a stage of cultural decay could be associated with the Spenglerian way to speak about the quality of society in terms of health. *Shadow* is written like an elaboration on a medical examination, as indicated by its subtitle; "A diagnosis of the mental suffering of our age" ("Een diagnose van het geestelijk lijden van deze tijd.").

Jo Tollebeek, a Belgian historian who has studied Dutch cultural criticism, published an article about the popularization of medical terminology amongst historians and writers in the nineteenth and twentieth century as part of the volume *De zieke natie (The sick nation)* in 2002. In the end of the nineteenth century, Tollebeek argues, historians, and other humanities disciplines, felt the need to develop new, more "scientific" (i.e., empirical) ways to research their subjects. Although initially the historian acted more like a judge, critically interrogating sources as the representatives of the past; just as doctors broadened their focus from the diagnosis of the individual to the diagnosis of society as a whole, historians also shifted their perspective to diagnosing the collective.²⁵ Tollebeek quotes Henri Pirenne as a prime pioneering example of an historian who started describing societies as if they were living organisms, writing about "mass movements, whose evolution depended on the laws of vitalism, independent of individual tendencies."²⁶

Randolph Starn writes that the use of the concept of 'crisis' in historical writings is the oldest form of the medicalization of history and was already used in Classical Greek theatre and literature. Before the seventeenth century, according to Starn, it was often used to describe the condition of war. During the Enlightenment, 'crisis' became a concept to also explain political and economic challenges.²⁷ Starn agrees with Tollebeek that during the

²³ Ibid., 45.

²⁴ Johan Huizinga, *In de schaduw van morgen* (Leusden: ISVW 2009), 21.

²⁵ J. Tollebeek, "De stethoscoop van de historicus. Geschiedenis, cultuurkritiek en pathologie," in *De zieke natie*, ed. Tollebeek, Nys, De Smaele & Wils (Groningen: Historische uitgeverij, 2004), 159.

²⁶ Ibid., 159.

²⁷ Randolph R. Starn, "Historians and Crisis," *Past and Present* 52 (August 1971): 3-22; 4-5.

nineteenth century 'crisis' became a term that could be used by anybody who took a critical stance towards the cultural or philosophical condition of a country. Starn states that this form of criticism was originally connected to the writings of conservatives and anti-revolutionaries, because the idea of 'crisis' reminds the reader of a (natural) body that is teased by 'unnatural' or unsuitable intruders. He quotes anti-revolutionary Louis the Bonald, who compares the French revolution "to a terrible and salutary crisis by means of which nature roots out from the social body those vicious principle weakness of authority had allowed to creep in..." According to Starn, the concept of 'crisis' evolved from a specific term to call out a dramatic situation, to a popular phrase to express a feeling of general displeasure.²⁸

Tollebeek distinguishes the different uses of medical terminology amongst historians. Is a diagnosis permanent? Is a crisis fatal or does it stimulate changes of all sorts? He quotes Emile Littré's definitions from the *Dictionnaire de médecine* (1863 – 1869): 'a crisis can be beneficial, but in other cases, catastrophic.' Regarding the usage of the term in medical jargon and the deeper insight into the diagnosis of the 'crisis,' it is essential to have a more fundamental look at the tone and the contextualization of that very term. For a philosopher like Spengler, mostly characterized as a historical determinist, the state of crisis is connected to the culture-organism as getting ill or weak.²⁹ In Huizinga's later pessimistic works, namely *Shadow*, his essay *Nederlands Geestesmerk* and later *A violated world*, the seriousness of his diagnoses and his bitter tone clash with his brief nuances and pleas for a hopeful look towards the future. The final chapter of *Shadow*, about the prospects for the times to come, starts with the pessimistic words: "We composed an overview of critical symptoms a "diagnosis." Using the term "prognosis" for the following conclusions would be overly confident. We cannot look three steps ahead: our view is shrouded in gloom."³⁰ Another example of Huizinga's deterministic and pessimistic terminology: "(...) This [his diagnosis of the cultural state] evokes an image of unbearable overburden and of the enslavement of the mind. The technical perfection, and economic and political effectivity of our culture do not protect us from barbarism. (...) Barbarism, supported by these perfect forms, only becomes more tyrant and powerful."³¹ Huizinga not only diagnoses society altogether, but also problematizes the influence of 'masses' of uncivilized and uneducated people, as if they were threatening the collective.

Huizinga's plea for hope, which only covers a little part of his essay *In the Shadow* and appears within it as an abrupt change of mind, is based on the idea that in a deathly crisis, simultaneously, something new is given birth to. Although longing for things to be like the past 'is a natural thing to do,' he gives up hope for the old culture and sees that the rapid changes in all elements of society in his contemporary time can only bear a new culture and a new civilization and a new age built on the confluence of Latin, Germanic, Anglo-Saxon and Christian fate, but also on an understanding of the Islamic and Eastern cultures.³² Despite all of his deeply pessimistic outlooks, Huizinga still says that he views himself as a "cultural optimist" in a 1938-preface of *In the Shadow*.³³ In his 1921 critique of Spengler's *Decline*, he started to be hopeful for the future in more convincing ways.³⁴ Huizinga's son Leonhard said

²⁸ Ibid., 7.

²⁹ See, for instance, Gregory Swer, "The Revolt against Reason. Oswald Spengler and Violence as Cultural Preservative," *The Philosophical Journal of Conflict and Violence* vol.3, no.2 (2019): 122 – 148; 123.

³⁰ Huizinga, *In de schaduw van morgen*. 135.

³¹ Ibid., 137.

³² Ibid., 145.

³³ Johan Huizinga, *Verzamelde werken 7: Geschiedwetenschap en hedendaagsche cultuur* (Haarlem: Tjeenk Willink 1950), 313.

³⁴ Huizinga, "Twee worstelaars met den engel," 487.

of his memory of his father in the 1920s: “Everything still radiated hope and welfare. The war was over. There was a better and carefree future ahead.”³⁵ In contrast to Spengler, Huizinga still insists that the details of the future cannot be known through an exact schematic comparison to the past, but he too is certain about the fact that a time of endings had arrived.

Shadow immediately became a bestseller in the Netherlands; however, scholars were not as enthusiastic about it as the public. It took some months before the first comments appeared, presumably because it was not perceived as a work of cultural history. Huizinga broke with traditional conceptions of academic historical writing by comparing the present to the past, predicting the future and being opinionated about the ‘quality’ of his time. It was a work for the masses and less for academics, just as Spengler’s *The Decline* was widely read by the German public yet received little serious consideration from scholars.³⁶

In later reviews of his contemporaries on *Shadow*, Huizinga was accused of some the same errors he himself originally criticized *The Decline* for. One of the most critical remarks is by Pieter Geyl: “He *did* point to a road of escape from the threat of ruin. He did so, one suspects, more from a sense of obligation not to give way to despair than from the genuine conviction firmly rooted in his soul. It was a road, indeed, which to a sober eye like mine loses itself in metaphysical and illusionist mists.”³⁷ Geyl here referred to an earlier remark on *Shadow* by the poet Albert Verwey, who mainly problematized Huizinga’s lack of hope in the future. Furthermore, Geyl criticized the way Huizinga ‘clumped up’ examples of political decay from completely different regimes. Huizinga presents his readers dramatic events in Nazi-Germany, fascist Italy, and the Soviet-Union to illustrate the prospects of Western civilization, without explaining exactly why these dramatic examples in totalitarian states predict the prospect for the West as a whole.

Conclusion

In the 1930s, the son of a professor of Medicine started presenting himself as the doctor of Western culture, diagnosing modern culture as if it were a living thing suffering from illness. Although he initially criticized Spengler’s vitalist perception of culture, Huizinga later believed that the culture he admired so much was destined to die from this illness sooner rather than later. Even though Huizinga described himself as an optimist and called upon his readers to stay positive, this cry for hope was not built upon the belief that Western culture could in fact be saved or renewed — instead he believed that the Western world would experience the birth of a new culture.

Huizinga vehemently criticized *The Decline of the West* in his review in 1921. After that however, he kept referring to this work time and again and especially to Spengler’s role in the increasing popularity of the *Untergangsstimmung* amongst the masses. Although he never endorsed *The Decline*’s dramatic description of the course of history, Huizinga’s later thought indeed showed surprising similarities to that found in the work he criticized so mercilessly back in 1921. It was reflected in Huizinga’s conservative outlook, his cultural diagnoses, which were created by comparing the relatively ‘healthy’ past to the ‘sickly’ present, his deterministic ideas about the development of culture, and his vague and metaphysical ideas about the evolution of history in the future. The *grand seigneur* of Dutch historiography thus received

³⁵ Du Pree, *Johan Huizinga en de bezeten wereld*, 116.

³⁶ Frans Lantink, *Oswald Spengler oder die ‘Zweite Romantik’*. Der Untergang des Abendlandes, *ein intellektueller Roman zwischen Geschichte, Literatur und Politik* (PhD dissertation: Utrecht University, 1995), 13.

³⁷ Geyl, “Huizinga as Accuser of His Age,” 235.

something of a blow to his reputation after World War II, as Huizinga's own critique of Spengler's method was now also used against him by his own critics.

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