Unheard Conjectures:

Fokkema and Ibsch's Paradoxical Theory of Modernist Authors[1]

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In the history of literary theory in the Low Countries and even in Western Europe Douwe Fokkema and Elrud Ibsch occupy a prominent position. On different levels and at different institutions—Fokkema at the University of Utrecht (UU) and Ibsch at the Free University of Amsterdam (VU)—they helped establish literary theory as a scholarly discipline, following the impetus of important predecessors such as J.J.A. Mooij, Frank C. Maatje and Teun Van Dijk. At variance with the preceding generation, though, they concentrated less on textual analysis as such, that is to say on the then popular method of 'close reading'. Rather, in all their publications they stressed the intricate relations between literature and the society in which it is produced and in which it circulates. Moreover, Fokkema and Ibsch have been relentless advocates of literary theoretical currents that are informed by a desire for methodology and scientificity. They are mostly interested in the specific function of literature in particular societies, in literature as a particular form of social behavior that changes over the centuries and hence needs to be reconstrued and analyzed, from both a synchronic and a diachronic perspective. This particular focus can be deduced from the cover of the second corrected edition of their popular and influential *Theories of Literature in the Twentieth Century Literature* (1995). This cover lists what they consider the most important twentieth-century schools of literary theory: Russian Formalism, Structuralism, Reception Aesthetics and Semiotics. There is no mention of the chapter on Marxist literary theories. Apparently, and even though dialectic materialism has strong scientific claims that might have appealed to Fokkema and Ibsch, the ideological dimension of Marxist theory is too far removed from their own strongly liberal views. In the 1980s and 90s, in a climate of poststructuralist suspicion, they considered semiotics as a more serious model for literary studies than deconstruction, and they wholeheartedly subscribed to Umberto Eco's reservations

Canadian Review of Comparative Literature / Revue Canadienne de Littérature Comparée
CRCL SEPTEMBER 2012 SEPTEMBRE RCLC
0319–051x/12/39.3/277

about "over-interpretation". In their view, literary interpretation is a valid but personal endeavor, whereas literary theory as a scholarly activity is a communal affair based on shared concepts and methodologies that examine literature as a set of conventions and codes that function in a specific society.

The same issues are at stake in Fokkema and Ibsch's programmatic *Knowledge and Commitment* (2000). In this work they advocate a rigorous distinction between critical practices of dealing with literature and culture, i.e., the interpretation and evaluation of particular texts, on the one hand and literary theory as a scientific discipline, i.e., the research of literature and the literary text as a system or model, on the other hand. Fokkema and Ibsch tackle the problematic assumptions underlying both traditional and deconstructionist hermeneutic approaches and various versions of close reading. Theoretical approaches to literary texts must transcend individual responses and focus instead on the responses of readers from an empirical (cognitive-psychological and systems theoretical) perspective. 'Objectivity' becomes one of the key concepts in their view on literature as a scientific object.

Moreover, this strong scientific bias in order to establish literary studies as a genuine scientific discipline is linked to a project of globalization that Fokkema and Ibsch pursue not only in their writings but also in their commitment to international organizations such as the International Comparative Literature Association (ICLA), of which Fokkema was president from 1985 to 1988. Literary theory is by no means the privilege of Western intellectuals, rather it should become a global discipline that contributes to a better understanding of literature and culture, including traditions that are less well-known in the West. Fokkema's knowledge of and deep commitment to Russian and Chinese literary and cultural traditions runs through all of his work, from his PhD dissertation to his last book on utopian literature in China and the West.

In this light, it may seem surprising that Fokkema and Ibsch are quite adamant in what is arguably their magnum opus, *Modernist Conjectures: A Mainstream in European Literature 1910-1940*, that modernism is a quintessentially Western-European phenomenon.[2] *Modernist Conjectures*, on which we will mainly focus in our contribution, provides a useful overview of modernism from a strong methodological and theoretical stance. The original Dutch version of the book has been very influential in Dutch modernism studies, putting modernism, rather than the historical avant-garde and expressionism, firmly on the Dutch studies agenda.[3] By contrast, the English version of the book has suffered relative neglect in international modernism studies and received but a few, and rather negative, critiques, among others by Richard Sheppard and Perry Meisel.[4] Casting a new look on the book, we want to examine why Fokkema and Ibsch's conjectures have received so little attention in international literary studies. After a brief presentation of the book, we will focus on some of its theoretical and methodological principles. These are as consistent as they are paradoxical.

1. Corpus and Concept: Extending and Restricting Modernism

As early as in 1980 Douwe Fokkema published an article in *PTL*, a journal devoted to literary theory, in which he presented Virginia Woolf's *The Waves* as a prototype of modernist literature. This case study already contains the kernel of the much broader examination of European modernism that is *Modernist Conjectures*. The latter presents a systemic analysis of modernism, both as a literary-historical phenomenon in its own right and from the belated perspective of the ensuing post-modernist literary revolt. In fact, it can be read as the pendant of Fokkema's *Literary History, Modernism and Postmodernism*, based on a series of lectures he gave at Harvard, which was published in the same year (1984) as the Dutch version of the modernism book. The interaction between modernism and postmodernism that provides the underlying framework for *Modernist Conjectures* was not intended as a radically new view of modernism and the established canon; rather, Fokkema and Ibsch relied on existing research to substantiate their own take on the topic. Thus, they were able to combine a lot of secondary material issuing from different linguistic and literary traditions. In addition, they expanded the canon of high modernism by including a number of Dutch works and by establishing unexpected links between authors and oeuvres. Although some reviewers appreciated Fokkema and Ibsch's extension of the modernist canon and of "our customary sense of the bibliography of that period" (Meisel 853), their choice for a comparative perspective may have contributed to the relative neglect of the book in the Anglo-Saxon world. Some critics apparently felt that Fokkema and Ibsch did not offer enough new insights into the work of well-known authors. The same critics also tended to overlook the added value of combining a coherent theoretical perspective with a comparative approach. Sheppard and Meisel judge the conceptual view of modernism in *Modernist Conjectures* to be "excessively narrow" (Sheppard 336) or "excessively literal" (Meisel 853), and to be at odds with the actual corpus analyzed, that is to say, "a literature of ambiguity and undecidability that, by definition, resists the kind of 'decoding' by which they claim to organize texts that are bent on dismantling their own coherence." (Meisel 337). This critical view does not do justice to the originality of Fokkema's and Ibsch's work. To begin with, Fokkema and Ibsch deliberately highlight different national traditions so as to stress the international character of modernism (in contrast to the then mainstream Anglo-American use of the notion). Further, they chart modernism with reference to a systematic theoretical framework which is intended to conceptualize the rather intuitive notions issuing from readings of isolated modernist texts as until then customary not only in the Anglo-American tradition but also (and perhaps even more so) in other Western European scholarly traditions.

The opening chapter of *Modernist Conjectures* details the work's theoretical underpinnings. This is followed by ten case studies focusing on prominent English, French,

German, Italian and Dutch modernists. In a brief conclusion Fokkema and Ibsch somewhat awkwardly formulate some reservations against what they themselves perceive as "a tendency towards reductionism" in their approach (Sheppard 337). The case studies apply the theoretical framework sketched in the opening chapter to individual modernists, seeing them as manifestations of an overall scheme. But in their focus on the precise characteristics of authors and texts they also reintroduce traditional notions such as that of the literary oeuvre, the author, and his or her intentions. In this respect, the theoretical framework appears "flawed" (Sheppard 336) to scholars who are more interested in methodological or comparative issues. In a more positive view, however, the precarious balancing act between theory and case study is often executed with great care, providing the reader with abundant information as well as a workable model, that does convince in the chapters on Musil (Sheppard 337) and Mann (Meisel 853).

From the outset, Fokkema and Ibsch justify their comparative approach, which in their eyes will lead to a more adequate image of modernism. It not only broadens the picture but also illustrates how modernism was an international phenomenon consisting of various branches. The latter shows from the diversity of languages and national traditions that is preserved in the book, quite literally so in the bilingual quotations as well as in the focus on the distinctive meanings of the label "modernism" in different literatures. Nowhere, however, is this allowed to obscure the homogeneous general pattern the book aims to trace. By emphasizing coherence and common ground, Fokkema and Ibsch frame their research object much broader than is the case in a traditional approach where modernism is considered from a national perspective. However, this more encompassing perspective is limited by strong constraints that, on closer consideration, fundamentally impact the concept of modernism put forward in the book.

The main constraint is temporal. Fokkema and Ibsch limit themselves to what is commonly called the "mainstream" period of modernism, that is to say the interwar period. In their view, this is the period in which there is a modernist fit between literature, authors and readers and their specific society and history. One important consequence of this delineation is the exclusion of American literature: the US did not experience the First World War (but this also holds for the Netherlands and some other European countries), nor did it participate in avant-garde movements in the following decades (17). However, the authors are aware that some form of American modernism did exist, but they see it as primarily a post-war phenomenon, with authors such as Bellow, Malamud and especially Nabokov, who is obviously also a border figure between Europe and the US and between modernism and postmodernism. Not only is their work temporarily later than European modernism, it is also very much associated with the American "lifeworld" (18). Due to the "interference of autochthonous literary, cultural and social conventions," American modernism is different in kind. Most importantly, the American modernists lack the attitude of "detached intellectualism" characteristic of their European counterparts, even

if their works do display irony and skepticism and "reserved observation". Similar arguments—particularly the stifling effect of Stalinism on literary innovation—are evoked to justify the absence of Russian authors.

A second constraint has to do with frames or terminology. Not all national literatures use the term "modernism," or, when the term is used, it does not always cover the same phenomenon. For instance, in French literature the notion "modern" is commonly used to encompass all literature from Baudelaire onwards, while "modernist" is not a common literary-historiographical concept to characterize interwar literature. Indeed, most scholars of French literature would be surprised to see the 'foreign' notion of modernism applied to their own canon. They would probably even be shocked to see Gide labeled a modernist alongside Proust, as in French literary histories these two are usually represented as radical antagonists. The inclusion of both in *Modernist Conjectures* becomes possible because Fokkema and Ibsch let their theoretical construct of "modernism" prevail over the actual positioning of authors within their national tradition. This enables Fokkema and Ibsch to discern modernist tendencies all over Western Europe, but this overall view—which is clearly based on an Anglo-American model—inevitably blurs the national constellation of this same corpus.

Fokkema and Ibsch's third constraint is linguistic. Russian authors such as Jurij Olesa and Evgenij Zamjatin, or Spanish Ultraísmo, are not included because Fokkema and Ibsch have no first-hand knowledge of the languages concerned. However, this apparent restrictive principle allows them to include less well-known Dutch authors that have an international potential. Thus, for instance, Dutch author Charles Du Perron, an important author in the Netherlands, part of his life worked in Paris, where he was a close friend of André Malraux's, who even dedicated his famous *La Condition Humaine* to him.[5] One small language area is thus selected on arbitrary grounds, whereas others are not presented at all.

Fokkema and Ibsch depict an international modernism as a kind of general cognitive category that is at the same time very narrowly circumscribed and limited to a small number of authors and texts that represent the "core" of modernism (22-23). A closer look, however, reveals that this international modernism is temporally, thematically and stylistically primarily modeled after the Anglo-American example. The English orientation of "high modernism" is confirmed by the overall structure of the volume. Rather than opting for a chronological or alphabetic order, the first chapters focus on 'English' literary canonicals, i.e., James Joyce, T.S. Eliot and Virginia Woolf. These chapters set the tone. All subsequent chapters will be read in relation to their example. The same holds for the very concept of literary modernism, which is largely modeled on the English canon. However, although Fokkema and Ibsch's choice reflects their own intellectual preference for canonical authors of 'high modernism', one may wonder whether the 'best' authors of a current are also the most representative ones. The canonized vision of modernism has been criticized recently, because of the normative and reductive aura that it projects (e.g., Van Alphen 2005:

13). Many modernist scholars today advocate a broader conception of literature, in which minor or secondary authors or journals are also studied in order to get a more adequate and polyvalent perspective on the current as a more complex force field. Such a broader perspective enables us, for instance, to trace the influence of modernist characteristics in popular literature, such as the novels by Graham Greene. In fact, this dissemination of modernist ideas and techniques in a non-systematic and non-integrated way has definitely contributed to the rapid spread of modernist literature as the most influential model.

2. Theory and Method: Analyzing the Modernist Code

Fokkema and Ibsch's study stands out from the bulk of modernist studies mostly on methodological and theoretical grounds. This aspect of the book has been harshly criticized, for instance by Meisel, who feels that the book's "fashionable theoretical vocabulary" clashes with the conventional, if not traditional insights that are being recycled (Meisel 853). It is important to realize that Fokkema and Ibsch's plea for a scientific orientation of their project, that will be further elaborated in *Knowledge and Commitment*, is out of tune with literary deconstruction's fierce critique of scientificity as a norm and ideal for the human sciences. The questions of corpus selection and method of analysis extensively treated in the first chapters are by no means byproducts of scholarly research, things to be hastily glossed over. Rather, they ensure the scientific validity of the research results. An unambiguous research questionnaire, a coherent set of texts to be analyzed, and a straightforward method that ensures objectivity (or at least verifiability) and homogeneity, are needed in order to arrive at generalizable conclusions. Fokkema and Ibsch's idea of "scientificity" is to a high degree influenced by the behaviorial sciences. They frequently talk about research "hypotheses" that should be formulated in unambiguous terms, so that they can be tested accordingly. The scientific jargon is not restricted to isolated words and phrases; it runs through the book. Theory is not only necessary to analyze particular cases; as with the "hard" sciences it even allows the researcher to make predictions of hitherto unobserved phenomena:

> Although, in agreement with Mukarovský, we assume that any text can have an aesthetic function, it cannot be denied that certain texts have a greater chance than other texts to produce an aesthetic effect among a particular group of readers. Apparently there is a correlation between the quality of certain texts and the aesthetic effect they produce among a particular reading public in a particular situation. We might almost posit that, if we know both the text and the disposition of readers, it is possible to predict with a considerable degree of accuracy whether they will consider a text to be aesthetic. (6)

In Fokkema and Ibsch's view, literature cannot be disconnected from history, society

and the reading public. This entails that it is a historical category susceptible to fluctuations and evolutions that can be measured by looking at the responses of readers. With reader-response criticism, Fokkema and Ibsch share the idea that "surprise" or the subversion of reader's expectations is the motor of historical changes in literature. Although they distinguish between sociologically different types of readership, their concept of the latter is rather abstract, and in practice they only focus on the direct addressees of the texts, the contemporary modernist readers, via diaries and critiques. Although changes in the literary canon occur through the readers' changing perceptions of literature, the latter is by no means reduced to a purely social practice. Quite the contrary: Fokkema and Ibsch are at the same time staunch defenders of the intrinsic characteristics and value of literature. This enables them to study the evolution of literature, and the establishment of modernism, as a mainstream practice by focusing on the literary texts themselves, as global manifestations of a more general current, and on the basis of "objective" scientific categories. In this respect, Fokkema and Ibsch still advocate a rather classical view on the importance of canonical texts. As a consequence their (re)construction of readers is normative rather than the description of an actual readership: their reader is inevitably a 'good reader', who grasps the innovative and complex character of modernist texts, and who is able to analyze them according to their encoding principles.

A strict methodological approach allows researchers to set up systematic and problem-oriented rather than case-bound research into literary texts that yields conclusions that can be controlled and further tested by other scholars. This should ultimately result in verifiable insights in the dynamics of modern literature. In order to combine textual analysis and a social perspective on literature as an institutionalized practice, Fokkema and Ibsch opt for a communicative approach to literature that can also be called functionalist. It combines insights from formalism and semiotics. This perspective is paradoxically the most innovative and at the same time the most ignored aspect of their work. Following Jurij Lotman and Umberto Eco, they see literature as a secondary modeling system. Literature takes ordinary language, the primary modeling system, as its starting point and transforms it into literary language. Fokkema and Ibsch foreground the notion of literary codes: these define the aspects of a literary text that are mandatory or at least prominent on the one hand and forbidden or superfluous on the other hand in particular types of literature. Codes cannot be regarded as merely intratextual phenomena, they are constitutive principles in artistic communication.

The notion of code has several advantages. To begin with, it indicates how literary language can be distinguished from ordinary language. Even when a literary work seemingly adopts communicative language, this is still a functional re-use according to the principle of secondary modeling. The aim of modernism was to found a proper and distinct literary language, therefore its code demanded conscious attempts to increase the distance between literary language and ordinary language. However, Fokkema and Ibsch refuse a mere norm-deviation dichotomy, because of the dif-

ficulty to define the exact status of norms. Second, following the Russian formalists and the Prague structuralists, they emphasize the tension between automatization and de-automatization. What is at one point considered deviant may in a very short while become normalized and even normative in literature (30). Time and again, they stress that it is better to speak of "particular selections", taken from a virtually unlimited set of possibilities. Although codes do not reveal everything, they enable scholars to distinguish the conventions of a particular era and to contrast them to earlier and later writing practices. Despite their individual signature, literary texts are not idiosyncratic events. Literature is governed by common practices and by conventions that have proven their efficacy for writers, literary mediators and readers. These conventions contribute to an optimal processing of literature as a cultural product. Codes serve to enhance the success of literature because they reduce the complexity of a literary work and help to discern patterns and topoi in otherwise irreducible texts.

Codes and coding (which encompasses both encoding and decoding) are then combined with Charles C. Morris's classical triad of syntax, semantics and pragmatics. By examining the interaction between syntactic, semantic and pragmatic components of the modernist code, the principles of literary modernism can be laid bare. *Modernist Conjectures* offers only general suggestions about the pragmatic dimension of the modernist code. A thorough examination of the relation between literary signs and participants would involve a social and cultural reconstruction of modernist practice that is beyond the scope of the volume. Moreover, it would probably have endangered the clear and rather homogeneous picture of modernism as a social practice which the authors want to propagate. However, Fokkema and Ibsch do point out that the historical reading circle of modernist texts—the readers primarily intended to read and discuss these "deviant" texts—was fairly small and homogeneous. This explains the clear profile of the current but at the same time it becomes possible to show the divergences and inconsistencies between authors by referring to the discrepancy between the literary and the non-literary context. Gide's notion of depersonalization, for instance, is considered a positive characteristic in his novels, but is criticized in his journalistic account of the USSR:

> 'Dépersonnalisation' in the latter quotation must be interpreted by means of an ideological or sociological code which attributes a negative connotation to the term. Evidently, *Retour de l'U.R.S.S.* should be read not as a literary text, but as political report. The Modernist code is not applicable here. (31-32)

Recent scholarship on authorship has focused a lot on this kind of authorial positioning. Jerôme Meizoz's term "authorial posture", to indicate the author's image based on discursive and non-discursive sources, is a useful tool to further pursue this line of research.

The syntactic and semantic components of the modernist code receive most attention. As far as the first, syntactic component of the modernist code, i.e., the relation

between the different parts of the textual sign, is concerned, Fokkema and Ibsch argue that modernism is a matter of novel combinations and selecting possibilities inherent in the logic of language and of literature rather than a transgression or violation of those principles. Syntagmatically speaking, modernist texts are characterized by the prevalence of "uncertainty". This feature is found on several levels: the relation between narrator and characters, the status of the narrator and the status of the novel as an established literary genre intended to convey general truths and convictions. Similar effects are found on the level of the narrated events. Characters are no longer constrained or determined by their environment or by natural causality. This results in a destabilization of established narrative schemata. Characters may for instance act in unpredictable, radically individualist ways, or beginnings and endings of narratives are no longer causally connected. As a result, the literary text becomes complex and "underdetermined". All components are ultimately "open", which demands a lot of extra effort (and possibly causes frustration) from the reader. The semantic organization of the text is linked to the worldview and subjecthood thematized in modernist literature. The semantic organization of modernist texts consists of "several concentric circles": the centre is constituted by words related to "awareness" or "consciousness", the second field is related to "detachment" and the third to "observation" or "perception" (43). Not only do these circles represent a broadening of the semantic universe, they can also be combined in various ways, e.g., "intelligence" can be regarded as a combination of "consciousness" and "detachment", whereas "experiment" combines "consciousness", "detachment" and "observation" (44). These specific modernist semantic fields must subsequently be confronted with other semantic fields that have disappeared or have been reassigned to a neutral or marginal position, e.g. religion and nature—essential to the symbolist code, or industrial production and agriculture from the realist code.

3. Paradoxes and Conjectures

Although the idea of modernism as a specific semiotic code is the most original contribution Fokkema and Ibsch made to the field of modernist studies, it failed to convince critics at the time. According to Meisel, "(t)he 'syntactic' and 'semantic' decodings upon which they claim to embark are no more than catalogues of recurrent sentence structure and shared vocabularies, and their analyses of most of the novels they study are little more than plot summaries" (Meisel 853). From a contemporary perspective, however, their work prefigures recent developments in the research of lexical, syntactic and semantic patterns that are now made possible through advanced computer techniques and the availability of large textual corpuses. Still, there are some profound paradoxes in *Modernist Conjectures* caused by the co-occurrence of very different perspectives and methods that are not adequately connected.

First of all, the idea of a code implies a view of communication in which the processes of encoding and decoding remain crucial for the functioning of the code. This social embedding is the Leitmotiv of *Modernist Conjectures*. Yet, in the analyses these contextual factors are mostly left out. They function in the background and are not dealt with in any systematic way. This results in a sometimes ambivalent representation of the research. On the one hand, Fokkema and Ibsch provide us with meticulous analyses of particular themes and motives in a restricted number of texts that invariably demonstrate their "modernist" character. On the other hand, however, these textual characteristics are usually "affirmed" by the authorial intentions. In almost all the chapters of the book, the final word on a work rests with the author, who seems self-conscious about his or her literary project. Any attempt to undermine or question these explicit statements—for instance by a critical reading of them—is avoided. In this respect, the idea of decoding as a rather straightforward way of "unpacking" meanings present in a text that are to a certain extent independent of individual characteristics or even the moment of publication, remains dominant. This explains why Fokkema and Ibsch hold on to the relative objectivity of their results, instead of limiting their research to the mere reconstruction of actual readers' responses. Text and (biographical and historical) context thus remain two sides of the same coin, so to speak. This view on the reading process is intended to counter the deconstructionist idea of 'anything goes', but it inevitably underestimates the dynamic and often rather idiosyncratic dimension of reading, even by experienced readers. Reading Gide after Proust and Joyce will, for instance, entail 'other' interpretations than reading Gide after Stendhal or Dickens.

A second paradox is generated by the semantic analysis as a heuristic tool for textual analysis. On the one hand, Fokkema and Ibsch contribute to a better understanding of the mechanisms underlying Western-European modernism by focusing on the detailed textual manifestation of general modernist themes. The detailed comments on particular authors in some chapters are the most inspiring part of the book and "provide many valuable and stimulating insights into a range of canonical novels" (Sheppard 336). On the other hand, the precise status of the modernist lexicon remains undetermined in some crucial respects. First of all, it is unclear how the categories of consciousness, detachment and observation (and, by implication, their counterparts, religion, nature and industrial production) can be defined and delimited. Are these categories metalingual, belonging to the discourse of scholarship and do they coincide with their "ordinary" or primary meaning, or do they convey other meanings and connotations? How are the overall concepts related to the discursive elements that realize these general themes in specific contexts? Are all the elements of this lexicon context-independent or do they on the contrary derive from the literary context in which the words function? In this respect, ideas concerning the nature and the dynamics of concepts from cognitive psychology and cognitive linguistics might prove very stimulating and provocative. Their integration in the framework laid out by Fokkema and Ibsch may well result in a more refined conceptualization better

suited to analyze literature as a communicative social process.

Fokkema and Ibsch sometimes tend to conflate the thematic and the semantic levels. In their analyses they are not always consistent in their own use of terms. New meanings and new keywords pop up, depending on the language and the themes proper to the authors and literary traditions discussed, revealing a discrepancy between the analyses and the general model proposed, and undermining the very ideal of an unambiguous metalanguage. This kind of questions leads to the problem of literary language as such. The idea of literature as a secondary modeling system implies that the meaning of words as used in literature is somehow "different" from non-literary uses, or at least that some kind of distinction can or should be made. A similar argument can be and has been made—around the time of *Modernist Conjectures*—for the distinction between ordinary language and scientific terminology. Precisely these methodological and theoretical problems are underestimated by Fokkema and Ibsch. Even in their modesty about their approach in the conclusion, they never really question their own assumptions:

> These and other assumptions, together with a set of beliefs about history and human destiny, frame our historical perspective. Although these assumptions have been partly confirmed by systematic research and seem quite plausible, they certainly need further testing and possibly correction. (323)

A third paradox in the book is that between the functionalist perspective and the traditional conceptions of author and text. Not only is it rather strange that authors are used as the ordering principle of a book that wants to define modernism as a code. A glance at the table of contents moreover reveals great divergences between the chapters: most of the chapters are divided into subchapters, with subtitles that sometimes refer to themes, sometimes to works that are treated, except for those on Valéry Larbaud and Italo Svevo that have no subtitles at all. These differences cannot simply be accounted for by the long writing process of the book; rather they are linked to the specificity of the oeuvre. Although Fokkema and Ibsch propose a general model to chart the macrostructure of literature, they remain fundamentally attached to the individual talent of authors and to the competence, not to say intelligence, of readers to recognize and value this originality. In this respect, it does not come as a surprise that they foreground authors and focus on the highlights of their oeuvres. The corpus under consideration is not a mere reflection or manifestation of modernism, rather it is the other way round: "we tried to find the core of Modernism and preferred the initiators rather than the later writers" (22). Major authors constitute and construct modernism in literature as a current. Moreover, the individuality of writers is linked to their intentional and conscious efforts, as is testified by remarks in conversations or letters to other modernist colleagues or by a biographical "turn" in their literary career.

No wonder, then, that minor oeuvres and authors are excluded from this pantheon and that the modernist heritage is not taken into consideration—this is not necessary

because the core of modernism is at the same time its summit, its beginning and its end. The exclusive canon of typical and ideal modernist authors and works also makes it possible to see the authors not as a group, adhering to a manifesto, but as a historical constellation of fellow travelers that share a certain unease with the literary tradition. In practice, this gives rise to divergent forms and writings and individual thematic accents. In other words, authors and the syntactic and semantic realization of the modernist codes do not run parallel. Even within the oeuvre of an author, different positions can be found. This heightens the familiar character of the author profiles in the book and makes it possible to compare English modernism with similar movements in smaller countries, such as the Netherlands, on the one hand, and to introduce the notion in areas where it was not explicitly used, e.g., in France, on the other hand. Even more drastically, it allows Fokkema and Ibsch to describe authors who are not usually connected, like Gide, Proust, Mann and Musil, as representatives of the modernist code according to similar schemata.

4. Concluding remarks

Modernist Conjectures can be read as a research program that, for all its flaws, remains nonetheless complex and stimulating. Even if today we no longer agree with some of the presuppositions underlying *Modernist Conjectures*, which is not only heavily indebted to Russian formalism and semiotics but also marked by a reverence for a very narrow concept of science and intelligence that strikes us as somewhat naïve and elitist, the project is much less rigid in practice and still has considerable merits for (re)readers today. In a first stage, a more comprehensive investigation of modernism may be realized by opening up the corpus of established authors. The same ideas could be applied to other authors in order to reconstruct the vicissitudes of modernist writing, its growing popularity and the various strategies of adaptation and vulgarization that ensued. In a second stage, adjacent currents such as symbolism and postmodernism could be mapped in similar ways, focusing on the foregrounding and fading of elements of the code. Such a project could ultimately result in a historiography of modern literature, seen not only in terms of conflicting codes but also of partial continuities and reinterpretations of established traditions. Literature and literary language would in this perspective no longer be seen as mere deviations or transgressions, but also as alternative realizations of possibilities. The way in which Fokkema and Ibsch describe literary modernism as a integrated set of characteristics and techniques—rather than as a purely intuitive and atomistic reading experience—certainly offers a first productive frame of reference to formulate such broad research questions.

In one of his last texts Douwe Fokkema (2009) discusses some of what he calls the "loose ends" of literary theory of the past century: questions that once generated very interesting research but that have disappeared from the agenda in recent

years. Fokkema's desire is still to "approach the secret of the fact that we recognize literature and the even more mysterious fact that we write literature" via scientific, i.e., empirical methods (Fokkema 2009: 42, our trans.). The loose ends of literature constitute the basis for a research program that comes remarkably close to that of *Modernist Conjectures*. First of all, the formalist definition of literarity, literary language as a deviant form of language use, secondly, intertextuality as the motor of literary dynamics and thirdly, the notion of genre as a set of conventions or code that is necessary to understand but also to innovate literary forms. In this late text, Fokkema highlights the stakes of his research program, which does not merely aim at knowledge per se, but also at commitment. The study and teaching of literature is necessary because it can enlighten us and help us debunk ideology:

> The literary-linguistic research must take into account differences in culture and education, and will initially have to limit itself to a limited corpus of texts and a closed group of readers. However, these conditions notwithstanding, the core of the hypothesis remains remarkably intact: surprising language use undermines rusted ways of thinking. Of the status and effect of striking language use we would like to know more in order to fight ideological rigidity with all the more vigor. (Fokkema 2009: 44, our trans.)

Fokkema positions himself as a "moderate conventionalist" and the notion of code has made way for convention and genre as prototype, but the reasoning is still that of *Modernist Conjectures*. The core and code of literature, whether it resides in a specific form of language use or genre conventions, can and must be discovered in order to transmit it to future readers across cultures and to keep literature alive. The reason for this is literature's intrinsic value: by innovating language, it keeps thinking fresh and sharpens language as crucial critical instrument.

Fokkema is motivated by a profound belief both in the powers of literature and of the human intellect. One of the many paradoxes of his conception of literature is that his deep admiration for the individual genius of Great Authors is not based on the romantic myth of originality and creativity, but on a razor sharp, detached intellect that allows them to formulate fundamental hypotheses about language, the world and about their own craft:

> The Modernist writer and their readers are intellectuals, and the purely intellectual consideration of their arguments is their highest priority. (23)

Would it be one step too far to state that this view of the modernist author is also modeled on Fokkema and Ibsch's ideal of the literary scholar and the intellectual as a detached, hyper-reflexive observer *tout court*? Like the modernist literature they analyze, their own theoretical practice is more marked by paradox and uncertainty than their belief in scientific accuracy would allow them, but this is perhaps not so much a flaw as a sign of humanness. In this respect their view on literature and the profound importance of reading may be linked to certain currents in cognitive literary theory and in ethical criticism.

This brings us, finally, to the English title of *Modernist Conjectures*. Modernism is not just a mainstream in European literature, it is perhaps the most important current for Fokkema and Ibsch because it joins innovative formal innovation and a strong detached intelligence. Modernism was so powerful and is still so fascinating because it was a bulwark against the dangerous totalitarian forces that were threatening to destroy Europe at the time. The conjectures of modernism about the world and the human condition may have been individual hypotheses, in a realm that is traditionally regarded as detached from society, but Fokkema and Ibsch show that literature not only reflects society but also has something unique to offer to it. So far, the first decades of the twenty-first century have been marked by profound crises, both politically and economically, and we are faced with a world in transition and uncertainty. With and in honor of Douwe Fokkema and Elrud Ibsch we may continue to hope that literature and literary theory will maintain its functions of keeping language and thinking on the edge.

Notes

1. This text originated in the framework of the University of Leuven GOA research project MDRN, which aims to analyse the dynamics of literature in Western Europe in the first half of the twentieth century. Our research has been funded by the University of Leuven and the Fund of Scientific Research Flanders (FWO). We would like to dedicate this text to our mentor and friend Hendrik van Gorp, who is the missing link between the authors of the present article and the work of Douwe Fokkema and Elrud Ibsch.

2. The Dutch version of the book was published in 1984, the English version was published by Hurst & Co in 1987.

3. See, for instance, Ernst Van Alphen, Christine Van Boheemen-Saaf and Hans Van Stralen, who at various moments enter into dialogue and discussion with Fokkema and Ibsch.

4. However, Sheppard did refer to Fokkema and Ibsch's book in his later works on European Modernism (see, for instance, Sheppard 1993 and 2000).

5. In the Dutch version of the book, there was an additional chapter on the Dutch female author Carry Van Bruggen.

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