Spectres of Modernism: 
Authorship, Reception and Intention in 
Witter Bynner and Arthur Davison Ficke’s 
*Spectra Hoax*

A thesis presented 

by 

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Abstract

This thesis draws from a range of primary materials relating to the Spectric School, a hoax poetry movement concocted in 1916 by poets Witter Bynner and Arthur Davison Ficke, to reconcile the movement’s relationship to the backdrop of modernist print culture. Specifically, it argues that Bynner and Ficke exploited a breakdown of discourses surrounding modernist conceptions of authorship, identity, and intention in their construction of the hoax movement. Additionally, this thesis considers the hoax alongside contemporary appraisals of the movement, and argues that the hoaxers’ subversion of what it meant to be an author exposes a growing disjunction during the modernist period between a culture of reviewing and modernist conceptions of authorship. Finally, this thesis considers Bynner and Ficke’s use of a hoax movement as a medium to further their poetic aims and avers that the hoaxers’ retrospective recasting of their motives alongside the development of the hoax complicate current critical valuations of the movement. Through considering Bynner and Ficke’s recasting of poetic intention, I challenge readings of the hoax that interpret it as having had a clear didactic purpose in parodying modernist poetry, and instead argue that the Spectra Hoax serves as an interface of meanings that complicates attempts to inscribe clear notions of authenticity, authorship and intentionality onto it.
Acknowledgements

I first became interested in the Spectra Hoax indirectly through my supervisor, Dr. Sarah Balkin, who suggested the *Little Review* as an insightful object of analysis for a thesis. Struck by something akin to Derrida’s archive fever, I made my way to the State Library of Victoria where I requested all twelve volumes of the *Little Review* to scour for things of interest. In it, I came across allusions to Witter Bynner and the Spectric School, and these initial sparks of interest led me to structure my thesis around the hoax movement.

My research regarding the Spectra Hoax was greatly augmented by a scholarship grant provided to me by the H.B. Higgins Poetry Scholarship, which allowed me to undertake a research trip in June 2017 to the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library to view the Arthur Davison Ficke Papers. This gave me the opportunity to view first-hand accounts of the movement that Ficke’s wife, Gladys Brown Ficke, had carefully archived alongside accounts of the movement by both Witter Bynner and Ficke. This thesis would not have taken shape the way it did were it not for the scholarship, and for that I am very grateful. My thanks go to Moira Fitzgerald for her help in making me feel welcome at the Beinecke, and for providing photographs of me undertaking my archival research, and to Anne Maxwell and Sarah Balkin for writing letters of commendation that assisted me in securing the H.B. Higgins Scholarship.

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Introduction: The Spectra Hoax and the Modernist Avant-Garde

The publication in Autumn 1916 of Spectra: A Book of Poetic Experiments, a volume of hoax poetry notoriously conceived by poets Witter Bynner and Arthur Davison Ficke, marked the birth of the Spectric School and was met ‘with a success that neither [of the authors] … had envisaged’.\(^1\) Published under the pseudonyms Emanuel Morgan and Anne Knish respectively, the book, populated by forty-six poems each assigned seemingly arbitrary Opus numbers and possessing a strange, seemingly amateurish cover,\(^2\) quickly attracted attention due to the unusual style of the text and the apparent foreignness of its two initial contributors. Indeed, as William Jay Smith chronicles in his account of the hoax, American publications ranging from the St. Louis Post-Dispatch to the Philadelphia Public Ledger caught wind of the original Spectra book and, despite mixed reviews, the strange identities of its creators combined with the peremptory, illuminative style of the book together conspired to gradually accumulate ‘more and more adherents [to the Spectric School] during the … next year and a half’, the course of the hoax.\(^3\) Most significantly, a third Spectrist poet, Marjorie Allen Seiffert, writing under the pseudonym Elijah Hay, joined the Spectric School soon after its inception in time to contribute to a special edition of Others dedicated wholly to the Spectric school in January 1917.\(^4\) In addition to this, some of Bynner, Seiffert’s and Ficke’s hoax poems (including a number of new poems) were published in a number of prominent modernist little magazines including The Little Review, Poetry, and Reedy’s Mirror, giving the movement ‘the seal of approval … of the American poetic renaissance’.\(^5\)

Perhaps regrettably, however, the revelation that the Spectric School was a hoax poetry movement came in April 1918, when, while giving a poetry lecture at the University of Wisconsin, Witter Bynner was challenged by a young professor who ‘accused the Spectric School of being a hoax’.\(^6\) Bynner did not deny the professor’s accusations, meaning that, in Suzanne Churchill’s words, ‘Bynner and Ficke’s public hints and private confessions’ that the

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\(^3\) Smith, The Spectra Hoax.


\(^5\) Smith, The Spectra Hoax, p.11.

movement was a hoax were confirmed.\textsuperscript{7} Churchill’s analysis of the Spectra Hoax reflects recent efforts in the sphere of modernist studies to challenge previously accepted distinctions between “high” and “low” modernisms, a divide criticised by Lawrence Rainey as ‘inadequate to account for the growing complexity of cultural exchange and circulation in modern society’.\textsuperscript{8} Building on this shift in conceptualisation of the modernist period, Douglas Mao and Rebecca Walkowitz have recently advocated the value of studying ‘bad modernisms’, since modernist works that fall outside normative frameworks of critical evaluation possess the potential of highlighting how ‘badness is relative and contextual’, contingent on the forces of a market that continues to undermine its value to the modernist canon.\textsuperscript{9}

Despite this recent critical revaluation of modernist works, however, literary forgeries have so far garnered little attention. As Kenneth Ruthven identifies, this is because the common consensus among critics is ‘that fake literature is an aberration best ignored’, proposing that because of this critical disapproval of ‘spurious works published inadvertently’, literary forgeries only become acknowledged ‘if’ serious' writing is affected by them.\textsuperscript{10} This is due to the inheritance of a ‘print culture which developed and naturalised a copyright law that privileges origins, authorship and authenticity’ and therefore disregards any attempts to undermine these values.\textsuperscript{11} Critical attempts to analyse Bynner and Ficke’s hoax poetry are further problematised by the fact that their poems are intended as hoaxes. Through framing their poems in this way, the hoaxers present a methodological challenge for the critic, since readings that dislocate the hoaxers’ poems from the context within which they were written risk becoming deceived by a narrative that continues to read parodic texts as confined to a straightforward didactic aim. This is a problem identified by Linda Hutcheon in \textit{A Theory of Parody}, who argues that ‘parody in the twentieth century has gone beyond this conservative function of keeping modishness in line’.\textsuperscript{12} Rather, Hutcheon identifies how, through functioning as a hermeneutic construction that informs inter-art discourse by providing a revaluation of past works through their parody, where ‘parody’s “target” text is always … another form of coded discourse’, parody possesses the ability to function not only ‘as a conservative

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{7} Ibid. p.37.
\item \textsuperscript{9} Douglas Mao and Rebecca L. Walkowitz, eds., \textit{Bad Modernisms} (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006). p.9.
\item \textsuperscript{11} Ibid. p.196.
\end{itemize}
force in both retaining and mocking other aesthetic forms’, but also has the potential to create ‘new syntheses’ within the relational system of aesthetic valuation.\textsuperscript{13} The Spectra Hoax is a text that continues to suffer from being characterised as a conservative critique of modernist poetry, since categorising the hoax as such is to curtail its potential for reformulating relationships between the hoax and the modernist avant-garde.

Indeed, a number of writings and reviews, many of them carefully archived by Arthur Davison Ficke’s wife, Gladys Brown Ficke, and stored in the Arthur Davison Ficke Papers at the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, have so far garnered little critical attention but provide an important context to understanding the relationship between the private environment within which the Spectric School was conceived and the public valuation of the movement itself.\textsuperscript{14} In June 2017, I undertook a research trip to the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library to research the Spectra Hoax. While exploring the archive, I realised that up until now, these sources have remained either unacknowledged, miscontextualised, or misrepresented by previous critics, who tend to treat them as fragments from which to construct a historical narrative of the hoax movement, which they see as having had a strictly didactic purpose. Through this thesis, I intend to present these sources instead as sites of contestation that confront assumptions regarding the Spectra Hoax, with contemporaneous reviews of the movement providing important insights into the ways in which Bynner and Ficke took advantage of the gap between the private, hermetic environment within which the hoax was conceived and the public sphere of modernist valuation in order to construct their hoax movement.

By reconciling the Spectra Hoax within its cultural context, I hope to redirect analysis towards an examination of the forces underlying its reception in order to demonstrate how Bynner and Ficke took advantage of a growing divide between the hoax and a culture of reviewing in the construction of their movement. This divide is reflected in Bynner’s retrospective account of the movement, who outlines how the hoax was conceived ‘with only three persons in the secret’, with the majority of the poems written within ‘ten days’ of meeting Ficke at a hotel room in Davenport, Iowa.\textsuperscript{15} Smith similarly writes how the hoaxers ‘extracted

\begin{itemize}
    \item \textsuperscript{13} Ibid. pp.16-20.
\end{itemize}
the whole of Spectric philosophy’ from this collaboration,\textsuperscript{16} and Churchill goes so far as speculating ‘about the sexual tensions’ attending this ‘intense, alcohol-laced’ moment.\textsuperscript{17} The genesis of the hoax movement, therefore, occurred entirely within the private environment of the hotel room, giving the hoaxers complete control over the initial construction of the movement. Despite the apparent freedom Bynner and Ficke had in composing the hoax movement, however, the closed environment within which the hoax was created was always at risk of becoming disrupted, implicating the hoaxers in a number of incidents where they came close to being found out as the perpetrators of the hoax. Smith writes how ‘the spectres which [the hoaxers] had loosed upon the air were to haunt them on more than one public occasion’, recounting a moment when, at a luncheon with Theodore Roosevelt’s sister Corinne Roosevelt Robinson, Bynner was asked to read selections from \textit{Spectra} while straining ‘every muscle to keep a straight face’.\textsuperscript{18} In another incident, Smith recounts a moment when a brigadier general ‘asked Ficke if he supposed the book to be genuine or a hoax’ and, following Ficke’s fabricated speculation that the movement was a hoax, proceeded to congratulate Ficke for his acumen, declaring that the brigadier general himself was Anne Knish.\textsuperscript{19} According to Smith, ‘Arthur Ficke understandably described this encounter as one of “the most deliriously happy hours I have ever spent”’.\textsuperscript{20}

One would assume that, faced with the threat of exposure, Bynner and Ficke would respond with caution. If we are to take Smith at his word, however, what these accounts reveal is the complete opposite, with the hoaxers revelling in the possibility, and consequent failure, of the Spectric School becoming revealed as a hoax movement. This is because, as Linda Hutcheon identifies in her work on adaptation, the pleasure of refunctioning a text comes from ‘repetition with variation, from the comfort of ritual combined with the piquancy of surprise’, inscribing ‘recognition and remembrance’ on a text while flaunting the risk of exposure by modifying it.\textsuperscript{21} In the case of the Spectra Hoax, the recoding of the movements Bynner and Ficke were parodying entailed a risk of transgression, meaning that the pleasure Bynner and Ficke received from perpetrating the hoax movement came from their knowledge of its status.

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{16} Smith, \textit{The Spectra Hoax}. p.17.
\item \textsuperscript{17} Churchill, “The Lying Game.” p.38.
\item \textsuperscript{18} Smith, \textit{The Spectra Hoax}. p.23.
\item \textsuperscript{19} Ibid. p.28-29.
\item \textsuperscript{20} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{21} Linda Hutcheon, \textit{A Theory of Adaptation} (London: Routledge, 2006). p.4.
\end{itemize}
as a hoax, where failures to uncover the movement as a hoax served to only increase its transgressive potential.

The risk of transgression, however, exceeded perhaps even Bynner and Ficke’s expectations, where every attempt by the hoaxers to exert control over the dissemination of the hoax movement only had the opposite effect of increasing the risk of the movement becoming uncovered. This threat of exposure paradoxically intensified the strength of the movement, with the result being that the opportunities Bynner and Ficke had to propagate the Spectra Hoax became multiplied. This tension, structured along a threat of disruption between the hoax and the broader modernist avant-garde became especially apparent in the letters correspondents sent to the hoaxers, with Smith citing in particular a letter Arthur Davison Ficke received from Lloyd R. Morris requesting his beliefs on the nature of contemporary American poetry. In it, Morris, ‘compiling a statement of opinion by the younger groups of American writers concerning the future temper’ of literature in America, asks Ficke if he believes ‘there is manifest today a new movement in [American] literature’. Rather than ignoring the letter, Ficke replies, in the Old World idiolect of Anne Knish, that he finds the ‘new movement in poetry too closely derived from a French movement’, criticising those ‘who speak so much of “new, new, new!”’ as knowing ‘nothing of European literary history’. In addition to mocking Ezra Pound’s efforts at aesthetic experimentation, Ficke’s response to Morris’s letter underlines the fragility of the membrane between the hoax movement and the avant-garde, where every act of perpetuating the hoax movement was accompanied by the potential for it to become exposed as a hoax.

Ficke’s response, however, also indicates how the hoaxers used their hoax identities to manipulate the purposes of the movement through their correspondences, simultaneously concealing and revealing their intentions through the statements they made relating to the movement. What this meant was that every statement Bynner and Ficke made about the positioning of the Spectra Hoax within the sphere of the avant-garde had the effect of implicating it further alongside the modes and practices they were claiming to parody. As Jacques Derrida identifies in The Law of Genre, however, a work ‘always potentially [exceeds] the boundaries that bring it into being’, since its membership within a particular system is

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signalled by intrinsic and extrinsic signals of belonging that change depending on the way the work is framed. The result of this is that works participate, rather than belong, within a certain genre, since no work can be said to satisfy all of the markers of belonging within a particular genre. Thus, lodged within the law of genre there exists a counter-law, a ‘principle of contamination … that would confound its sense, order and reason’. This proved to be especially true of the Spectra Hoax, since each statement made by the hoaxers regarding their intentions similarly serve as markers of inclusion and exclusion, involving the hoax in a tradition of parody while contesting the generic borders imposed upon it. Following from Derrida, Hutcheon argues that ‘to deal with adaptations as adaptations is to think of them as … inherently “palimpsestuous” works, haunted at all times by their adapted texts’. Although not strictly a form of adaptation, the Spectra Hoax haunts modernist avant-garde poetry through its framing as a hoax movement. Likewise, attempts to interpret the hoax are haunted by Bynner and Ficke’s writings regarding the movement, since these statements of intent challenge its assumed didactic function.

Borrowing from Hutcheon’s methodology, in the first chapter of this thesis I seek to reconcile an early history of the Spectra Hoax alongside a number of reviews criticising the movement. In doing so I identify how current critical accounts of the hoax attempt to impose a narrative onto the hoax that presents it as having had a directly didactic purpose. In their willingness to read the hoax in this way, I argue that critics have become hoaxed by Bynner and Ficke, with the result being that the parameters of the hoax extend far beyond its uncovering in 1918. The second chapter explores the construction of the hoaxers’ hoax identities, arguing that Bynner and Ficke exploited a breakdown between style and matter during the modernist period in the construction of their parodic selves. Additionally, I identify how the hoaxers’ construction of their identities was facilitated by an emerging gap between a culture of reviewing and Bynner and Ficke’s subversion of what it meant to be a modernist author, with the result being the collapse between their real and hoax identities. Finally, in chapter three I examine Bynner’s retrospective account of the hoax alongside Ficke’s unpublished account of the movement and identify how these documents reveal a retrospective ambivalence towards the Spectra Hoax, with the result being the retroactive recasting of

27 Ibid. p.225.
intention by the hoaxers. Through reconciling these documents with the directions Bynner and Ficke’s own lives took following the hoax movement, I argue that the hoaxers’ attempts to recast their intentions of the movement have the opposite effect of mystifying any attempts at coming to a truth behind the hoax movement.

In this work, therefore, I delineate how a breakdown in discourses surrounding conceptions of authorship, identity and intention during the modernist period enabled Bynner and Ficke to subsequently exploit the growing divide between a culture of reviewing and the hoaxers’ subversion of what it meant to be an author in the construction of their hoax movement. Additionally, I consider how the hermetic environment of the hoax gave the hoaxers the opportunity to manipulate the narrative of the hoax, with the result being the perpetuation of the hoax long past its supposed uncovering as a hoax movement in 1918. Finally, in response to Bynner and Ficke’s claims regarding the conservative motives behind their movement, I undertake a comparative analysis of the hoaxers’ retrospective accounts to show the capacity of parody to enable a recasting, and subsequent re-figuration, of poetic intention. Through my analysis, I hope to show that to impose a firm line of intention on the hoax is to deny the ambiguous, “spectral” qualities of the movement.
Chapter 1. ‘Throwing Rocks at Windows is Better’: Modernist Print Culture and the Shaping of the Spectric Narrative

In 1916, an article appeared in the June *Forum* outlining the method of the Spectric School. In it, Bynner and Ficke, writing under their pseudonymous personas, divided ‘the theory of the Spectric School … naturally into two propositions’.29 The first proposition placed the poet as ‘a perceiver of objects and a recipient of impressions’, while the second proposition posited the poet as ‘the portrayer of objects and the creator of expressions’.30 Bynner and Ficke, therefore, cast the role of the poet as reconstructive, with the poet’s role being to recognise ‘the fragmentary nature of his perception’ in order to eventually reconcile ‘some relation between his limited and single-colored vision and the great stream of pure light from which this vision was originally separated’.31 Within Bynner and Ficke’s parodic conception of the Spectric School, then, the poet was central to the process of poetic creation, as the role of the poet was to synthesise and consequently portray the object of the poem.

This article would come to hold a central role in the early perpetuation of the hoax movement, with a number of reviewers interested in the Spectric School citing this piece in anticipation of Bynner and Ficke’s *Spectra* book. Drawing from this article and a number of other writings and reviews contemporaneous to the early propagation of the hoax movement, this chapter identifies how, even before the publication of the *Spectra* book, Bynner and Ficke were already creating a narrative of the Spectric School that they hoped would replace, and potentially exceed, the concrete elements of the hoax movement’s reception. By examining reviews of *Spectra* alongside Bynner and Ficke’s own writings regarding the movement, this chapter identifies how Bynner and Ficke instigated a process of control over the narrative of the Spectra Hoax, with the result being the iteration of these narratives by subsequent critics and anthologists of the hoax movement.

In his meticulous account of the Spectra Hoax, Smith celebrates the propagation of the hoax movement and notes how newspapers from Boston to St. Louis published reviews of *Spectra*, with reputable modernist publications such as *Poetry* and *Reedy’s Mirror* speaking of the book in ‘glowing terms’.32 Indeed, a number of anthologies and critical articles relating to

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30 Ibid.
31 Ibid.
the Spectra Hoax continue to memorialise it as having been unequivocally successful in fooling reviewers and passing itself off as an authentic poetry movement. Alongside Smith’s account of the success of the Spectra Hoax is Louis Untermeyer’s account of the hoax, which similarly valorises the movement, writing that ‘disciples [of the Spectric School] announced themselves overnight’ alongside ‘revolutionary poets’ who ‘proved their radicalism by excoriating those of their fellows who refused to recognize the advent of a new power in literature’. Additionally, in his typological account of hoaxes, Brian McHale classifies the Spectra movement as a ‘trap hoax’, since the movement was ‘designed with didactic and punitive purposes in mind’: specifically, to highlight the tendency for individuals involved in poetic circles to follow the latest poetic movement without even examining its provenance.

McHale’s classification of the Spectric School as a trap hoax, however, implies that Bynner and Ficke were successful in convincing reviewers as to the authenticity and quality of their poetic movement. This assumption regarding the success of the hoax in convincing readers of its veracity is reflected in Curtis MacDougall’s account of the Spectra Hoax who, in his compilation of hoaxes, characterises the Spectric School as ‘what should have been the literary hoax to end all literary hoaxes’ in order to argue that ‘critics generally were so dumfounded [sic] that all a majority of them could do was to announce a new school of poetry, quote from the preface and cite an opus or two by way of illustration.’ MacDougall presents the ‘verse-reading public’ as foolishly ‘enthusiastic’, flattening readers of modernist poetry into a mass of uncritical dupes willing to be fooled by Bynner and Ficke’s hoax poetry. In addition to these critical appraisals of the Spectra Hoax, more contemporary accounts of the movement, while more cautious in their evaluation of the hoax, similarly treat the movement as having been unequivocally successful in its aims. Susan Stewart, for instance, states that ‘the poems [of the Spectric School] were seriously evaluated and considered by such modernist luminaries as Harriet Monroe’, while Suzanne Churchill writes how the movement ‘earned critical acclaim from respected critics and poets’, citing E.L. Masters as an example.

36 Ibid.
In *Genre*, John Frow argues that ‘genres create effects of reality and truth which are central to the different ways the world is understood’, characterising genre as a set of ‘semiotic frames’ that ‘implicate and specify layered ontological domains’ which themselves form in reference to ‘the effects of authority and plausibility’ specific to genre. Genre works as an iterative process, propagating structures of meaning and truth that consequently shape our understanding of the world. The alignment of the Spectra Hoax alongside contemporary accounts of its reception highlights a narrative that, at the very least, undermines the alleged unequivocal success of the hoax movement. Indeed, a number of reviews give positive evaluations of the movement, focussing on its theory of poetic expression and psychological elements. For instance, a review appearing on July 11, 1916 in the New York *Globe* written in response to Bynner and Ficke’s *Forum* article lauds the Spectric School for its proposed poetic method, with the reviewer writing that gone are the ‘blind, unscientific days of the unthinking poets who wrote for love of life and … had never heard that a primrose by the prim river’s brim wasn’t indeed a primrose at all, but a plexus’. Similarly, in anticipation for the *Spectra* book of poems, a reviewer for the Boston *Evening Transcript* complements the Spectric School for the ‘highly original and startling idea of calling their poems, after the manner of composers of music, simply “Opus 1” and “Opus 2”’. *Much Ado* called *Spectra* ‘the most unique, amusing, thought stimulating and sometimes beautiful collection of poems [they had] come across in a long time’, and the New York *Evening Sun* asked readers whether they were ‘hep to the Spectric Group’, calling the Spectrists ‘facts’ alongside a passage cited from Bynner and Ficke’s Preface to *Spectra*. Indeed, Smith cites this particular review as evidence of the success of the Spectric School, concluding from it that ‘almost everyone’ had at least heard of Bynner and Ficke’s hoax poetry movement.

In the *Evening Sun* review, however, the reviewer also points out an implicit disparity between the poetic techniques explicited by Bynner and Ficke in their Preface and the poems that immediately follow it, telling readers to ‘say what you will about the verse, the explanation

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is a corking explanation’. Indeed, following this early influx of positive reviews are a number of reviews that question the success of the Spectrists’ theory of poetic expression. For instance, a reviewer from Los Angeles identifies the Spectric School as derivative, writing that ‘the new school does what all other schools have done—takes one of the ancient axioms of poetic art and makes of it a dogma … with nonchalant disregard of other interrelated axioms and corollaries’. The reviewer cites Bynner’s (writing as Morgan) Opus 40 as an example to highlight the fact that their poems ‘[seem] to have been written for one purpose only—to attract attention’, ultimately condemning the majority of the poems as ‘gibberish’. In addition, a subsequent review appearing in the New York Globe from early 1917 revises its previous adulations of the Spectric School, with the reviewer writing that ‘if it had not been for the preface we should doubtless have found much that is interesting and excellent in “Spectra”’, ultimately recommending that readers ‘skip the prefaces’ since, ‘being bewildered by all that the preface told us we ought to see may easily have blinded us to some very real merits’ of the School. Similarly, a reviewer for the Detroit Tribune criticises the Preface for being ‘as brilliant as a rainy midnight in the country’, and through comparing both poets’ ‘Opus 40’ alongside the Preface ultimately concludes that the published poems fall short of being ‘Spectral’.

And indeed, a closer look at the hoaxers’ poetry demonstrates how they hinted towards the parodic nature of the Spectric School by undermining their own poetic method through their poems. In ‘Opus 40’, for instance, Bynner appears to hoax the movement’s conception of poetic creation, writing:

Two cocktails round a smile,
A grapefruit after grace,
Flowers in an aisle
. . . Were your face.

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45 “The Spectrist School of Song.”
46 “Mitchell Kennerley Is the Publisher of ‘Spectra’ of the Spectrists...,” Los Angeles [Graphic], 1916, LSFBRIAR, Arthur Davison Ficke Papers 1865-1971, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.
47 Ibid.
A strap in a street-car,
A sea-fan on the sand,
A beer on a bar
. . . Were your hand.

The pillar of a porch,
The tapering of an egg,
The pine of a torch
. . . Were your leg.—

Sun on the Hellespont,
White swimmers in the bowl
Of the baptismal font
Are your soul.50

In this poem, Bynner hints at the parodic nature of the Spectric School by openly contravening the poetic method outlined in the movement’s public statements of intent. Rather than reconciling the ‘limited and single-colored vision’ of the Spectric poet with ‘the great stream of pure light from which this vision was originally separated’, Bynner instead parodically connects the visions of the poet to each other in order to construct the image of a body.51 The reviewer for the Detroit Tribune identifies this, asking the reader whether ‘the poetic and very spectric likeness of a hand to a beer’ has ever been ‘revealed to the public’, sarcastically writing that ‘almost anyone would love to have a leg like a porch-support’.52 Concluding their appraisal of the hoaxers’ poems by sardonically exclaiming ‘How—how spectric!’, the reviewer mocks hagiographical readings of the movement that venerate Bynner and Ficke’s pseudonymously constructed poetry, repudiating followers of the Spectric School as individuals willing to be indiscriminately duped by the hoaxers (see Figure 1).53

51 Bynner and Ficke, “The Spectric School of Poetry.”
52 “New Futurist Poems Are Called Spectral, but They Seem Shy of That Quality.”
53 Ibid.
New Futurist Poems Are Called Spectral, but They Seem Shy of That Quality

Figure 1. “New Futurist Poems Are Called Spectral, but They Seem Shy of That Quality,” Detroit News Tribune, January 18, 1917. Courtesy of the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.
This reviewer’s scathing critique of a readership apparently willing to indiscriminately consume poetic works implies a suspicion towards the motives behind the Spectric School, contradicting critical accounts of the hoax that present it as having been successful in fooling its audiences. In *A Singular Modernity*, Fredric Jameson argues that we must treat modernity as a ‘narrative category’, since it is impossible to conclusively detect the ‘tropological underpinnings’ that constitute its boundaries, since its mediators continue to vanish to the extent that they are impossible to conclusively evaluate.54 It is only through treating the modernist period as a site of contestation that a better understanding of the processes that characterise it can take place, since such an approach reveals the complex relationships between ‘hosts of realities’ that contravene attempts ‘to take a point of view on individual events’ by the critic.55 Similarly, the reviews that constitute our record of the Spectra Hoax should be treated as fragments that resist and undermine attempts to impose a periodising interpretation upon the Spectra Hoax, with their heterogeneity instead drawing attention to the ways in which historical processes stultify, misrepresent, and often glorify certain histories over others, especially within the context of critical accounts of the hoax movement.

Redirecting analysis towards the narratives that structure critical accounts of the Spectra Hoax reveals a tendency by critics to alienate the hoax movement from the sphere of the avant-garde in order to posit it as a critique of modernist avant-garde poetry. Smith, for instance, posits that ‘correspondents of all sorts’ were attracted to the hoax movement due to the ‘forthright, “damn-the-torpedoes” quality’ of Bynner and Ficke’s poetry, which stood ‘in contrast to the veiled and wishy-washy nature of that of some of their contemporaries’,56 while Untermeyer writes that ‘it seems incredible today that such an obvious absurdity could be taken seriously’ by the modernist avant-garde.57 In his analysis of hoax poetry movements, Philip Mead concludes from his analysis of the Yasusada hoax that ‘readers want to believe and they will easily overlook discrepancies and even exposure’ of a hoax in order to justify their initial admiration of it, with the result being that ‘authenticity effects’, rather than plausible authenticity, are enough to convince modern readers as to the veracity of a hoax.58 A closer look at critical accounts of the movement reveals a similar process, with critics selectively

55 Ibid. p.28.
seizing evidence of the success of the hoax from the contested terrain of reviews that constitute accounts of its reception in order to characterise Bynner and Ficke as enacting an oppositional, conservative critique of modernist poetry.

A look at Bynner and Ficke’s declarations of poetic practice early in the life of the hoax indicates that this is a stance the hoaxers were willing to facilitate. In an interview published by the Chicago Daily Tribune on May 5, 1916, for instance, Witter Bynner unequivocally declares that the new modernist schools of poetry ‘produce an exclusive poetry’ that can ‘only be comprehensible to themselves’, and instead advocates the need for ‘a robust, living poetry which recognizes all the faculties of a vigorous, optimistic nation’.\(^59\) This interview also contains one of the earliest public references to the Spectra Hoax, with Bynner offering ‘the Spectrists’ as a ‘ray of hope’ in the democratisation of poetry, ultimately conceding that ‘poetry should be for the many’ and ‘is coming decently to its own again’, with the Spectric School opening the opportunity for poets to finally contribute ‘something of value … to English literature in the next few years’ (see Figure 2).\(^60\)

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\(^{60}\) Ibid.
Rebel Poet Turns Cold Water on Miss Amy Lowell’s ‘Bath’

Unless the present crop of poets grows long on its head and fat on its laurels, there is about the most brilliant show in the current music box poet’s death, according to Witter Bynner, rebel poet, who, in the past three times five years, a terrific shock to the more self-indulgent and more complacent.

Mr. Bynner, who lives with celerity, a garland of corn and a jolly and a jolly, yesterday watched with admiring joy on Miss Amy Lowell’s ‘Bath’ and estimated that only strictly for being the dictionary in a new and rapid sight tab. The poets, scholars, and critics have no place in poetry, he declared, and he uttered a prayer that the public would not be deceived by the recent writings of this class, and fall to hear the songs of the better human, poets bursting from the long silence.

Listened to Medical Museum.

“ Ezra Pound, John Gould Fletcher, and Miss Amy Lowell are the most conspicuous figures in the imagistic school, which is now attracting about the same marked curiosity aroused by sightseers at a medical museum,” said Mr. Bynner.

“These schools, with their affections of lines, style, and symbolisms, attempt to produce an exclusive poetry, and I should say they succeed very well because it can only be comprehensible to themselves.

“There is a large need for poetry. It is one of the necessities of the national life, but the public wants it real. They call me a rebel because I am trying to do this sort of work myself and to direct the talents of other writers to a robust, living poetry which recognizes all the possibilities of a vigorous, optimistic nation.

Nothing but Not.

“Most of this imagistic poetry is nothing but rot. How many can take up their time with it is beyond me. As I once put them in rhyme:

‘They would rather be made and little else.

Something that lives a day and dies,

This is a thought intolerable.

As far Ezra Pound, head of the imagists, James Stephens disposed of him perfectly in two lines. He says:

‘God, who made all things, made the world and made it round.

And he made poetically, feet to hasten the sight of Ezra Pound.

‘Pound has no technical balance, but what else has he, except poetic and less clear than Whitman.’

‘In my address before the Fortnightly club I discussed a new brand of poetry by the speculators. I received a letter of hope in it. In the presence of the book, which is only as yet in manuscript form, I admit that Whitman is not too low or common to have the dress of verse.

‘Here is a sample of the speculistic stuff:

‘The little crosses gleamed across the floor.

And stood profound in front of me.

And one was faith, and one was hope.

And one was charity. One looked for what it could get, and hope looked for what was lost.

(Ezra Pound and depended, but Ezra was blind.)

Charity’s eyes were crossed.

‘Then with a leap a single shape,

With hands on the skin

Bravished a little moisette ages,

And each one like a pity.

Fell to a bag as fast could be.

As fast as fast could be.

And stuck, as if comforted and sung.

Faith, hope, and charity.

That is it; it was my singing and

Endeavouring every claim.

That’s what, be glad that I

Can be the thing I am.

Not Quite Hopeless.

‘Now, of course, this sort of stuff isn’t quite so hopeless as some of the other, but what does it mean? A few may see intelligences in it. But poetry should be for the many. It should have body and heart. I would like to see the writing of poetry honored by real men and not only a handful of Jedicts.

When I first started thinking of writing poetry I was held back by shame. I didn’t want to be classed as a poet.

‘But now poetry is coming decently to its own again. Unless the freaks, who desire, and chemist, get so bold and numerous as to disgust the public and shame the more earnest poets there will be something of value contributed to English literature in the near future.

Mr. Bynner spoke before the Fortnightly Club yesterday afternoon. He will continue next week.

Figure 2. “Rebel Poet Turns Cold Water on Miss Amy Lowell’s ‘Bath.’” Chicago Daily Tribune, May 5, 1916. Courtesy of the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.
Following Bynner, in an article submitted to the *North American Review* in September 1916, Ficke takes on a more conciliatory tone towards contemporaneous poetry movements, complimenting ‘the Revolutionists’, his phrase for the ‘Imagists and Vorticists and Spectricists and Patagonians and a Choric School’, for demanding ‘true feeling and appropriate expression instead of empty rhetoric’, and implores the reader to ‘give them profound thanks’ for this. 61 Ficke, however, cautions against presuming that the poetry of ‘the Revolutionists’ has replaced ‘the old beauty’ of poets such as Shakespeare, Milton, and Shelley, ultimately critiquing ‘the Revolutionists’ for disregarding the importance of form to poetry and consequently advocating for a poetic method whereby the ‘hearts’ cry’ of the poet can become expressed in ‘the measures of a perfect song’, with the expression of emotion needing ‘formal law’ in order for the poem to achieve ‘a real concordance of body and soul’. 62 In both of their accounts, Bynner and Ficke each cast themselves as individuals concerned with reinstating poetry as a medium reflective and expressive of the public sentiment and taste. While Bynner casts himself as a figure concerned with redirecting poetry towards the public good rather than pursuing it for its own aesthetic ends, Ficke goes one step further in advocating for a poetic method that combines expression and form. Read alongside the hoaxers’ declarations of their poetic ideals, then, the Spectra Hoax emerges as a critique of other modernist poetry movements. 63

However, in each of their declarations of poetic practice, both Bynner and Ficke mischievously include the Spectric School alongside more prominent modernist poetry movements. This inclusion, although subtle, works to not only undermine the hoaxers’ appraisals of modernist poetry movements by demonstrating the ease by which their movement could operate alongside other, more concerted efforts at creating modernist poetry, but also aligns the hoax with the very movements critical accounts claim Bynner and Ficke were critiquing through their parody. Recalling Derrida, who argues that works *participate*, rather than belong, within a certain genre, I propose that in parodying avant-garde modernist poetry movements, Bynner and Ficke participated in the schools that critical accounts continue to pit them against.

In *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, Peter Bürger draws a distinction between bourgeois and avant-garde modes of aesthetic expression, arguing that while bourgeois art is designed to

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62 Ibid. p.447.
63 For more on attempts to reinstate poetry as a public good, see: Ben Lerner, *The Hatred of Poetry* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2016).
reinforce the individual’s status in relation to a society increasingly characterised by consumerism and individual alienation, avant-garde art functions instead to negate ‘art as an institution that is unassociated with the life praxis of men’. Avant-garde art, therefore, works to realign the individual’s status with the social collectivity, collapsing the distinction between the subject experiencing the artwork and the aesthetic object that the artwork entails. This is a concern addressed by Rainey, who, through his comparison of Ezra Pound and Franco Marinetti’s attempts to establish competing forms of avant-garde practice in early modernist London, argues that the effect of this competition was ‘to provoke a reconfiguration of the relations among the institutions in which the discourse of art and poetry had been produced until then, forcing intellectuals and artists to come to terms with… their bearings on the place of art in a cultural marketplace being radically transformed’. Bynner and Ficke instigate a similar process through their parody of modernist avant-garde poetry, encouraging a critical refiguration of the relations among previously assumed discourses circulating in the sphere of modernist cultural production.

Stewart’s assertion that Bynner and Ficke’s ‘forgeries succeeded to some degree in actually being avant-garde poems’ takes on a new significance when considered in this context, revealing a recognition by Bynner and Ficke that, in order to critique the avant-garde, it was necessary to participate in the cultural conditions that enabled its existence to the extent that the hoaxers’ hoax movement itself became an avant-garde poetry movement. This is perhaps best reflected in Ficke’s ‘Opus 40’, where writing under the guise of Anne Knish, he avers:

I have not written, reader,
That you may read. . . .
They sit in rows in the bare school-room
Reading.
Throwing rocks at windows is better,
And oh the tortoise-shell can with the can tied on!
I would rather be a can-tier
Than a writer for readers.

I have written, reader,
For abstruse reasons.
Gold in the mine . . .
Black water seeping into tunnels . . .
A plank breaks, and the roof falls . . .
Three men suffocated.
The wife of one now works in a laundry;
The wife of another has married a fat man;
I forget about the third.67

In this poem, Ficke deliberately enacts a process of linguistic elision, where attempts by both readers and critics to co-opt the hoaxers’ poetry within an explanatory narrative become consequently critiqued and parodied by this poem. Through its refusal to be co-opted into an explanatory narrative, Ficke’s poem deliberately displaces attempts to interpret it by enacting a process of negation embodied by the first stanza, a negation that implicates the poem in an avant-garde aesthetic practice of collapsing the distinction between the reader of the poem and its author. The shift from a deconstructive to a reconstructive mode from the first to the second stanzas, reflected by Ficke’s shift from ‘I have not written’ to ‘I have written’, serves as an enactment of this process, negating and subsequently refiguring the reader’s relationship with the poem.68

Rather than undermining the avant-garde status of the poem, the parodic context of the poem has the opposite effect of reinforcing its potential to sublate the modernist movements Byner and Ficke positioned their movement alongside, with the hoaxers collapsing the distinction between the “genuine” and the “fake” to mediate a challenge towards the institutional systems that came to characterise the modernist avant-garde. Indeed, as Chartier argues, reading is an appropriative practice, both ‘because it actualizes the text’s semantic potential and because it creates a mediation for knowledge of the self through comprehension of the text’.69 Through framing their movement as a hoax, Byner and Ficke actualise the potential of avant-garde aesthetic practice to mediate a process of realigning the individual’s

68 Ibid.
status in relation to modernist aesthetic practice, and in doing so challenge the reader’s position within this rapidly changing site of contestation. As a parody of aesthetic practice, therefore, Ficke’s poem both signals the futility of interpreting Bynner and Ficke’s hoax poetry as a form of critique and collapses the divide between the contemporaneous reader of Spectra and the critic attempting to retrospectively reassemble an account of the hoax movement. To read the hoax in this way is to restore, and extend, Smith’s characterisation of the ‘damn-the-torpedoes’ nature of Bynner and Ficke’s hoax poetry movement, affording it a status as an avant-garde modernist poetry movement.
Chapter 2. ‘Signally True to Form’: Modernist Selfhood, Style, and the Production of Poetic Identity

In a letter published in August 1917, before it had been exposed as a hoax, Ezra Pound criticised the Spectric School as having come ‘a little late’, writing that ‘people intending to be schools’ should have ‘done it first’.\(^{70}\) Specifically, Pound argues that a poetic school should be based on ‘something having to do with their art, not on a vague aesthetic theory’, with Ficke and Bynner’s Preface to Spectra (read by Pound as its manifesto) advancing ‘no proposition affecting his own medium’ and rather simply reiterating ‘some twaddle about ultra-violets’.\(^{71}\) Pound dismisses the Spectra movement as a poetic school with little to offer in advancing the creation of poetry.

Pound perceptively identifies the derivative qualities of the Spectric School that may have marked it as a hoax, including the disjunction between the movement’s ‘vague aesthetic theory’ and the hoaxers’ poetry itself, which purportedly fails to realise the propositions outlined in the Preface to Spectra.\(^{72}\) Following this, as was mentioned in the previous chapter, a number of reviewers similarly identified a disjunction between Bynner and Ficke’s stated aesthetic aims outlined in their Preface and the consummation of these aims within the poems themselves. For instance, a review appearing in the Detroit News Tribune attempts to judge the success of Bynner and Ficke’s Spectric method through applying the method respectively to both Bynner’s ‘Opus 40’ and Ficke’s ‘Opus 40’.\(^{73}\) Rather than judging Bynner and Ficke’s poems as being successful examples of the Spectric method, the reviewer instead concludes that they are more like ‘a cross-section of life itself’, ultimately deeming these particular poems to be failures of the Spectric method.\(^{74}\) Similarly, a review appearing in the New York Globe also identifies a failure between the Preface and the poems, writing that ‘if it had not been for the preface we should doubtless have found much that is interesting and excellent in “Spectra”.’\(^{75}\) Most interesting, however, is a review that appeared in the Chicago Evening Post on March 9, 1917. In it, the reviewer, having compared the Preface to the poems of the Spectric School, expresses concern that Bynner and Ficke ‘concocted the preface simply to pull’ the

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\(^{71}\) Ibid.

\(^{72}\) Ibid.

\(^{73}\) “New Futurist Poems Are Called Spectral, but They Seem Shy of That Quality.”

\(^{74}\) Ibid.

\(^{75}\) “Our Little Spectric Group.”
reader’s and the reviewer’s ‘leg’, however ultimately leaves it up to the reader to decide the veracity of Bynner and Ficke’s stated poetic propositions (see Figure 3).  

**Figure 3. “A New “School.”” The Chicago Evening Post, March 9, 1917. Courtesy of the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.**

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Aside from coming close to astutely identifying the movement as a hoax, what these reviews identify within the form of the *Spectra* book is a disjunction between stated poetic intention and the fulfilment of this stated intention. This chapter explores this disjunction, and identifies how the disparity between the Preface and the poems reflects an increasing discrepancy between form and content during the modernist era. By exploring this discrepancy, this chapter tracks the development of Bynner and Ficke’s pseudonymous selves and argues that in the construction of their identities, the hoaxers enacted a struggle against a culture of reviewing increasingly characterised by what constituted authorship during the modernist period.

The Preface serves as a statement of form for the Spectric School. In it, Bynner and Ficke profile the supposed poetic ‘aim of the Spectric group to push the possibilities of poetic expression into a new region’ through achieving ‘a fresh brilliance of impression’ reputedly derived from ‘the methods of Futurist painting’. Specifically, this aim is to be achieved through a tripartite poetic technique (aptly termed the ‘Spectric technique’), outlined as a process of diffraction, vibration and adumbration through which the reader could come to know ‘the true essence of objects’ with the ‘overtones, adumbrations, or spectres’ surrounding, and giving the object, ‘its full ideal significance and its poetic worth’. In the Preface to the original *Spectra* book, therefore, Bynner and Ficke conceive of a parodic poetic style whereby the poetic object is given meaning through ‘the insubstantiality of the poet’s spectres’, which in turn contributes to ‘the reader’s sense of the immediate theme’ of the poem. Thus, the form of the Spectric poem relies on capturing the apparently paradoxical insubstantiality of the poem’s object and subsequently transmitting this sense of insubstantiality to the reader, a process to which the poet is central.

In *Postmodernism and Consumer Society*, Fredric Jameson identifies modernism as a period rich in opportunities for parody, since modernism is characterised by the proliferation of ‘unique styles’ that subsequently offer the parodist the opportunity to ‘cast ridicule on the private nature of these stylistic mannerisms … with respect to the way people normally speak or write’. This proliferation of styles is what allowed Bynner and Ficke to parody contemporaneous poetry movements, since these movements were characterised by a shift

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78 Ibid, p.77.
79 Ibid, p.78.
towards a formalisation of poetic practice. Following Jameson, Ben Hutchinson argues that with the bold poetic innovation of the early modernist period there emerged a foregrounding of style ‘as its own subject matter’, where authors became increasingly preoccupied with forming their own signature styles through their poetry.\textsuperscript{81} However, alongside this foregrounding of style there developed ‘a concomitant suspicion of mere style, a fear that … modernity may have been voided of any meaningful content’.\textsuperscript{82} According to Hutchinson, then, modernism is defined by its self-conscious style, where ‘the weight of classical culture’ can be felt constantly pressing on the ‘textual surfaces’ of modernism.\textsuperscript{83} This tension between content and style is dramatized within the \textit{Spectra} book, where the text’s refusal to consummate its stated poetic aims challenges the over-stylisation of modernist poetry. As Hutchinson identifies, however, this tension was accompanied by an anxiety, manifested in the reviews presented, over the increasing disjunction between form and content during the modernist period. Bynner and Ficke, then, characterise the disjunction between the Preface and the poems as a paradox, where the Spectric method is designed, from the outset, to fail in its poetic aims.

The growing disjunction between form and content during the modernist period, however, subsequently became reflected in the construction of authorial identity, where authorship was increasingly characterised by an interest in constructing an identity rather than presenting a self. Indeed, this shift in the presentation of authorial identity was a primary concern amongst authors and poets of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. In Oscar Wilde’s \textit{Portrait of Mr W.H.}, for instance, the narrator argues that to accuse an artist of forgery is to ‘confuse an ethical with an aesthetical problem’, since the artist works from a ‘desire for perfect representation’, with art consequently being characterised as ‘a mode of acting, an attempt to realise one’s own personality on some imaginative plane out of reach … of real life’.\textsuperscript{84} According to Wilde, then, aesthetic autonomy is reliant upon the fabrication of a self that exceeds the boundaries of authenticity to the point that it is apparently no longer clear where the facts of one’s life end and their unique, idiosyncratic style takes over. Similarly, in ‘The New Biography’, Virginia Woolf identifies a shift away from presenting the facts of the biographical subject’s life in favour of capturing their personality, where the individual becomes ‘the supreme object of [the biographer’s] curiosity’, judging a successful biographer.

\textsuperscript{82} Ibid, p.2.
\textsuperscript{83} Hutchinson, \textit{Modernism and Style}.
as possessing the ability to reconcile the ‘truth of fact’ with the ‘truth of fiction’. The result of this, however, is that ‘the life which is increasingly real to us is the fictitious life’, with the consequence being the increasing dependence by the biographer on ‘the novelist’s art of arrangement, suggestion, [and] dramatic effect to expound the private life’ of the biographical subject. Ultimately however, Woolf cautions against carrying ‘the use of fiction too far’ or relying too heavily on the ‘substance of fact’, since the biographer ‘loses both worlds’ if one becomes prioritised over the other. The prioritisation of style during the modernist period, then, was expressed on the level of the self, with selfhood increasingly conceived as a changeable, constructed phenomenon.

The increasing gap between style and content that characterised the modernist period, therefore, encouraged authors and poets to construct, rather than simply present, a poetic identity. In the formation of their pseudonymous identities, Bynner and Ficke took advantage of this process, where it was the increased prioritisation of style over matter that allowed the authors to develop a hoax movement, and consequently hoax identities, through which they could subsequently parody the various schools that were emerging at the time. Indeed, included in the typescript sent by Ficke to Mitchell Kennerly, the publisher of the Spectra book of poems, is a page carefully outlining the biographical details of Ficke and Bynner’s respective poetic personas (see Figure 4). Anne Knish, the poetic identity adopted by Ficke, is apparently ‘a native of Buda-Pesth’, well known as an ‘author of numerous critical reviews in Continental periodicals’ but relatively unknown in the Anglophone world. Similarly, Emanuel Morgan, the poetic identity adopted by Bynner, is characterised as a poet ‘only just beginning to publish his verse, having for years been interested primarily in painting.’ Morgan’s obscurity is explained by his ‘twenty years spent in Paris’, where the possibility of international travel covers up any suspicion regarding the veracity of Morgan’s identity.

86 Ibid. p.100.
87 Ibid.
89 Ibid.
90 Ibid.
Anne Knish is a native of Buda-Pesth who has for the last few years lived in Pittsburgh. She is the author of numerous critical reviews in Continental periodicals, and of one volume of poems in Russian, entitled “Via Auren.” A book of English verse, “Spectra”, by herself and Emanuel Morgan, is to be published shortly.

Emanuel Morgan, originator of the Spectric theory of poetry on which Mrs. Knish has an article in this number, is only just beginning to publish his Spectric verse, having for years been interested primarily in painting. He has now returned to Pittsburgh, his native city, after twenty years spent in Paris, where his friend, Remy de Gourmont, turned him to writing poetry. The volume "Spectra", of which he is co-author with Anne Knish, is soon to be issued in this country.

Figure 4. Authorial statement sent to Mitchell Kennerley along with the typescript of Spectra. Courtesy of the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.
In her analysis of the Spectra Hoax, Suzanne Churchill examines the emergence of Bynner and Ficke’s poetic identities, and argues that Bynner and Ficke’s masquerading of poetic identity reveals ‘not that the masquerade exposes an underlying essential or true self, but rather that identity emerges through the kinds of dialogues and performances that little magazines enabled.’ According to Churchill, then, the Spectra Hoax enabled Bynner, Ficke and later Seiffert ‘to play out fantasies of being someone “Other” than themselves’, with the hoaxers’ poetic identities representing ‘modern selves to be made—and fabricated through the performative venues of little magazines.’ Subsequently, Churchill identifies how Ficke, Bynner and later Seiffert ‘parodied gender, sexual, and national markers of modern identity’ through the construction of their respective poetic identities, where ‘each persona represented a particular type in the modernist little magazine world’: Bynner constructed his poetic identity, Anne Knish, on the stereotype of the Jewish New Woman; Ficke constructed his poetic identity, Emanuel Morgan, on the stereotype of the modern aesthete; and Seiffert constructed her poetic identity, Elijah Hay, as a parody of the ‘heterosexual male idiom’ of poets such as ‘Ezra Pound, William Carlos Williams, and Maxwell Bodenheim’. Churchill argues that the selves invented in the little magazines came to constitute actual selves, implying that Ficke, Bynner and Seiffert gradually came to inhabit the public selves they had constructed within the pages of Others. In formulating her argument, however, Churchill overstates the stability of the poetic self to begin with, implying that the hoaxers became the public selves they had constructed through their poetry. As has been established, a defining characteristic of the modernist project was a widening gap between the author’s actual self and the self they chose to project through their work. The result of this was the destabilisation of both identities, where the distinction between the author’s actual self and the self they chose to project in their work broke down to the point that it became increasingly difficult to distinguish between ‘the substance of fact’ and the ‘use of fiction’ in the construction of authorial identity.

Beyond challenging modernist conceptions of selfhood in the construction of their hoax movement, however, what the pseudonymous construction of the hoaxers’ poetic identities reveal is a struggle between a culture of reviewing, characterised by a valorisation of authorship and a veneration of genius, and the hoaxers’ subversion of what it meant to be an author, a process dependent on the aforementioned dissolution of modernist selfhood. In his seminal

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91 Churchill, “The Lying Game.”
93 Ibid. pp.25-33.
work on cultural production, Pierre Bourdieu characterises the ‘field of cultural production’ as a ‘site of struggles’, where ‘what is at stake is the power to impose the dominant definition of the writer and therefore to delimit the population of those entitled to take part in the struggle to define the writer’. Indeed, throughout the reviews chronicling the exposure of the Spectric School as a hoax there emerges a collective obsession with authorship, where the hoaxers’ hoax poetry became read alongside, and compared to, their previous work. A review appearing in *Reedy’s Mirror*, for instance, wrote that the ‘only difficulty about them was that they passed too often out of parody and burlesque into good poetry of original significance’, concluding that ‘the disclosure would be a good joke on the public were it not for the fact that the burlesque poetry is more successful than the authors’ serious work’. Similarly, a reviewer writing for the *Louisville Courier-Journal* notes that the hoaxers’ ‘work was far more successful than anything the authors had done before’, and a *New York Times* reviewer expresses surprise that Witter Bynner and Arthur Davison Ficke were uncovered as the perpetrators of the Spectra Hoax, since ‘both men are well known for verse that is as far from the Cubist or Spectric variety as possible’. What emerges in the context of the reviews, then, is a contest over what constituted authorship, where the hoaxers’ hoaxed work became co-opted into a system of valuation and revaluated by reviewers alongside their previous work.

The contestations and revaluations of the Spectra Hoax revealed a crisis for reviewers who, faced with a threat against what constituted the ‘writer’, reacted with an attempt to reassert their ‘capacity to put forward a critical definition of the social world, to mobilize the potential strength of the dominated classes and subvert the order prevailing in the field of power’, a field increasingly characterised by ambiguous authorship and the restriction of cultural production to a small sphere of cultural producers. This is a crisis identified by Walter Benjamin, who argues that the technological reproduction of artworks during the modernist period has the effect of jeopardising the authenticity and authority of the artwork being reproduced, with its ‘historical testimony’ and ‘physical duration’ becoming subordinated to the process of that

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99 Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production*. p.44.
work’s production. These qualities, which together constitute the artwork’s unique position in time and place, work to establish ‘its embeddedness in the context of tradition’, and become lost when the artwork becomes reproduced on a mass scale. According to Benjamin, then, ‘what withers in the age of the technological reproducibility of the work of art is the latter’s aura’, defined by him as the positionality of the work of art in its time and place, with the result being the detachment of the ‘reproduced object’ from ‘the sphere of tradition’. Building on Benjamin’s concept of the aurality of the artwork, Miriam Hansen identifies how ‘one strategy of preserving the potentiality of aura, of being able to introduce the concept in the first place, was to place it under erasure, to mark it as constitutively belated and irreversibly moribund’, highlighting how it is only when the aura of the artwork is under the threat of erasure that efforts to preserve it become mobilised.

In his work on cultural production, Ken Gelder argues that during the modernist period, authors became increasingly ambivalent towards the technological reproducibility of their work facilitated by an emerging culture of reviewing characterised by the mass proliferation of media, reasserting the originality of their work through small print circulation, private presses, and expensive private editions which together constituted a field of ‘restricted production’ within which modernist authors enacted a struggle against attempts to reproduce and co-opt their work. Through formulating a hoax movement structured along a growing disjunction between form and content, therefore, Bynner and Ficke consequently exploited the widening gap between the culture of reviewing and the concept of authorship emerging during the modernist period, a process itself characterised by a growing anxiety surrounding what constituted the author and, by extension, the modernist work.

Care needs to be taken, however, in arguing that Bynner and Ficke exploited a struggle between a culture of reviewing and modernist conceptions of what defined authorship in their construction of the Spectra Hoax, since such a view of the hoax risks structuring the movement on the critical distinction between “high” and “low” modernisms that this thesis seeks to

102 Ibid, p.22.
challenge. This is a concern addressed by Joyce Piell Wexler in *Who Paid For Modernism?*, who writes that ‘the ideology that art and money are antithetical was a reaction to the expansion and diversification of the literate audience in the nineteenth century’, where the demographic changes in what constituted a reader in the late nineteenth century presented a ‘threat to elite culture’ and consequently encouraged authors such as Gustave Flaubert to redefine the ‘model of the writer as professional’ to preserve their status as highbrow writers. By redefining themselves in this way, modernist authors took advantage of ‘the value of individual reputation in developing … brand-name recognition’ to distinguish themselves in a market saturated by writers competing for publication. Wexler’s analysis presents the development of modernist authorship as a dialectical process between a set of interrelated cultural forces competing to define the author, with the persona of the modernist writer developing in relation to changing circumstances of publication.

Aware of the forms that increasingly came to dominate the modernist period, Bynner and Ficke simultaneously took advantage of these processes to perpetuate their hoax movement while parodying contemporaneous attempts by other modernist writers to define themselves against a print culture saturated by writers competing for readers. This awareness of the forms constituting the field of modernist cultural production is reflected by a reviewer writing for the *Chicago Dial*, who celebrates the ‘tale of the Spectric School’ and expresses regret for its premature demise due to ‘the interruption of the war’, but proceeds to identify how ‘reviewers ran signal true to form’, where ‘the more conservative reviewed with alarm; the more radical poured out superlatives; the professionally cautious maintained their fence-rail dignity’, and ‘the supremely canny avoided the question altogether, or evaded responsibility’. This reviewer’s self-conscious characterisation of the culture of reviewing within which they were writing implies an early awareness of the forms constituting this field, with the responses to the hoax movement already becoming inflected with a fatalism that has permeated its history, implying that the exposure of these processes only comes as a surprise to those estranged, either temporally or intellectually, from the modernist period.

106 Ibid. p.128.
Chapter 3. ‘His Memory Has played Him a Dramatic Prank’: Truth, Falsity and the Recasting of Poetic Intention

In April 1918, the Spectric School was finally revealed to be a hoax poetry movement. As Suzanne Churchill recounts, Witter Bynner was giving a poetry lecture at the University of Wisconsin when a professor ‘accused the Spectric School of being a hoax’.\(^{108}\) Bynner did not deny the professor’s accusations, meaning that the membrane between the private environment of the hoaxers and the modernist print culture within which they had perpetuated the movement had finally been breached. The consequence of this was the ambiguation of the border between the public and privately constructed personas that the hoaxers had constructed for themselves, to the point that Bynner himself was quoted in the *New York Times Magazine* as saying that he found that he wrote like his hoax persona, Emanuel Morgan, ‘without the slightest effort’, leading him to doubt ‘where [Morgan] leaves off and I begin’ (see Figure 5).\(^{109}\) Considered in isolation, Bynner’s claim regarding the merging of his poetic and hoax selves appears to conform to modernist conceptions of selfhood, where Bynner’s admission that his and Ficke’s pseudonymous identities became more real than their own poetic identities corresponds to Jameson’s alignment of modernism with an increased prioritisation of style over matter.

When considered in this way, poetic intent appears to be inconsequential to an analysis of the Spectra Hoax, since Bynner and Ficke’s multiplication and eventual merging of poetic selves suggests a lack of concern over the consequences that might arise from the hoax movement. This is a sentiment strongly reflected by Smith who, in comparing a softened and conciliatory letter that Ficke wrote to the *Saturday Review* in 1939 reflecting that ‘everybody concerned regarded the episode as of a degree of unimportance’\(^{110}\) alongside an earlier and harsher unpublished account of the hoax, writes that ‘the statements are not, I think, really contradictory’, and ultimately concludes that ‘to exaggerate the importance of Spectra’ is wrong, ‘for that would be to deny its basic nature’.\(^{111}\)

\(^{110}\) Quoted in Smith, *The Spectra Hoax*. p.46
\(^{111}\) Ibid. p.47.
Soulful Spectrism Nothing but a Hoax
Witter Bynner Tells How He and Arthur Davison Ficke
Posed for a Year and a Half as “Emanuel Morgan” and “Anne Knish,”
Whose Poetry Awed Many Reviewers

There were the Imagists and the Paracelsists and the Whatnotists, and they were all exceedingly annoying to Witter Bynner, minor poet, who, though subtle, is smart, or at least persuades people that he is. He got out to Chicago one year and a half age in a great hubbub about all those absurd schools of poetry and peered forth his grief to one Laird Bell, who in his college days toyed with literature as editor in chief of The Harvard Monthly, but has since sunk to the level of a successful Chicago lawyer. Bell, apparently, ventured something to the effect that you mustn’t be so terribly severe to the Greeks and the Celts because, after all, it was something to have founded a school, whereupon Bynner retorted:

“Bah! Why, I can find a school of poetry myself!” The two were at a performance of the Russian Ballet. Bynner looked at his program. One of the offerings was “The Spectre of the Rose.”

“And what’s more,” continued Bynner, “I will found a school of poetry. And I’ll call it Spectrism!”

At this point, Bell drops out of the story, the scene shifts to Davenport, Iowa, and there enters Arthur Davison Ficke, also a minor poet, a lifelong friend of Bynner. Bynner told Ficke that he had a little job of school-founding on hand in which he needed help—So in short, would Ficke help him found Spectrism? Ficke welcomed the suggestion with acclaim. The two at once set to work, found a publisher, and—lo! and behold!—there appeared on the market a book of poems called “Spectra,” so bizarre and violent in style that it seemed a perfectly natural sign of the times. The authors, according to the cover, were Emanuel Morgan and Anne Knish. The poems were a delicious satire on Gians and Cismis. But nobody guessed the truth. And there began for Bynner and Ficke a year and a half of undiluted joy.

They kept the secret all that time, while reviewers solemnly reviewed the book, praised it, or, at most, “kidded” it as a “pair of Washington其中包括 things, without for a moment realizing that it was intended to be satire. Finally, last month, the bubble burst. Bynner blames it on Ficke; Ficke, who is now a Major in the United States Army and far away in France, hasn’t been heard from; but, anyhow, the thing got too hot for Bynner, and he confessed at last that he was Emanuel Morgan, and that the Major was Anne Knish. So one more was added to the list of first-class literary hoaxes, the names of Bynner and Ficke took their places beside Chatterton and Eugene Field and Prosper Merimee, and Bynner, run to earth in his New York domicile, got out a whole stock of clippings and a copy of “Spectra” and told all about his audacious career of deceit, as follows:

“Ficke and I wrote as much as six of these Spectra in a day, once we got the thing started—the whole book was finished in three weeks. Some of the things that we wrote seemed so extravagant that we threw them in the wastepaper basket; yet, if you’ll look at the book, you’ll see that we got away with some wild stuff.”

His visitor turned the leaves of the book gingerly. Here are a few of the outbursts he found there:

“To some, housecleaning is a holy rite. For myself, houses would be empty but for the golden muses dancing in sunbeams.”

“... and I loved a woman whose two eyes...”

“... and I knew you once—it was Last night, and you spoiled my otherwise bright evening.”

“The book was reviewed all over the country. Well-known poets and editors wrote in praise of it. We had stated that the two authors lived in Pittsburgh because we believed that there would be less danger of the secret being ferreted out there, since interest in schools of poetry is not the big thing in the life of the average Pittsburgher. But we had to do something about the letters that came to the poets, so we gave, as

Figure 5. “Soulful Spectrism Nothing but a Hoax,” New York Times Magazine, June 2, 1918. Courtesy of the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University. Page 1 of 2.
Figure 5. “Soulful Spectrism Nothing but a Hoax,” New York Times Magazine, June 2, 1918. Courtesy of the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University. Page 2 of 2.
As argued in Chapter One, Smith’s account of the hoax valorises the movement as an attempt at didactic poetic criticism. To read the hoax in this way, however, is to neglect Bynner and Ficke’s own intentions behind the Spectra Hoax, and as a result, Smith’s analysis of the hoax can only be successful if poetic intention becomes sidelined in favour of his narrative of the Spectric School. As Michael Wood identifies in a review of William Empson, Empson’s belief in the importance of ascertaining ‘the contents of an author’s mind’ is essential to the practice of literary criticism, since it is only through ascertaining this matter that ‘certain meanings—ironies, for example’, can be traced out.\textsuperscript{112} The Spectric School presents a particularly challenging case to interpret, since authorial intention becomes obfuscated and elided by Bynner and Ficke through the deliberate multiplication and ambiguation of poetic identity, authority, and intent. This is especially apparent in Bynner and Ficke’s competing accounts of the Spectric School, where a retrospective, unpublished account of the hoax written by Ficke claiming to give a clear account of the Spectra Hoax instead serves to further complicate Bynner’s account of the hoax appearing in a 1928 edition of \textit{PALMS: A Magazine of Verse}.

Through undertaking a comparison of these documents alongside a set of newspaper articles and interviews chronicling the exposure of the Spectric School as a hoax, this chapter identifies how Bynner and Ficke both take advantage of, and respond to, a print culture characterised by reception and reviewing by retrospectively recasting their own poetic intentions within their accounts of the movement. Drawing on scholarship regarding the centrality of authorial intention to the practice of criticism, I will challenge current readings of the hoax that present it as a critique of modernist avant-garde poetry. These critiques sideline Bynner and Ficke’s own motives behind the movement; in reading the hoax in this way, critics risk simply reiterating contemporaneous appraisals of the movement that are more concerned with preserving a culture of reviewing than uncovering Bynner and Ficke’s own intentions behind the Spectra Hoax. Rather, through examining how the hoaxers recast their intentions regarding the movement in their retrospective accounts of its conception, I argue that Bynner and Ficke’s statements of intention have the effect of mystifying any attempts at uncovering a truth behind the construction of the Spectra Hoax.

Around a decade after the Spectric School was revealed to be a hoax, Bynner published an account of the Spectra Hoax in \textit{PALMS: A Magazine of Verse}. In addition to purporting to

outline a history of the hoax, Bynner concludes his account by acknowledging a tendency by anthologisers and critics to speculate that, ‘liberated by our pseudonyms and by complete freedom of manner’, the hoaxers ‘wrote better as Knish and Morgan than we have written in our own persons.’ Instead of refuting this claim, Bynner cautiously affirms it, writing that ‘once in a while we think so ourselves’. When read in isolation, this statement seems to build upon Bynner’s earlier interview with the New York Times Magazine from a decade earlier, with Bynner casting himself as a modernist author whose hoax self became more real than his real self, with the result being to further complicate the possibility of obtaining any conclusions as to Bynner’s own intentions behind the Spectra Hoax. Shortly after Bynner published his account of the Spectric School in *PALMS*, however, Ficke wrote an unpublished account of the Spectric School promising to recount ‘the truth, the whole truth, about the great Spectric School’ for ‘an admiring and respectful posterity’, stating that he ‘cannot permit Witter Bynner’s inaccurate account [of the hoax] … to remain uncorrected’. Ficke’s account of the Spectra Hoax, therefore, ostensibly begins with a claim to repairing the narrative of the Spectric School. The exaggerated use of legal vernacular, however, immediately undermines the veracity of Ficke’s account, and what follows instead is a subversion of the reader’s expectations, with Ficke detailing a number of anecdotes from which he ascertains that ‘Bynner does not give [him] as much credit for the founding of the Spectric School’ as he deserves, proceeding to ask the reader, for instance, whether Bynner mentions anywhere ‘in his false and felonious [sic] article’ that Ficke was the one that ‘furnished the ten bottles of excellent Scotch out of which … the whole Spectric philosophy’ was extracted. Ficke’s use and exaggeration of legal language sets up his account as a parodic deposition of the hoax movement, where his repeated denial to present ‘the truth’ of the movement establishes a refusal to present a conclusive and unitary narrative of the Spectra Hoax.

Despite his refusal to present a conclusive version of events in his account of the hoax, Ficke ends on an apparently ‘less frivolous’ note, countering Bynner’s conclusion that he and Ficke wrote better as their hoax identities than they had as themselves, and, writing that ‘his memory has played him a dramatic prank’, instead posits that they ‘never think that, as

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113 Bynner, “The Story of the Spectric School of Poetry.”
115 Ficke, “The Spectric School of Poetry.”
116 Ibid.
117 Ibid.
118 Ibid. p.5
applied to [their] own poetry; but … thoroughly think it about each other’s.  

Following this, Ficke excoriates Bynner for failing to ‘emphasize the seriousness that lay back of [their] nonsense’, writing that when he and Bynner construed the Spectric School, both of us were genuinely indignant at the charlatanism of some of the new “Schools” of poetry; and it was with the most deadly intentions that we made our attempt to render those “Schools” patently ridiculous. We had great fun doing it—but back of the fun was an intensity of malice which Bynner does not explain. We who had devoted our whole lives to poetry were angry and indignant on seeing apes and mountebanks prancing in the Temple. We had learned quite well that poetry is not as easy as that.

This is perhaps the clearest statement of intent provided by either of the authors for the establishment of the Spectric School, with Ficke’s change in tone indicating a desire to finally provide a motive behind the hoax movement.

In his seminal essay *The Death of the Author*, Roland Barthes criticises the role of authorial intent in the practice of literary criticism, characterising literature as a practice ‘tyrannically centred on the author’, arguing that ‘to give a text an Author is to impose a limit upon that text,’ where the assignation of authorship to a text results in a delimitation of its potential meanings. Instead, Barthes argues that the reader must separate the textual object from its creator in order to liberate it from the tyranny of interpretation, formulating the text instead as a ‘tissue of quotations’, with the result being a shift in the locus of meaning from the singular Author to a collective readership and the consequent casting of the reader as the space ‘on which all quotations that make up a writing are inscribed without any of them being lost’. Within Barthes’s essay, the author’s role in the creation of meaning becoming ceded by the reader’s ability to construe a multiplicity of meanings from the work. What emerges within critical accounts of the Spectra Hoax, however, is the opposite effect, where, through sideling Bynner and Ficke’s recondite and duplicitous intentions behind the hoax movement, critical accounts of the hoax instead tyrannically present the hoaxers as having been singularly minded, and singularly successful, in the construction of their hoax movement. This is especially true

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119 Ibid.
120 Ibid.
122 Ibid. p.148.
of Smith’s account of the hoax who, presented by Ficke’s contradictory statements of poetic intent, ultimately concludes that ‘the poets all the same did make their point’ of parodying contemporaneous avant-garde poetry movements, disregarding Ficke’s statements of intent in favour of imposing his own reading of the hoax.\textsuperscript{123}

Indeed, the quote that Smith draws from to draw his conclusions regarding the Spectra Hoax appears in an editorial in the \textit{Saturday Review} alongside a debate between Edith Franklin Wyatt and Leonard Bacon regarding the extent to which William Marion Reedy and Harriet Monroe had been duped by Bynner and Ficke. Specifically, Bacon and Wyatt debate how much knowledge Monroe had of the movement, with Bacon writing that she ‘seldom or never mentioned the episode’ and Wyatt countering that Monroe was aware of the Spectric School, having a hoax poem by Bynner ‘waiting guiltily for publication when careless gossiping betrayed the hoax’.\textsuperscript{124} It is understandable that Ficke retrospectively downplays the importance of the hoax within this context, especially considering the power that Monroe and Reedy had in determining poets’ careers as the editors of \textit{Poetry} and \textit{Reedy’s Mirror}, respectively.\textsuperscript{125}

Countering Barthes’s fatalistic conclusion regarding the death of the author, Stanley Fish argues that the ‘act of assigning intention’ is necessary for the ‘act of construing meaning’, where meaning is conditional on the specific circumstances within which the author was writing.\textsuperscript{126} Intention, therefore, is central to the practice of literary interpretation and exists within the interpretive circle, with the result being that ‘the act of intending a meaning cannot constrain the specification of intention that follows’.\textsuperscript{127} What this means is that ‘meaning, intention, and biography are inextricable’, where the re-centering of biography to the practice of interpretation foregrounds a set of debates regarding ‘what constitutes a biography, … what is and is not biographical evidence, … [and] what kinds of entities can have biographies’.\textsuperscript{128} This is not to say, however, that intention exists as a stable quantity in the practice of literary

\begin{thebibliography}{10}
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\bibitem{123} Smith, \textit{The Spectra Hoax}. p.47.
\bibitem{127} Ibid. p.14
\bibitem{128} Ibid. p.15
\end{thebibliography}
interpretation. Indeed, what emerges when Bynner and Ficke’s accounts of the hoax movement are compared is a divergence between the hoaxers’ retrospective declarations of intention, where Bynner’s embracing of his hoax identity is contrasted by Ficke’s desire to establish a firm motive behind the construction of the Spectra Hoax. This can perhaps be explained to some degree by the hoaxers’ divergent careers following the hoax movement. As Max Putzel identifies in his biography of William Marion Reedy, editor of Reedy’s Mirror, Bynner had a vested interest in keeping himself in good standing with his reviewers and publishers, arguing that in order to quell the wrath ‘his efforts had inspired in their victims’, ‘Bynner seems to have thought that his best policy lay in the plea of split personality which Reedy had suggested’, trying to ‘make peace with those he had duped by blaming Emanuel Morgan for their deception.’ Through considering Bynner’s actions alongside Reedy’s review of the movement, the hoaxer’s claim of split personality becomes characterised by Putzel as a pragmatic decision to save face with his publishers and subsequently downplay his involvement in the hoax through the conflation of his actual and pseudonymous poetic identities.

Indeed, following the Spectra Hoax, Bynner attempted to profit from his hoax identity, publishing a number of Spectric poems under his pseudonymous identity in an anthology titled The Beloved Stranger published by Alfred Knopf, Kennerly’s publishing apprentice. These attempts to save face, however, never fully succeeded in restoring Bynner’s reputation with critics and reviewers. As James Kraft identifies in his biography of Witter Bynner, by hoaxing his contemporaries, Bynner ‘set himself against the poets of the time, and in doing so he created great uncertainty about himself and his poetry’, leading to an unwillingness by his contemporaries to ever fully ‘trust and include him again’. This suspicion was only heightened by Bynner’s later poetic declarations of his homosexuality, with Kraft writing how Bynner and his partner Robert Hunt ‘led a married life’ following the hoax ‘when this was not largely or even minimally accepted’, with Bynner declaring his ‘love in his art at a time when it was easy for people to scorn or ignore his work because he was homosexual’.

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130 Ibid.
132 Ibid. p.84. As Kraft identifies, Witter Bynner’s poetic declarations regarding his sexuality became most explicitly expressed in Eden Tree, an anthology published by the author in 1931. Regarding the homosexual overtones of Eden Tree, Kraft quotes Bynner as having expressed relief that ‘its honesty has been understood’, writing that he is ‘sick of literary glazing over the truth’, finally stating that ‘poets, at any rate, shouldn’t’.
Kraft refers to *Eden Tree*, a book of poetry published in 1931, Bynner ambiguously gestures towards his homosexuality in ‘Opus 62’, writing:

> Three little creatures gloomed across the floor  
>     And stood profound in front of me,  
> And one was Faith, and one was Hope,  
>     And one was Charity.  
>  
> Faith looked for what it could not find,  
>     Hope looked for what was lost,  
> (Love looked and looked but Love was blind),  
>     Charity's eyes were crossed.  
>  
> Then with a leap a single shape,  
>     With beauty on its chin,  
> Brandished a little screaming ape . . .  
>     And each one, like a pin,  
>  
> Fell to a pattern on the rug  
>     As flat as they could be—  
> And died there comfortable and snug,  
>     Faith, Hope and Charity.  
>  
> That shape, it was my shining soul  
>     Bludgeoning every sham . . .  
> O little ape, be glad that I  
>     Can be the thing I am!133

Following the figurative death of faith, hope and charity, the ending of the poem gestures towards a liberation of Bynner’s homosexual identity, with the poet expressing gladness that, after ‘bludgeoning every sham’, he ‘can be the thing that I am’.134 This inflection of homosexual identity is a trope identified by Churchill, who argues that Bynner’s ambiguous framing of his gay identity within the context of the hoax movement dissolves the boundary between ‘same-

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134 Ibid.
sex desire’ and ‘flirtation and evasion’, with the result being that ‘the pose of lunacy serves as a way of being openly gay without necessarily admitting same-sex desire’.  

Meanwhile, as a reviewer stated in the Chicago Dial, ‘the interruption of the war … gave “Miss Knish” a commission as Captain Arthur Davison Ficke’, thus giving him the critical distance to cast a firm motive behind the Spectra Hoax without any consequences to his career as a poet. Care needs to be taken, however, in overstating the role that biography plays in the process of interpretation, since the text risks becoming subordinated to the status of a set of actions by the author. This is a concern addressed by Roger Chartier, who identifies a fundamental tension running through literary criticism characterised by two opposing approaches. The first constitutes approaches ‘that deduce the reading or the reader from the text’s internal structures’, while the second involves approaches that ‘attempt to locate individual or shared determinations which govern modes of interpretation from outside of the text’. Both of these approaches risk subordinating the hoax either to the interpretive processes that exist outside it or to the diegetic processes by which Bynner and Ficke cast their intentions behind the hoax movement. Indeed, Chartier adds that in order to restore the ‘true complexity’ of the ‘process by which works take on meaning’, it is necessary to consider ‘the close-knit relationship among three poles: the text itself, the object that conveys the text, and the act that grasps it’. Through its categorisation by critics as a work of parody, the Spectra Hoax has consequently become functionalised as a set of acts that produce the effect of parody, with the result being the sidelining of the cultural conditions within which the hoax took place. Conversely, to over-read the hoaxers’ poetic intentions regarding the hoax movement through a purely biographical lens is to commit a similar error to Smith, since such an approach risks overstating the importance of the social contexts and cultural conditions within which Bynner and Ficke were writing.

To read Bynner’s ambiguous statements as allusive references to his homosexual identity is to graft biographical meaning onto a movement that, by its nature, refuses to provide any conclusions regarding the hoaxers’ intentions. Indeed, Bynner’s ambiguous gestures towards his homosexual identity reflects D.A. Miller’s identification that, historically, homosexuality is referred to not by a ‘name, but the continual elision of one’, a fact that only

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136 “The History of Our So-Called Poetic Renaissance...”
138 Ibid. p.161.
complicates any attempts at establishing a firm causality between sexuality and intention. This is because references to homosexuality ‘only [work] by mobilizing highly variable and in any case never quite provable connotations’, complicating the ‘task of specifying how, or as what, it is perceptible,’ except when these connotations are put in reference to ‘the state of general opinion that is always ready to suspect, and often actually able to detect, male homosexual behavior in even the minutest deviation, by dilation or intensification, from male homosocial norms.’ Read in this way, the allusions to his homosexual identity that Bynner folds within his poetry always remain ambiguous, and thus complicate attempts at establishing any conclusive readings of Bynner’s hoax poems. Any attempt at parsing the hoaxers’ duplicitous intentions through their poetry is, furthermore, complicated by the framing of these poems as hoaxes. By framing their poems in this way, Bynner and Ficke inflect each of their poems with a degree of semantic ambiguity, gesturing towards a truth behind the movement while refusing to provide the reader any definitive revelations regarding the meanings of their poems. Through each rewriting of their own motives behind the hoax, therefore, Bynner and Ficke only further mystify their own intentions regarding its construction, with the truth of the movement only becoming more and more obscured with each recasting of its explanatory narrative. Rather than anchoring the Spectra Hoax within a particular context, therefore, Bynner and Ficke’s later writings have the opposite effect of further alienating Spectra and its associated writings from the cultural conditions within which it was produced.

Considering this alienation of the hoax from its cultural context, it is understandable that critics have attempted to inscribe meaning onto the hoaxers’ evasive and often parodic statements of intent. This desire to impose meaning upon the hoax movement is taken to the extreme in a retrospective editorial of the Spectric School appearing in a later edition of Reedy’s Mirror, with Arthur J. Eddy analysing it through the frame of Freudian psychoanalysis in order to argue that the hoaxers’ burlesques serve as ‘revelations of the real Bynner and the real Ficke’, commending the hoax for providing ‘delightful revelations … of two personalities who are betrayed to be more human, more natural, more hail-fellow-well-met than their serious verse indicates them to be’. To ascribe intention to the Spectric School in this way, however, is to neglect Bynner and Ficke’s own motives regarding the hoax movement and to thus deny the hoax movement the very Spectral qualities that the hoaxers took advantage of in parodying

the modernist avant-garde. Indeed, in his account of the movement, Bynner outlines how ‘on the way to visit Arthur Davison Ficke in Davenport, Iowa, I stopped in Chicago and saw the Russians give a ballet called Le Spectre de la Rose. The suggestiveness and fitness of the word Spectral or Spectric flashed over me’.\(^{142}\) Conceived by Bynner on his way to see Ficke, the Spectra Hoax reflects the liminality of the context within which it was construed, existing somewhere between Bynner and Ficke’s own lives and the wider cultural context within which they were writing, promising, but never providing, any answers as to its provenance. As a work that refuses to conclusively provide any answers regarding its intentions, the Spectra Hoax can be said to exist somewhere between the hoaxers’ own intentions, the context within which they were writing, and critics’ appraisals of it. The hoax, therefore, exists at the interface between truth and falsity, where each gesture towards intentionality simultaneously entails a refusal to uncover a truth behind the movement. The parodic mode of the movement only intensifies this denial, always promising poetic revelations yet obscuring them by undermining their veracity through the inflection of a double-meaning upon them. The recasting of poetic intention, therefore, serves to diffuse and refuse interpretations of the hoax by later critics, only clouding the hoaxers’ motives further rather than providing any truths regarding the movement.

\(^{142}\) Bynner, “The Story of the Spectric School of Poetry.” p.207.
Conclusion

In the epilogue to his book on literary forgeries, Ruthven writes that ‘literary forgeries are even more anarchic than literature because they question those institutions which identify and process the ‘genuine’ article’.143 The result, according to Ruthven, is that when a forgery is proved to be a forgery, what ensues is a moral panic ‘in people with a vested interested in keeping such institutions intact’.144 As this thesis has shown, literary hoaxes such as the Spectra Hoax threaten to collapse and destabilise implicit structures that exist within the literary field through their parody. To call the fallout following the exposure of the Spectric School a hoax a moral panic, however, is to misrepresent a movement that deliberately elides any attempts at establishing firm meanings behind the actions of its hoaxers.

Despite, or perhaps because of this refusal by Bynner and Ficke to conclusively signify their intentions regarding the movement, the Spectra Hoax has enjoyed a curious afterlife in the annals of literary history. In what is perhaps a deeply ironic consequence of the hoaxers’ critique of modernist avant-garde poetry, the Spectra book has become fetishized as a collector’s item by the very print culture that the hoaxers were repudiating through their hoax poetry. Smith writes that ‘copies of Spectra have for many years been collectors’ items’,145 reflecting a sentiment expressed by a reviewer writing for the Arizona Republic in 1940 who avers that ‘whatever it is worth as poetry, “Spectra” today commands a premium in first edition form and finds a special place in the bibliography of its authors [sic] works’.146 Having become subsumed within an economic system of cultural valuation, the hoax today exists at the margins of a print culture that treats it at best as a literary curiosity, and at worst as an ‘aberration’ of modernist poetry which is ‘best ignored’.147 This is exemplified by the Specta Hoax’s inclusion in The Museum of Hoaxes, an inclusion that ossifies the Spectra Hoax literally into a museum object to shock and be gawked at, with the result being the transformation of the hoax from a system of coalesced meanings into an alienated entity to be cordoned off and stared at from afar. Similarly, a recent article written by Michael Waters appearing in Atlas Obscura, a website that features obscure events, places and things from around the world, proffers a brief

143 Ruthven, Faking Literature. p.198.
144 Ibid.
145 Smith, The Spectra Hoax. p.46.
147 Ruthven, Faking Literature. p.195.
history of the Spectra Hoax, ultimately concluding, as Bynner’s account of the hoax does, on a claim of split identity.\textsuperscript{148}

As this thesis has discussed, criticism of the movement has similarly treated the hoax as a set of concrete narratives, perhaps explained by the dominance of Smith’s account of the hoax from 1961 which reflected a resurgence of interest in dubious authorship and hoax movements during that period. Smith’s account of the hoax is followed by Suzanne Churchill’s article published in 2005, who analyses the hoax’s incarnation within the pages of Others. What these accounts crucially miss, however, is the potential of the hoax movement to encourage the reader to reconsider previously assumed relationships within the sphere of the modernist avant-garde. This is a concept referenced in an interview with Bob Perelman discussing the hoax movement during a workshop at the University of Pennsylvania. In it, Perelman tenders that ‘the real scandal for [him]’ regarding the Spectra Hoax is that the movement shows ‘that there is no hoax poetry’, stating ‘that maybe poetry itself has something tremendously hoax-like at its heart’.\textsuperscript{149} Perelman’s statement gestures toward the transformative power of the hoax, with the hoax possessing the potential to encourage the reader to synthesise new critical, cultural, and generic relationships between the movement and the sphere of cultural production.

Although this thesis is, by its nature, limited in scope both by the archival materials I have chosen to present and the detail with which I have presented the Spectra Hoax, I hope to have restored the Spectra Hoax’s status as a plexus of valent meanings, parodying even the way its own history has become reiterated and gradually refunctioned by subsequent critics. To limit the potentiality of the hoax movement is to succumb to a culture increasingly characterised by a desire to impose limits of authorship, authenticity and intention on the works that exist within it, assigning works that do not conform to its standards a marginal, outsider status. As has been discussed, the hoax had irreparable ramifications on Bynner and Ficke’s careers and legacies as poets. Despite the wealth of resources on his life, Arthur Davison Ficke has not had a biography written about him, having become relegated to the annals of biographical encyclopedias. Witter Bynner, meanwhile, has enjoyed a brief afterlife in James Kraft’s biography of the author titled Who Is Witter Bynner?, with Kraft presenting the author as a figure who has been relegated to the border of modernist American literature despite the


\textsuperscript{149} pennsound, \textit{Bob Perelman Discusses the Spectra Hoax}, 2010, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gu_Enct8JvU.
fact that Bynner was deeply involved with a number of now prominent poets from the period.\textsuperscript{150} Interestingly, a review of Kraft’s biography by David Yezzi critiques the book for missing ‘the wealth of telling particulars obviously available to a Bynner biographer that would animate its subject beyond broad psychologizing’,\textsuperscript{151} reflecting Woolf’s preoccupation with balancing the ‘substance of fact’ with the use of fiction in the genre of literary biography.\textsuperscript{152} Yezzi presents Bynner as a poet whose poems ‘were soon obscured by the fragments of civilization that Pound began piecing into the Cantos’, with his style of the ‘simple lyric’ losing ground to the aesthetically and intellectually charged experiments of authors such as Wallace Stevens and T.S. Eliot.\textsuperscript{153} To present Bynner as an author out of step with his contemporaries, however, is to consign the Spectra Hoax a similar status in the modernist canon.

Indeed, this thesis has instead attempted to refigure the unique status of the Spectra Hoax in relation to modernist print culture, highlighting how Bynner and Ficke, as I have shown, deeply involve the movement within a print culture increasingly suspicious of texts that refused to conform to generically imposed markers of provenance and authorship. Through exploring how Bynner and Ficke mediated the ‘hearts’ cry’ of their poetry through their hoax poetry movement, I have identified how the hoaxers instigated an attempt to align their movement along the movements they were claiming to critique, thus involving the Spectra Hoax in an effort to redirect poetry towards a social function.\textsuperscript{154} Through this process, the hoaxers subsequently subverted what it meant to be a modernist author in the construction of their hoax identities, exploiting the collapse between style and matter in order to enact this challenge. This struggle, embodied by the declaration that the ‘only difficulty about them was that they passed too often out of parody and burlesque into good poetry of original significance’, had the consequence of throwing the hoaxers’ own intentions into doubt, a problem only exacerbated by Bynner and Ficke’s own accounts of the movement.\textsuperscript{155}

By recasting their own intentions, the hoaxers elide any attempts at establishing a singular motive behind the movement. Through reconciling the status of the Spectra Hoax with the print culture within which it emerged I have attempted to recover its oppositional status as

\textsuperscript{150} James Kraft, \textit{Who is Witter Bynner?} In his biography, Kraft presents Witter Bynner as a figure heavily involved in modernist and mid-century literary circles, having had the privilege of accompanying D.H. Lawrence and his wife Frieda on a trip to Mexico in 1923.
\textsuperscript{152} Woolf, “The New Biography.” p.100.
\textsuperscript{153} Yezzi, “Whither Bynner?”
\textsuperscript{154} Ficke, “Modern Tendencies in Poetry.”
\textsuperscript{155} “Spectrics Unmasked.”
a resistive text, contesting the boundaries imposed upon it by later critics and anthologists. Through presenting the hoax as a text that contests its own interpretation I hope to have restored the ‘suggestiveness and fitness’ of its ‘Spectric’ designation, with the Spectra Hoax always refusing and undermining the categories imposed upon it.  

In his letter to Leonard Bacon, Ficke concludes by downplaying the ramifications the Spectra Hoax had on modernist print culture, writing that it ‘was no Gunpowder Plot to blow up the Houses of Parliament; it was conceived very frivolously, was meant to be taken very lightly, and so far as I know it never even cracked a windowpane’. As this thesis has shown, however, the potential of the Spectra Hoax to reformulate relationships in the sphere of the modernist avant-garde exceeded even Witter Bynner and Arthur Davison Ficke’s own expectations of its capabilities.

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156 Bynner, “The Story of the Spectric School of Poetry.” p.207  
157 Bacon, “Americans and Poetry.”
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https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gu_Enct8JvU.


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