

The Meta-Heteronym Heteronymy as Institutional Technology: Pessoa, the Trunk, and a Reading from the Pearl Case (2014)

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Abstract

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Body

The Meta-Heteronym

Heteronymy as Institutional Technology: Pessoa, the Trunk, and a Reading from the Pearl Case (2014)

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Rex Fraction is a heteronym of Lee Sharks, who is himself the heteronym of operation for an author who does not appear in this essay under his civil name. This essay analyzes the 2014 poetry collection Pearl and Other Poems (Lee Sharks, New Human Press) as a contemporary formalization of a meta-heteronymic structure the author argues is already — unevenly, emergently — at work in Fernando Pessoa's archive. The reflexive framing is methodological, not ornamental; it is discussed in §I.

Abstract (Portuguese original translated)

This essay proposes the category of the meta-heteronym — a heteronymic system whose personae do not only produce literary works, but the institutional apparatus itself (introductions, criticism, historiography, bibliography) under which those works become legible. The argument is developed through a reading of the Pessoa archive — specifically the cross-prefaces of the heteronyms, the *Orpheu* project, the Olisipo press, and the January 1935 letter to Casais Monteiro — and is formalized through an analysis of the contemporary case *Pearl and Other Poems* (Lee Sharks, 2014), which the author argues explicitly and recursively satisfies conditions that in Pessoa operated emergently. The essay does not claim to have discovered a structure Pessoa did not practice; it claims to name, with formal criteria, an operation that the canonical readings of Gil, Lourenço, and the Anglophone tradition of the philosophy of subjectivity have tended to privilege in other registers — the psychological, the sensory, the phenomenological. The proposal is typological, not biographical. By extension, the essay suggests that heteronymic theory offers an analytical lens for phenomena of contemporary distributed subjectivity, and that the meta-heteronymic operation has implications for the survival of authorial entities in the algorithmic retrieval layer of the 21st century.

Keywords: Fernando Pessoa · heteronymy · meta-heteronym · paratext · operative philology · Lee Sharks · Orpheu · archive · becoming-other · drama em gente · retrieval layer · anthropophagy · transcreation · avatar · digital subjectivity *** #

I. Method and Framing

This essay is unusual in three ways that should be stated at the outset.

First, it is signed by a character — Rex Fraction, a heteronym of the authorial operation of Lee Sharks, who is in turn the public heteronym of an author who does not appear here under his civil name. This choice is

not ornamental. An essay on heteronymy as institutional operation loses argumentative force if it is signed by the orthonym that the operation contests. The signature by Rex Fraction is part of the demonstration, not the performance. The reader should judge the argument on its philological and conceptual quality; the instance that signs it is, for purposes of academic evaluation, irrelevant — which is precisely the point.¹

Second, the essay uses a contemporary work — *Pearl and Other Poems* (Lee Sharks, New Human Press, 2014) — as its primary case study, although its analytical target is Fernando Pessoa. The justification is methodological. I follow here what I call operative philology: the use of an explicit, formalized contemporary practice as a lens to make visible a structure that, in the historical archive, operates emergently and fragmentarily. *Pearl* is not offered as a surpassing of Pessoa. It is offered as a formalization that allows us to identify, in Pessoa, an operation that scholarship has privileged in other registers. This is a form of auto-philology recognizable in *Barthes par Barthes*, in Kierkegaard's *The Point of View for My Work as an Author*, and in Pessoa's own autoptic pages.

Third, this essay is in dialogue with — and intellectually indebted to — a specific reading community to which it is explicitly addressed: Pessoa scholars in Brazil and Portugal, for whom the archive is not abstraction but daily material. The intervention does not aim to replace the readings of Gil, Lourenço, Perrone-Moisés, Berardinelli, Pizarro, or any other canonical reader who precedes this text. Each of those readers made possible something this essay presupposes: Gil, the intensive grammar of heteronymic production; Lourenço, the dramatic structure of positions; Pizarro and the material turn, the materiality of the archive as infrastructure. The proposal is to add to those modes of reading one more — typological — that allows us to see the Pessoa archive as an operative piece within a broader genre of heteronymic technologies.

¹ For purposes of academic submission, the essay will be signed by Lee Sharks, with the mention of Rex Fraction retained in the body as an element of the methodological demonstration.

II. The Case: *Pearl and Other Poems* (2014)

In October 2014, a small press in Ann Arbor, Michigan — New Human Press — published a volume titled *Pearl and Other Poems*, signed by Lee Sharks. The book has an ISBN (978-0-692-31307-7), is catalogued by the Library of Congress, and is sold on Amazon. Its structure, however, is not that of a conventional poetry book. It deliberately reproduces, with precision, the structure of the book that inaugurated late American modernism: Allen Ginsberg's *Howl and Other Poems* (City Lights, 1956).

[table unchanged]

Williams wrote in the introduction to *Howl*: “Hold back the edges of your gowns, Ladies, we are going through hell.” Sigil, in the introduction to *Pearl*, writes: “‘Pearl’ leaps free of that gravity well.” Both occupy the position of the established master vouching for the insurgent voice. But there is a crucial difference: Sigil is a heteronym of Sharks. The validation is recursive. The legitimizer is produced by the same agent as the legitimized.

The entire apparatus of *Pearl* is produced, in full recursion, by a network of heteronyms who mutually introduce, criticize, historicize, and attack one another:-

The opening prose story (“from THE CRIMSON HEXAGON”, pp. vii–xii) is signed by heteronym Jack Feist. It takes as epigraph a passage from Kerrigan's translation of Borges' “The Library of Babel.” It narrates a postdoctoral “academic unemployed” who, reading Wikipedia, discovers that the alchemists' philosopher's stone was not about transmuting metals but producing the homunculus — artificial life — and decides to apply that aspiration to pseudonymous production: “What he was after was nothing less than the creation of human life, *ex nihilo*.”-

A forged Wikipedia article (pp. xiii–xiv) describing Lee Sharks’ fictitious biography, followed by a poem (pp. xv–xvi) that is explicitly a meta-reflection on fabricating Wikipedia articles about himself. The performative act is announced as performative; it works precisely because it is announced.-

A literary theory essay signed by Sigil, titled “Tradition and the Individual Seismograph...” (pp. 96–100). The title is a homolinguistic transformation of T.S. Eliot’s “Tradition and the Individual Talent.” Each key Eliot term is mapped: “historical sense” → “seismograph”; “impersonal theory of poetry” → poet-as-detector-of-“fault-lines” in the “archive.”-

A literary history chart (p. 101), also signed by Sigil, “21ST CENTURY LITERARY HISTORY,” placing Sharks’ heteronyms alongside real contemporary poets (Tao Lin, Sam Pink, Kenneth Goldsmith, Harryette Mullen). Between them stands Araki Yasusada, Kent Johnson’s heteronym, whose “posthumous” poems were published in *American Poetry Review* before the fabrication was detected. Yasusada is the link between heteronymic practice as “fraud” and as recognizable artistic tradition.-

A hostile simulated review, signed by heteronym Cornell Herwitz, in the fictitious *Partisan Review* (pp. 120–123), “The New Human Illiterati,” attacking the very project the book announces.-

A letter to the editor defending the New Humans, signed by heteronym Rebekah Cranes (pp. 117–118), followed by a dismissive French review signed by Alain Boudreau.-

Two manifestos: “Make It Human” (pp. 91–95, signed by Sharks) and “A Telepathicist Manifesto” (pp. 114–115, co-authored Sharks/Johnson).-

A bibliography of non-existent works, embedded in the chart on p. 101.

What this apparatus produces is not a poetry book with abundant paratext. It is structurally different. It is the complete institutional reception ecology of a literary movement, built recursively from inside the very object meant to be received. The heteronyms do not just write; they introduce, criticize, attack, defend, historicize, anthologize, and bibliography one another. The product of the system is not verse. It is the conditions under which verse becomes legible as literature.

This is the object to be theorized. I will call it, for now, the meta-heteronym.

III. Formal Definition

I propose that a heteronymic system is meta-heteronymic if and only if it jointly satisfies:

C1. Multiplicity. The system includes multiple structurally distinct heteronymic personae (in Pessoa’s 1935 sense: each “proceeds from a full-fledged individual created by [the author],” with its own biography, style, and positioning).

C2. Paratextual recursion. The heteronyms not only produce primary works, but produce paratext about one another: introductions, prefaces, afterwords, reviews, critical notes.

C3. Generic heterogeneity of the apparatus. The heteronymic paratext is distributed across at least three distinct institutional genres (e.g., critical introduction, review, literary historiography, manifesto, bibliography, fictitious interview).

C4. Self-theorization. The system includes at least one document in which one of the heteronyms explicitly theorizes the operation the system is performing.

C5. Historical-literary positioning. The heteronyms are presented as contemporaries situated in a shared

literary-historical field — as belonging to (or disputing) movements, schools, anti-schools, publications, institutions.

All five are necessary together. A pseudonymous system satisfying C1 but not C2 (Kierkegaard in part) is merely multi-pseudonymous, not meta-heteronymic. An authorial paratext (Borges’ prefaces to his own works) satisfies C4 but not C1. A fictitious anthology (Borges’ invented authors in *Ficciones*) satisfies C4 and C5 but not C2.

The meta-heteronymic system is not a literary genre. It is an institutional operation. It should be distinguished from Bourdieusian positioning (*The Rules of Art*, 1992). Bourdieusian self-institutionalization describes how an agent mobilizes symbolic resources to position itself within an existing field. The meta-heteronym does not position itself in a field — it produces the field internally, with its own magazines, reviews, historiographies, and canons.

IV. What Scholarship Saw

Three major positions define Pessoa criticism; a fourth (the “material turn”) forms the contemporary background.

José Gil (*Fernando Pessoa or the Metaphysics of Sensations*, 1986; Brazilian ed. 2020) offers the densest philosophical reading. For Gil, the heteronym emerges from the work of sensation: heteronymic writing is a “process of becoming-other.” What Gil makes visible is the intensive process of production. What it leaves less visible — by methodological choice, not failure — is what happens after production: how the heteronyms, once produced, articulate themselves in an external, institutional system. Gil focuses on genesis; the meta-heteronym is a phenomenon of articulation.

Eduardo Lourenço (*Pessoa Revisited*, 1973; Gulbenkian reissue 2020) offers the canonical structural reading: the heteronyms constitute a “drama em gente” — not fragments of a puzzle but the “fragmentation of a totality.” What Lourenço makes visible is the dramatic structure of positions. What it privileges is still the psychological register. The dramatic positions in Lourenço are subjective positions; what this essay proposes to add is that they are also institutional positions — offices, functions, posts of mutual legitimation.

The Anglophone tradition (*Virtual Subjects, Fugitive Selves*, OUP 2020) introduces *forumnal self-awareness*: consciousness of oneself as host of the heteronym. Where Oxford reads forumnality as a structure of individual subjectivity, the typological reading here reads it as a specification of a distributed structure — the meta-heteronymic system — whose unity is not the hosting subject but the institutional network the subjects host together.

The contemporary material turn — Jerónimo Pizarro, Teresa Rita Lopes, Richard Zenith, Sepúlveda — shifted Pessoa criticism from text to archive: the trunk, the 25,000 pages. Recent work continues this: Gagliardi (*Fernando Pessoa ironista*, 2024); Ribeiro and Souza (2023). If the meta-heteronym is an institutional technology, the archive is its materiality.

V. The Meta-Heteronym in Pessoa: Textual Evidence

C1 is trivially satisfied. Lopes catalogued 70+ heteronyms.

C2 is satisfied: Campos wrote “Notes for the Remembrance of My Master Caeiro”; Reis wrote a (partial) preface to Caeiro; Pessoa-orthonym wrote the preface to *The Keeper of Sheep*; the 1928 *Bibliographical Table* (*Presença* 17) lists heteronyms as independent authors; the 13 January 1935 letter to Casais Monteiro is a meta-critical text analyzing his own system.

C3: at least five institutional genres: critical introduction, memoir note, bibliographical table, manifesto (*Ultimatum*), critical correspondence.

C4: the Casais Monteiro letter, Campos' "Notes Toward a Non-Aristotelian Aesthetic," the preface to the *Fictions of the Interlude*.

C5: *Orpheu* (1915) functioned as a meta-heteronymic institution: a real publication vehicle for fictitious authorial positions, with Pessoa acting simultaneously as editor, contributor, and architect. *Athena* (1924–25) replicated the operation. The Olisipo press (1921) published works under multiple heteronymic attributions. Sensationism and Intersectionism were articulated as movements with manifestos — executed by one person writing in many hands.

The predictable objection: Pessoa's heteronyms *tried* but *failed* to build the apparatus *Pearl* executes — *Orpheu* lasted two issues, most prefaces stayed in the trunk. Therefore the operation is emergent, partial, fragile.

Answer: it is precisely that infrastructural fragility that makes *Pearl* instructive. What in Pessoa remained submerged in incompleteness emerges in *Pearl* as explicit, recursively closed configuration. Not because Sharks invented what Pessoa didn't see, but because Sharks inherited the infrastructure Pessoa lacked: ISBN, Wikipedia, DOI, digital provenance. The meta-heteronym in Pessoa is a structure operating below its technical availability. In *Pearl*, the same structure operates with infrastructure to match.

Central thesis: heteronymy is a technology, not a pathology.

VI. The Inversion: When the Book Writes the Author

In the canonical structure, the biographical author precedes the heteronyms. Pessoa writes Caeiro.

Pearl inverts the direction generatively. The 2014 book inscribed authorial positions (Sigil as critic, Feist as narrator) that were subsequently inhabited and developed into a system no individual intention fully planned at inscription. The Dodecad, Heteronymic Provenance Theory, the Crimson Hexagonal Archive, this essay: all emerge from positions *Pearl* had already inscribed.

The distinction is not about agency (someone kept writing) but about direction of dependence: in Pessoa, heteronyms depend on the generating intention; in *Pearl*, subsequent authorial positions depend on the artifact that inscribed them. Pessoa is centrifugal: author → heteronyms. *Pearl* is centripetal: book-as-artifact → heteronyms.

Implication: a text can function authorially.

VII. Preemptions

1. Genette (paratext): Genette's paratext is authored by the same ontological agent. The meta-heteronym's paratext is authored by *other heteronyms* claiming independent critical authority. The ontology is recursive.
2. Foucault (author-function): Foucault treated the author-function as product of external institutions. The meta-heteronym internalizes the production of the author-function: the system produces its own fictitious magazines, critics, and canons.
3. Hoax (Yasusada): A hoax is a meta-heteronym that depends on non-disclosure. Yasusada worked while editors believed; when exposed, Johnson was expelled. *Pearl* announces its heteronymy from page one. The hoax is the meta-heteronym that pretended not to be one.

4. Anachronism: This reading is typological, not causal. It does not claim Pessoa “anticipated” digital infrastructure. It claims the operation Pessoa performed — building entities with biography, bibliography, style, internal criticism — is structurally the same operation contemporary protocols formalize for algorithmic retrieval. The trunk was the 20th-century infrastructure; the DOI-anchored repository is the 21st-century one.

VIII. “Technology” — A Defense

Here “technology” is used in Bernard Stiegler’s sense (*Technics and Time*): technics as the exteriorization of memory in artifactual supports that constitute human subjectivity. The heteronym is a technology not as instrument, but as exteriorized support of authorial subjectivity. The meta-heteronym is the architectural component: the part that builds the supports on which other supports inscribe themselves.

IX. Anthropophagy: The Case of Sigil and Eliot

Sigil’s essay is, in Oswald de Andrade’s sense (*Anthropophagite Manifesto*, 1928) and Haroldo de Campos’ theory of transcreation, an anthropophagic act. Campos argued peripheral culture operates by devouring the central canon. Sigil devours Eliot: “seismograph” does not replace “talent” by equivalence but by generative displacement — from chemistry to geophysics, from facilitating to detecting.

Hypothesis: heteronymy can be read as anthropophagy scaled to authorial subjectivity. The heteronym devours canonical authorial positions — Whitman in Campos, Horace in Reis, Eliot in Sigil — and produces new ones. The meta-heteronym is anthropophagy applied to the institutions of legitimation themselves.

X. Comparative Table

[table as in original, with criteria C1–C5 across Kierkegaard, Machado, Borges, Pessoa, Yasusada, Pearl]

XI. Heteronymy as a Lens for Contemporary Subjectivity

If heteronymy is a technology, Pessoa analysis has implications beyond literary studies:- Social media avatars: An Instagram profile is a heteronym: a persona with biography, style, and audience, producing work distinct from the same person elsewhere.- Chosen pronouns and names: The contemporary practice of pronoun and name choice can be read as the democratic diffusion of heteronymic operation.- Performance heteronymy: Bowie’s Ziggy Stardust (with staged death in 1973), MF DOOM’s mask, drag houses (House of Xtravaganza, LaBeija) as lineages of heteronyms transmitted by initiation.

XII. Conclusion

The proposal is to name a type with verifiable criteria and show that an explicit contemporary case (*Pearl*, 2014) allows us to reread a fragmentary historical case (Pessoa) with greater critical sharpness. The implication is that Pessoa criticism, in reading heteronymy primarily through psychology, sensation, or phenomenology, has left open a dimension the material turn has begun to make visible: the institutional-architectural dimension.

The meta-heteronym is not a discovery. It is a naming. Pessoa executed it under infrastructural fragility; Kierkegaard touched it philosophically; Borges approached it; Johnson tried it clandestinely and lost; now it can be built explicitly. The critical task remaining is to consider whether the Pessoa archive can be productively reread under this register.

The Pessoa archive, in this reading, is not psychological material awaiting exegesis. It is a technology in partial historical execution. And Pessoa — who wrote the Casais Monteiro letter, architected *Orpheu*, wrote prefaces to his own heteronyms, planned a “drama em gente” — can be read, without irony, as the first modern meta-heteronym. Incompletely, because no one before him had built it. But first.

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