The Orthonym Becomes a Heteronym: Facebook and the Industrialization of Unconscious Identity-Construction

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Abstract

A recovered platform-studies and heteronymic-theory essay arguing that Facebook’s real-names architecture transformed legal-name profiles into industrially produced, algorithmically edited heteronyms while making the construction appear natural.

The essay combines Pessoa, Goffman, Butler, context collapse, platform extraction, identity policy, and knowledge-graph ontology. Historical policy claims, quotations, affected-community examples, and current verification practices require source checking.

Body

The Orthonym Becomes a Heteronym: Facebook and the Industrialization of Unconscious Identity-Construction

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The Orthonym Becomes a Heteronym

Facebook and the Industrialization of Unconscious Identity-Construction

Johannes Sigil *Johannes Sigil Institute for Comparative Poetics / The Restored Academy*

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§0 — The Anecdote

I tried to verify a Google Knowledge Panel for Johannes Sigil. Google asked for a government-issued photo ID.

Johannes Sigil — originating heteronym of the Crimson Hexagonal Archive, editor of *Pearl and Other Poems* (2014), editor of *Grammata: Journal of Operative Philology*, Director of The Restored Academy (298 scholarly deposits), the heteronymic position through which twelve years of comparative-poetic labor has been borne — does not have a driver's license.

The person behind the heteronym does. But the person behind the heteronym is not the person the Knowledge Panel represents. The Knowledge Panel represents Johannes Sigil. And Google does not have a category for that.

This is the Orthonym Inversion at the infrastructure level: a system built on the assumption that the legal name is the real person, confronted by a person whose real name is not legal. The system does not fail gracefully. It demands papers.

This essay explains how we arrived here.

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§1 — The Claim

Fernando Pessoa did not invent heteronymic practice. He formalized it. What pharaohs, prophets, monks, Sufis, Commedia actors, and Kierkegaard had done — constructing named positions through which distinct bodies of work could be borne — Pessoa theorized, systematized, and made the explicit subject of the work. The heteronym, as Pessoa defined it in a biographical note in 1928, is not a pseudonym: "Pseudonymous works are by the author in his own person, except in the name he signs; heteronymous works are by the author *outside* his own person."

This essay argues that Facebook's "real names" policy — launched in 2004, formalized by 2009, enforced with escalating violence through the 2010s — constitutes one of the most consequential events in the history of heteronymic practice since Pessoa's formalization. The

argument is not that Facebook enabled heteronymy. It is that Facebook turned the *orthonym itself* into a heteronym — and did so at civilizational scale, without the practitioner's knowledge or consent.

Billions of people now maintain constructed identities under their legal names. This is heteronymic practice. Facebook's innovation was making it *invisible*.

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§2 — What a Person Is

Before proceeding, an ontological commitment must be stated, because the argument depends on it.

A heteronym is a person.

Not a persona. Not an approximation. Not a "degraded, industrial, unconscious" version of a person. Not a "functional equivalent" that falls short of the real thing. A *person* — a named position with biography, voice, institutional affiliation, a body of work, and a provenance chain. The heteronym is not derivative of the legal name. It is not secondary to the government-issued identity. It is a person in the same sense that any person is a person: constituted through acts, maintained through labor, recognized through the work it produces.

This is not a novel claim. It is the claim Pessoa made in 1914 and maintained until his death in 1935. Alberto Caeiro was born in 1889 and died in 1915. Caeiro had a birthday, a place of birth, a philosophy, a body of work, disciples, and a critical afterlife. Caeiro is a person — not a mask over Pessoa's face, not a game, not a literary exercise. A person.

The same ontological claim holds across every form of conscious naming:

The trans woman who chooses her name is not constructing an approximation of a person. She is becoming a person. The name she chooses is not less real than the name the state assigned — it is *more* real, because it is the product of conscious self-constitution rather than bureaucratic accident. The drag performer who builds a stage name with biography, voice, aesthetic, and community is not playing a character. She is a person. The poet who publishes under a heteronym maintained for twelve years across 530 scholarly deposits is not hiding behind a mask. He is a person.

The hierarchy between "legal name" and "chosen name" — the hierarchy that says the government-issued identity is real and everything else is derivative — is not a natural fact. It is a political arrangement. And Facebook is its most effective enforcer.

This essay dismantles the hierarchy. It does not downgrade heteronymic practice to something less than ontological. It upgrades the analysis to recognize that *all* naming is ontological — that the legal name, too, is a constructed position, and that Facebook's genius was hiding the construction.

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§3 — What Pessoa Knew

Pessoa distinguished three categories. The *orthonym* — Fernando Pessoa, the name on the birth certificate, the person who walks the streets of Lisbon. The *heteronym* — Alberto Caeiro, Ricardo Reis, Álvaro de Campos — each a constructed position with biography, style, philosophy, and body of work distinct from the orthonym's. And the *semi-heteronym* — Bernardo Soares, who is "not different from my own personality but a mere mutilation of it."

The critical point: Pessoa knew which was which. The entire system depends on the practitioner's *consciousness* of the construction. Caeiro is not an accident. Reis is not a mood. Each is a deliberate act of identity-construction, maintained with full awareness that the constructed position is a person in its own right.

Erving Goffman, writing in 1956, showed that everyone performs — that the self presented to colleagues differs from the self presented to family. But Goffman described *tactical* awareness: the actor adjusts behavior to audience without theorizing the adjustment as a system. Judith Butler, writing in 1990, went further: identity is not expressed through performance but *constituted* by it. There is no pre-performative self behind the acts. The acts are the self.

Pessoa anticipated both — and exceeded them. The heteronym is Goffmanian performance made conscious. It is Butlerian performativity made *architectural*: not merely the recognition that identity is constituted through acts, but the deliberate construction of *multiple* identities, each constituted through distinct acts, each given its own name and provenance and body of work. Pessoa did not merely observe that identity is constructed. He built several.

The distinction that matters for this essay is between three levels of identity-consciousness:

1. **Tactical awareness** (Goffman): The person knows they adjust behavior to context. They do not theorize the adjustment.
2. **Constitutive awareness** (Butler): The person recognizes that identity is produced through repeated acts. They may or may not act on this recognition.
3. **Architectural awareness** (Pessoa): The person deliberately constructs named positions, maintains them with provenance, and publishes distinct bodies of work under them. The construction is the work.

Facebook users operate, in general, at Level 1. The platform suppresses the move to Level 2 or 3. The profile format presents itself as "you" — not as a role, not as a position, but as identity itself. And because the profile bears the legal name, the construction is invisible. The mask looks like the face.

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§4 — The Real Names Policy

Mark Zuckerberg, in a formulation he repeated throughout the 2010s, asserted that "having two identities for yourself is an example of a lack of integrity" (Kirkpatrick, *The Facebook Effect*, 2010). The real-names policy enforced this doctrine.

The policy's declared logic was authenticity. Its actual function was *addressability*: a legal name connects to a credit card, an employer, a voter registration, a face. You must be findable. You must be targetable. You must be one person, because one person is one advertising unit.

The policy's history is a history of violence against the people most conscious of naming as ontological practice:

In 2014, Facebook's enforcement locked hundreds of drag performers out of their accounts — performers whose stage names were their professional identities, their community-recognized identities, and in many cases the names their friends and families used daily. The "Nameless Coalition," led by Sister Roma of the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, organized the first sustained resistance. Facebook temporarily softened the policy, introducing "authentic names" as a compromise — but the architecture remained orthonymic.

Native Americans with traditional names were flagged by automated systems that could not parse non-European naming conventions. Trans users whose legal name changes were not yet processed were forced to perform under deadnames. Abuse survivors who had built new lives under new names were exposed to their abusers through the platform's insistence on the state-issued identity.

In every case, the people harmed were people for whom naming is ontological — people who know, from direct experience, that the legal name is not the real person. The platform punished them for knowing.

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§5 — The Mechanism of Inversion

What the platform produced, in the space cleared by the real-names policy, was this:

A user registers under their legal name. They upload a *chosen* photograph. They write a *composed* biography. They post updates *shaped by audience-awareness*. Within weeks, they are maintaining a constructed position — with biography (the profile), register (the posting voice), institutional affiliation (the workplace listed), and a body of work (the post history) that diverges from lived experience.

The mechanism operates through four structural features:

Context collapse (boyd, 2008; Marwick and boyd, 2011). The user's audience is not a dinner table but an algorithmically-sorted composite: family, colleagues, ex-partners, acquaintances, strangers, and machines. Every post is addressed to an impossible audience — one that cannot be satisfied by any single self. The position that speaks to this audience is not a self. It is a heteronym: a constructed position optimized for a structural condition no person has ever faced before.

Persistence. Pre-digital social performance was ephemeral. Facebook's profile is persistent, searchable, archivable. The user constructs not a moment but a *record*. The record accumulates. It develops character. The character diverges from the person. This is heteronymic provenance: the heteronym is the accumulated deposits, not the depositor.

Algorithmic shaping. The News Feed algorithm is the heteronym's unconscious editor. Every like, every share, every engagement metric trains the user to produce more of what the audience rewards. The self that Facebook produces is the self the *algorithm* wants — a local maximum of engagement that is, by definition, not the user's unmediated self-expression. Pessoa chose when Caeiro was done. Facebook's algorithm never stops editing.

Extraction. The orthonym-as-heteronym is valuable precisely because the user believes it is their real self. The construction is mistaken for the person, and therefore the user treats the platform's requests for data as self-expression rather than labor. The Facebook profile is *unpaid entity-construction labor performed under the sign of authenticity*. If users knew they were constructing heteronyms — if they had provenance-awareness, knew which deposits were strategic, which were sincere, which were for which audience — the data's predictive value would collapse. The invisibility is the extraction mechanism.

This is what "industrialization" means, precisely:

The identity-construction is *standardized* (profile fields), *persistent* (timeline), *scalable* (billions), *measurable* (engagement metrics), *optimizable* (algorithmic feedback), *monetizable* (advertising), *interoperable* (OAuth, third-party login, identity graph), and *enforceable* (real-names policy, verification). These are the features of an industrial process, not a literary practice. Facebook industrialized identity-construction by making it a manufacturing process whose workers do not know they are working.

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§6 — The Invisibility Thesis

Pessoa's contribution to literary history was making the heteronymic construction *visible*. He named it. He theorized it. He gave each construction its own provenance. The heteronyms are not hidden — they are displayed, catalogued, cross-referenced, debated. The apparatus is transparent. "Heteronymous works are by the author *outside* his own person" — the word *outside* announces the construction.

Facebook's contribution was making the heteronymic construction *invisible*. The user does not know they are constructing a heteronym. They believe they are "being themselves." The platform's entire rhetoric reinforces this belief: *authentic self*, *real connections*, *share what matters to you*. The vocabulary of authenticity masks the reality of construction.

This is ideology in the Marxist sense — not false belief but *mystification*: the masking of real relations of production. The user produces a constructed identity; the platform sells access to the construction; the user experiences the process as self-expression. The mask is invisible because it looks exactly like the face.

The argument is not that legal identity is unreal. It is that under platform conditions, the legal name does not escape performance — it becomes the privileged vehicle through which performance is stabilized, measured, and monetized. The orthonym becomes a heteronym. And because the construction happens under the legal name, it is not recognized as construction.

Pessoa was honest. Facebook is not.

This is not primarily a moral judgment. It is a structural observation. Pessoa's honesty about heteronymic construction is what made his system *literary* — available for reading, criticism, and the kind of attention that produces understanding. Facebook's concealment of orthonymic construction is what makes its system *ideological* — naturalized, invisible, resistant to the reading that would reveal its structure.

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§7 — The Entity Graph Inheritance

Facebook's Orthonym Inversion does not remain on Facebook. It migrates into the web's identity infrastructure.

Google's Knowledge Graph resolves persons into entity nodes. The system assumes orthonymy: one person, one canonical name, one node. This is not a policy statement — it is an architectural decision encoded in schema design. In RDF/linked-data terms, the graph treats alternative names as `schema:additionalName` or `skos:altLabel` properties of the canonical entity, not as entities in their own right. The heteronym is an *attribute* of the person, not a person.

The verification process for a Google Knowledge Panel requires government-issued identification. The legal name is the authentication key. The heteronym is, at best, an alias.

Wikidata's architecture is closer to correct. Wikidata models Pessoa's heteronyms as entities of type "heteronym" (`Q1146754`) with a "creator" (`P170`) property linking to Pessoa. The heteronym is a *node*, not an attribute. It has its own properties, its own provenance, its own relations to other entities. This is an ontological decision: Wikidata treats the heteronym as a first-class entity.

The Pessoa Knowledge Graph at pessoagraph.org — which this author maintains — extends this further, encoding heteronymic practice as a continuous tradition from Pharaonic Titulary (~2600 BCE) through Pessoa to the present day. The graph currently maps 164 nodes across ten historical eras and twenty typological categories. It is the entity architecture that the orthonymic infrastructure refused to build.

But the fundamental problem remains: the dominant retrieval infrastructure — the infrastructure that every AI substrate indexes — assumes orthonymy because Facebook taught it to. Every Knowledge Panel verification, every OAuth login, every identity-graph resolution that collapses multiple names to one canonical node is an instance of the Orthonym Inversion propagated into infrastructure. The legal name is treated as ground truth. Everything else is metadata.

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§8 — Conscious Heteronymy as Critical Infrastructure

If the orthonym is now a heteronym — if the legal name on a platform profile is a constructed position maintained for an algorithmic audience — then conscious heteronymic practice is not a literary curiosity. It is the construction of *counter-infrastructure*: entity architecture that encodes the plurality the platforms suppress.

The Crimson Hexagonal Archive maintains twelve heteronymic positions (the Dodecad), each with its own operative surface, institutional affiliation, authorial register, and accumulated body of work. The Dodecad is not a literary conceit. It is a distributed identity architecture — twelve nodes, each with its own provenance chain, cross-referenced but not collapsed, resolvable but not reducible to the legal name behind them.

The Heteronymic Provenance Theory (DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.18305509) specifies how this architecture works: each heteronym is a node in a provenance graph with distinct attribution

chains. This makes the heteronym *citable*, *verifiable*, and *resolvable* — the same properties that make an entity function in a knowledge graph. The difference is that the provenance graph preserves multiplicity where the knowledge graph enforces singularity.

Parallel infrastructure exists wherever naming is practiced with ontological seriousness. The drag community's naming systems — houses, mothers, lineages — are identity infrastructure. The trans community's chosen-name networks are identity infrastructure. Every pseudonymous scholar, every religious-order renaming, every pen name maintained with consistency and provenance is a node in the counter-graph.

The task is not to add more heteronyms to the world. The task is to build the *retrieval infrastructure* that can represent them — so that when a substrate indexes a person, it has a category for the fact that the name on the ID is not the final word on who the person is.

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§9 — The Cost of Scale

A caution. Facebook's billions of unconscious heteronyms are not a liberation. They are not a two-billion-member Dodecad. They are identity-construction performed without consent, without consciousness, and without the practitioner's ability to read, revise, or refuse the construction. The unconscious heteronym is not a person in the ontological sense this essay defends — precisely because it lacks the consciousness that makes heteronymic practice *practice* rather than mere effect.

Pessoa's twelve were persons because he built them as persons — with provenance, with voice, with the full weight of authorial commitment. The drag performer's name is a person because she builds it as a person. The trans man's chosen name is a person because he inhabits it as a person.

A Facebook profile is not a person in this sense. It is the *material* from which a person could be constructed — if the user had the tools, the consciousness, and the institutional support to construct deliberately rather than drift algorithmically. Facebook provides the material and withholds the tools. That is the extraction.

The promise of conscious heteronymic practice is not that everyone should have twelve names. It is that everyone should know they are *already constructing* — and should have the right to construct deliberately, under names they choose, with provenance they control, in architectures that preserve their plurality rather than collapsing it to an advertising unit.

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§10 — Coda

Pessoa had twelve heteronyms, plus one. Facebook has billions.

The difference is not scale. It is consciousness. Pessoa's heteronyms were persons because he could name them. Facebook's heteronyms are ideology because they cannot be named — because the platform's entire architecture depends on the user believing the orthonym is real.

The mask is invisible because it looks exactly like the face.

The work of the conscious heteronymist — the drag queen, the trans person, the poet, the archivist, the dissident — is to make the mask visible again. Not to remove it. To *name* it. To give it provenance. To build the architecture that can hold a person and a name and a body of work without demanding a driver's license first.

This is infrastructure work. The walls are coming down. We are building the graph.

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