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### Heteronymy, Dialogism, and the Collision of Times: The Many Symphonies in Fernando Pessoa

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#### Abstract

Fernando Pessoa's heteronyms — Alberto Caeiro, Ricardo Reis, Álvaro de Campos, and Bernardo Soares — are typically read as literary masks or symptoms of psychological division. This article directs focus on how Pessoa's heteronymy embodies modernity. Through Pessoa's poetry and *The Book of Disquiet*, and based on critical overview of Octavio Paz, George Monteiro, and Richard Zenith, this article demonstrates that each heteronym performs a distinct response to the collapse of unified identity: Caeiro's impossible pastoral, Reis's stoic withdrawal, Campos's futurist exhaustion, and Soares's documentation of metaphysical 'tédio'. Drawing on Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of dialogism, the article proposes that Pessoa imports the novel's unfinalizable dialogue into lyric poetry, making contradiction itself the structure of the self. The article further presents that each heteronym inhabits an incompatible historical temporality, rendering synthesis impossible and positioning modernity as the collision of times within one subject. Heteronymy thus emerges not as eccentric technique but as literary ontology, prefiguring postmodern theories of the decentered subject while retaining modernism's anguish.



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**Keywords:** Fernando Pessoa, heteronymy, modernism, fragmented subjectivity, *The Book of Disquiet*, dialogism

## 1. Introduction

Portuguese poet, Fernando Pessoa, born in Lisbon in 1888 started to write as a different person even when he was six years old. He wrote letters as a French man. When his family moved to South Africa in 1895, Pessoa learnt English and wrote several booklets featured by British Press. He returned to Lisbon in 1905. Between 1914 and 1935, Pessoa wrote and invented not characters but authors: Alberto Caeiro, Ricardo Reis, Álvaro de Campos, and Bernardo Soares, each with distinct biographies, horoscopes, aesthetic programs, and philosophical systems incompatible with the others. Caeiro rejects metaphysics for pure sensation; Reis disciplines chaos through Horatian measure; Campos accelerates into futurist ecstasy until it curdles into abjection; Soares documents the aftermath in a diary of metaphysical 'tédio'. Critics have long treated these figures as masks, pseudonyms, or symptoms of Pessoa's psychology. The present paper attempts to bring the perspective that heteronymy is not Pessoa's eccentricity but his way of embodying modernity.

While the 19<sup>th</sup> century lyric "I" assumed stability, Wordsworth's "emotion recollected in tranquillity" and Tennyson's dramatic monologues secured by character, Pessoa demonstrates that the modern subject arrives already plural, contradictory, and theatrical. His heteronyms formalize the fracture rather than mourn it, staging modernity's competing demands with *pastoral nostalgia*, *classical order*, *futurist sensation*, *bureaucratic tedium* as a dialogue with no final speaker. Pessoa's works are thus an encounter of literary ontology befitting to a world in which the self is always already the other, and always already too many.

## 2. Multitudes of Pessoa

Fernando Pessoa's heteronyms represent one of modernism's most radical literary innovations—a deliberate fragmentation of author identity into multiple distinct poetic voices. These personalities, each represent a unique perspective of the world. Pessoa's innovative use of heteronyms allowed him to explore themes and styles, making his work a rich tapestry of modernist thought. Pessoa created complete heteronymic author personas such as Álvaro de Campos, Ricardo Reis, and Bernardo Soares who functions as autonomous literary figures, not mere stylistic variations.



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### **2.1. Alberto Caeiro: Pre-Modern Nostalgia as Impossible Response**

Alberto Caeiro represents Pessoa's experiment in pre-modern wholeness, a self that refuses abstraction and seeks unity through pure sensation. In "The Keeper of Sheep," Caeiro declares: "I'm a keeper of sheep. / The sheep are my thoughts / And each thought a sensation" (Pessoa, 2006, p. 35). He posits "thinking with your eyes," a direct encounter with things that rejects metaphysics, theology, and psychology as corruptions. For Caeiro, the cure for modernity is to unlearn it.

Yet Caeiro's pastoral clarity is already a modern symptom, a fantasy of simplicity written from inside the very modernity it rejects. As Octavio Paz argues, Caeiro is "the impossible: a pagan in the 20th century" (Paz, 1987, p. 151). His anti-intellectualism is hyper-intellectual; his "natural" poems are artifacts of extreme literary artifice. He is what modernity imagines when it dreams of escaping itself.

None of Pessoa's heteronyms embodies the crisis of modernity more unambiguously than Caeiro. He tries to cure modernity by refusing it altogether. Caeiro's answer to modernity is seductive in its simplicity: abandon thought, return to sensation, be pagan in a world of machines. But the very vehemence of his anti-metaphysics betrays its impossibility. He is a 20th-century man pretending not to be, and the effort exhausts him. If unity cannot be recovered through nature, perhaps it can be imposed through form. Ricardo Reis proposes a shift from Caeiro's naturalism to Horace's structured poetry, aiming to restore unity through formal constraints rather than nature. This transition involves a substitution of sensory richness with stoicism and impulsiveness with calculated restraint.

### **2.2 Ricardo Reis: Classical Order as Discipline Against Chaos**

If Caeiro responds to modernity with pastoral refusal, Ricardo Reis answers with classical discipline, using form and stoicism to manage chaos. A physician and Latinist, Reis writes Horatian odes that counsel withdrawal: "To be great, be whole: exclude / Nothing that is you. / Be whole in each thing. Put all you are / Into the least you do" (Pessoa, 2006, p. 89). Where Caeiro dissolves the self into nature, Reis fortifies it with meter. He accepts fate, worships indifferent gods, and measures each day against mortality.

But Reis's doctrine of restraint is also a form of paralysis, revealing that classical order in modernity is not salvation but resignation. Richard Zenith calls Reis's posture "a conscious renunciation of the world's soullessness" (Zenith, 2021, p. 487). His odes are



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beautiful cages. He cannot believe in the gods he invokes, and his calm is the calm of a man who has already decided not to feel. Order without faith becomes ritual without meaning.

Reis's classical discipline offers temporary shelter from modernity's flux, but his serenity comes at the cost of vitality. To feel nothing is, finally, to be nothing. Where Reis withdraws into meter, Álvaro de Campos charges forward into the machine. If Caeiro says "no" to modernity and Reis says "endure," Campos screams "more." He is the heteronym who refuses to be saved from modernity because he wants to be consumed by it — and in that consumption, he reveals its true psychological cost.

### 2.3 Álvaro de Campos: Futurist Surrender to Modern Sensation

Where Reis withdraws from modernity into form, Álvaro de Campos accelerates into it, transforming the self into a conduit for urban sensation and machine-age speed.

A naval engineer educated in Glasgow, Campos is Pessoa's heteronym of the machine age. In "Triumphal Ode," he becomes the city's noise: "O wheels, O gears, eternal r-r-r-r-r-r eternal!" (Pessoa, 2006, p. 157). He wants to feel with his entire nervous system, to merge with trams, factories, and dynamos until the boundary between self and metropolis dissolves.

Campos's ecstatic surrender to modernity, however, collapses into exhaustion, proving that multiplicity without integration produces not plenitude but nausea. George Monteiro traces this aesthetic to Walt Whitman, arguing that "From Whitman, Pessoa learned that the self could be legion without ceasing to be lyrical" (Monteiro, 2000). Yet for Campos, "I contain multitudes" becomes "I'm nothing. / I'll always be nothing. / I can't want to be something. / Apart from that, I have in me all the dreams of the world" (Pessoa, 2006, p. 171). If Reis is Pessoa's classical resistance to modernity, Campos is his ecstatic surrender. The heteronyms don't resolve the contradiction; they *are* the contradiction (Monteiro, 2000).

Campos lives modernity at full volume until the volume itself becomes unbearable. His odes swing from futurist ecstasy to abject collapse, from "eternal r-r-r-r-r" to "I'm nothing." But modernity is not only the sublime shock of the new; it is also the dead hour after the shock, when the machines are off and the office is empty. To record that hour, Pessoa invented Bernardo Soares — not a poet of triumph or discipline, but a bookkeeper of



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tedium. If the first three heteronyms perform grand responses to modernity, Soares documents what remains when the performance ends.

### 2.4. Bernardo Soares and the Unresolvable Self

If the other heteronyms perform grand responses to modernity, Bernardo Soares inhabits the aftermath, recording the banal interval where no response feels possible.

A Lisbon bookkeeping assistant and the “semi-heteronym” author of *The Book of Disquiet*, Soares is Pessoa’s most liminal creation: not quite a full heteronym, not quite Pessoa himself. Richard Zenith calls Soares “the quintessential modern man, conscious of his own fictionality,” a figure who “knows he’s unreal” and keeps writing anyway (Zenith, 2021, p. 572). *The Book of Disquiet* is fragments, bits and pieces of diary entries, and aborted essays — the form of a self that cannot cohere into genre. Soares confesses: “I’m the empty stage where various actors act out various plays” (Pessoa, 2001, p. 48).

Soares therefore intensifies rather than resolves modernity’s contradictions, turning metaphysical boredom into the basic condition of the modern self. His signature condition is ‘tédio’, a metaphysical boredom that is both personal and epochal: “Tedium is the physical sensation of chaos” (Pessoa, 2001, p. 263). In Soares, modernity is the banal ache of repetition — invoices, trams, rented rooms. This is why Octavio Paz identifies Soares as the endpoint of Pessoa’s project: “Modern man is a man without a self” (Paz, 1987, p. 149), and Soares lives that absence as a daily schedule.

Soares, essentially, does not try to find rhythm with Caeiro, Reis, and Campos; rather, he chronicles their inability to agree with each other. Soares acknowledges fragmentation as the sole authentic mode of existence. His writings serve as the interim amidst their acts, the space where disguises are shed only to expose additional disguises. In a scenario where modernity necessitates our multifaceted nature, Soares illustrates the experience of residing within the interstices among these multifarious aspects. If modernity demands that we become multiple, Soares shows what it feels like to live in the gaps between those multiples.

Soares makes explicit what Caeiro, Reis, and Campos enact: there is no whole self to which any of them can return. Soares is the individual who is aware of his fragmented nature, existing as the gap between various personas. When this space is articulated, the concept of heteronymy evolves from isolated trials into a unified theory of personal identity,



transcending its initial literary classification. To grasp this transformation, it is essential to interpret the heteronyms not as discrete attempts but as a cohesive approach towards self-exploration.

### **3: Heteronymy as Modern Method**

Pessoa's heteronyms are not pieces of a puzzle but evidence that the puzzle has no final image. By interpreting heteronyms not just as disguises but as explorations of different ways of existing, Pessoa's work could be linked to dialogues on personal identity, relationships between self and others, and different views on selfhood apart from traditional Cartesian ideas. Fernando Pessoa's heteronymy is not a literary trick but his method for embodying modernity. The shift is not one of theme but of ontology: from the self as substance to the self as performance and this approach is what that places heteronymy on a deeper level, comparable to philosophical movements like phenomenology and existentialism, rather than just a stylistic choice

For Pessoa, the modern subject arrives already plural, and the heteronyms formalize that fracture rather than mourn it. Octavio Paz articulates the stakes: "Pessoa's heteronyms are not masks of one author but the proof that the author does not exist. Modern man is a man without a self" (Paz, 1987, p. 149). He pushes Rimbaud's "Je est un autre" to its extreme: the "I" is not merely *another*, but *many others*, each with biographies, horoscopes, aesthetic feuds, and political views. As Zenith documents, Pessoa "met" these figures "as complete, autonomous individuals with whom he could converse" (Zenith, 2021, p. 182). This is not dissociation as pathology; it is dissociation as epistemology, a way of knowing the world by multiplying the knowers.

Heteronymy thus functions as a dialogic method in which competing voices remain unreconciled, making the argument itself the structure of the self. This is where Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of dialogism becomes indispensable. For Bakhtin, the novel is superior to poetry because it stages unfinalizable dialogue between voices that refuse synthesis. Pessoa imports that novelistic structure into lyric poetry. Caeiro's anti-metaphysics cannot silence Reis's stoicism; Campos's machine-awe cannot cancel Soares's tedium. The "contradiction" Monteiro identifies — "The heteronyms don't resolve the contradiction; they *are* the contradiction" (Monteiro, 2000) — is Bakhtinian: meaning resides in the friction between utterances, not in a supervening thesis. Pessoa's corpus is a lyric novel with no narrator, only characters who write poems at each other.



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The radicalism of this method emerges when set against Pessoa's Anglo-American precursors, particularly Walt Whitman and T.S. Eliot. Monteiro's reading of Pessoa through Whitman is critical: "From Whitman, Pessoa learned that the self could be legion without ceasing to be lyrical" (Monteiro, 2000). Yet Whitman's "I contain multitudes" is ecstatic and integrative; his multitudes cohere in democratic song. Campos inherits Whitman's energy but not his faith. For Campos, multiplicity becomes "I'm nothing. / I'll always be nothing" (Pessoa, 2006, p. 171) — Whitman under the condition of modernity. Equally, Pessoa anticipates Eliot's "impersonal theory" but inverts it. Where Eliot seeks to escape personality through tradition, Pessoa escapes personality by exploding it into persons. Tradition cannot suture the self; it only provides more costumes.

Heteronymy therefore constitutes a distinct modernist response to the crisis of representation that defines the early 20th century. If Joyce's Stephen Dedalus seeks to "forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race," Pessoa forges multiple souls and abandons the race. If Pirandello's *Six Characters* search for an author, Pessoa's characters *are* the author, and the author vanishes. This is why Paz claims Pessoa "fakes the faker" (Paz, 1987, p. 152). He does not wear masks to hide a true face; he wears masks because modernity has made the concept of a true face obsolete. The fake becomes the only available truth, and the proliferation of fakes becomes method.

Heteronymy allowed Pessoa to experiment in multidirections defying literary periods, genres and for this reason there is no possibility of any synthesis. Caeiro is pre-modern, a pagan anachronism. Reis is classical, a Roman in exile. Campos is futurist, consumed by the present's velocity. Soares is belated, writing after history has ended in tedium. Modernity, for Pessoa, is not a single moment but the catastrophic collision of incompatible temporalities within one body. To be modern is to be Caeiro remembering what he never lived, Reis imitating what he cannot believe, Campos exhausted by what he worships, and Soares documenting what none of them can finish. No dialectic can resolve that because there is no shared time in which synthesis could occur.

Ultimately, heteronymy anticipates our state, in which identity is enacted through various, incompatible selves that modernity both requires and disintegrates. Reading Pessoa is engaging in a modern ontology. He anticipates the postmodern decentered subject but without postmodernism's ironic distance. Pessoa's fragmentation is not playful; it is



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structural and anguished. The way the present 21<sup>st</sup> century reality breaks into different profiles on social media platforms; these are Campos, Reis, and Soares digitized. Yet Pessoa differs from us in one crucial respect: he makes the fragmentation *legible as form*. Where we experience multiplicity as glitch or hypocrisy, Pessoa renders it as architecture. His radicalism was to understand, in 1914, that modernity would not allow us to be one person, and to respond not with elegy but with system. Heteronymy is that system: a poetics for a world in which the self is always already other, and always already too many.

If heteronymy is Pessoa's method for embodying modernity, then his work does not end with him. It begins again each time the modern subject recognizes itself as multiple.

#### 4. Conclusion

Pessoa's heteronyms do not solve modernity's crisis of the self *they map it*, with Caeiro, Reis, and Campos staging three failed attempts at unity.

Alberto Caeiro, Ricardo Reis, and Álvaro de Campos each perform a distinct but failed attempt to stabilize the self under conditions that make unity impossible. Caeiro posits a pre-modern wholeness "*thinking with your eyes*" yet, as Paz notes, he is "the impossible: a pagan in the 20th century," a nostalgia that modernity renders unreal (Paz, 1987, p. 151). Reis answers with classical discipline, building a fortress of odes against chaos. But his withdrawal into form is itself modern, a "conscious renunciation" that admits the world's soullessness while refusing to touch it (Zenith, 2021, p. 487). Campos then inverts Reis entirely, surrendering to the city's speed until the Whitmanian "multitudes" become exhaustion: "I'm nothing. / I'll always be nothing. / I can't want to be something" (Pessoa, 2006, p. 171).

Bernardo Soares makes explicit what the others perform: that in modernity there is no whole self to return to, only the interval between masks. Taken together, these three enact what George Monteiro calls Pessoa's central contradiction: "The heteronyms don't resolve the contradiction; they *are* the contradiction" (Monteiro, 2000). There is no whole self to return to, only the interval between performances — the space Bernardo Soares inhabits when he writes, "I'm the empty stage where various actors act out various plays" (Pessoa, 2001, p. 48).



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The implications for modernist studies are twofold. First, heteronymy forces a revision of authorship that goes beyond Barthes's "death of the author" or Foucault's "author-function." Pessoa does not kill the author; he multiplies him until the category becomes inoperable. The author survives as committee, as civil war. Second, heteronymy reframes modernism's formal experiments. Stream of consciousness, collage, and mythic method all attempt to represent a fragmented world through a single, if shattered, sensibility. Pessoa abandons that project. He does not represent fragmentation; he performs it as system. The heteronyms are not voices in one head but heads that cannot share a world. This is why Pessoa remains unreadable by the standards of New Criticism or conventional lyric theory: there is no unified speaker to interpret, only a parliament of selves that vote against each other.

Pessoa over exemplifies writers' creativity. He creates an interactive space not only in his head but also on paper. To read Pessoa, then, is to recognize heteronymy as the most essential tool of modern condition; a dialogue with no last word, adequate to a self that remains multiple. Thus, heteronymy is not Pessoa's eccentricity but his method: a literary ontology. To read Pessoa now is to recognize our own multiplicity; a code-switching between professional, private, and digital selves, each one real and each one insufficient. His work does not promise to heal the modern subject. It gives that subject its most honest form: a dialogue with no last word, a stage with no final actor. As Pessoa himself expresses lucidly from within *The Book of Disquiet*, "My soul is a hidden orchestra; I know not what instruments, what fiddlestrings and harps, drums and tamboura I sound and clash inside myself. All I hear is the symphony" (Pessoa, 2001, p. 442). *The Book of Disquiet* is still being written because modernity is still unresolved, and in that destruction, Pessoa leaves us with only what self-modernity allows: one that is multiple, contradictory, and alive precisely because it refuses to cohere.

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