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Stories Are Not All Equal An Interview with Wu Ming

Let's start from the beginning. Who is Wu Ming and who was Luther Blissett?

Wu Ming 1: The Wu Ming Foundation is a band of novelists, a small combo devoted to telling stories. Currently we are based in Italy. Our name means “Anonymous” in Chinese, although we are not anonymous ourselves. Our names aren’t secret, indeed, “Wu Ming” may also mean “Five names” if you alter the way the first syllable is pronounced. However, we use five *noms de plume* composed by the name of the band plus a numeral, following the alphabetical order of our last names. The line-up is: Roberto Bui AKA Wu Ming 1, Giovanni Cattabriga AKA Wu Ming 2, Luca Di Meo AKA Wu Ming 3, Federico Guglielmi AKA Wu Ming 4, and Riccardo Pedrini AKA Wu Ming 5. The name of the band is meant both as a tribute to dissidents (“Wu Ming” is a common byline among Chinese citizens demanding democracy and freedom of speech) and as a refusal of the celebrity-making, glamorizing machine that turns authors into stars. “Wu Ming” is also a reference to the third sentence in the Tao Te Ching: “Wu ming tian di zhi shi,” “Nameless is Heaven’s and Earth’s Origin.” Luther Blissett was a multi-use collective alias adopted by hundreds of artists and activists all over Europe (and sometimes in South America) during the 1990s. We were part of that project, which ended in December 1999. Our debut novel Q was authored by “Luther Blissett.” The following books were Wu Ming’s work.

The question that comes immediately to mind is: how do you do it? After all, “written by committee” is never a compliment. I can’t help but imagine all kinds of obstacles—not the least of which is pride.

But perhaps the more interesting question is why it should seem so strange? It’s easy to imagine a group of people working together on a

car, a jazz record, or a scientific experiment. So why is it that, despite the many successful examples of collective authorship from Homer on, the idea of the writer is so stubbornly bound up with individuality? This can't merely be a matter of literary stardom, can it? After all, the celebrity machine did as well with the Police as they do with Sting.

WM1: I wouldn't quote the ongoing debate on tapping into the "wisdom of crowds," the Internet's "hive mind," Wikipedia, and so on. Those things sound incredibly obvious to us, we've been putting these principles into practice for more than a decade, and yet they're still stunning in this age of hyper-individualistic propaganda. Multitudinous intelligence always existed. The arts (plural) always were a communal thing before the bourgeoisie persuaded the world that Art (singular and capitalized) is the magnificent output of some super-gifted, super-egoic Ego. We are tale-tellers. Telling stories is a social process, it's about "togetherness." Stories are what keeps people together.

You mentioned jazz, and we've always described ourselves as a "combo," a "band," a "small orchestra." Our books aren't "written by committee," because we're not a committee. We are a band, and our books are spontaneous compositions, results of a collective improvisation in which individual colorful leads and contributions are enthusiastically followed, not repressed in the pursuit of homogeneity. Of course you have to master the techniques of playing, you've got to know all the licks before you're able to improvise good music in a jam-session; there's a lot of preliminary work to do, years of historical research, and the collective must be powerful, multi-skilled and flexible in order to harmonize all the parts. On the other hand, each member must be humble: you know that what you're doing is relative and negotiable, the words you're writing are not definitive, the other guys will have their say, and they'll put their hands on the text until everyone's satisfied.

Yes, I'm reminded of a story told by a friend of mine. A pollster meets a farmer and asks if he believes in baptism. The farmer stares a minute, a bit confused, and finally says, "Believe in it? Hell, I seen it done!" Still, I have to ask, where do you work? The same building? The same room?

WM1: We have a place in the eastern periphery of Bologna where we meet every two days. If it's a calm period, the session only lasts the afternoon. If it's a time of super-work, the session lasts all day. On the days we don't meet each member writes on his own and stays in contact with the others via email or text messages.

You clearly have good programmatic reasons for working the way you do, and yet reading your work I also get the sense of something more: a fascination, let's say, with the ins, outs, and intrigues of identity. I'm thinking, for example, of the Protean protagonist of Q and the meeting between Cary Grant and Marshall Tito in 54, during which they compare notes about their false identities.

WM5: Identity has to do with Personal History, a series of interpretations of facts and mental reactions to those facts that give rise to refrains (in the Deleuzian sense). These have the aim of marking out a territory in time, an ambit of non-volatility. Memory builds edifices of "I am thus-and-so and not some other way" and trades a series of reactive constructions for Personality. Really it's a question of schemes that keep the mind from falling into anxiety over the randomness of the cosmos: everything fluctuates, but you need to pretend that it doesn't. It has to do with the most radical of all fears, the fear of not being "something."

But the mind knows that it's a question of a game, a construction, that in reality Personality and Identity (we confuse the two so often that they have almost become synonyms) are mechanisms of constraint, that there's nothing originary in those concepts. Metamorphoses, shamanic animal transformations, the taste for masks, even at base the erotic drive—becoming another—are strategies performed to commemorate the artificiality of the social mask. The person who plays with identity is prepared to an extent to exchange the territory of existential security, the certainties of one's own personal Story (I am thus-and-so), for an opening toward the potential, toward the unexpected. In this way metamorphosis (self-conscious beings changing), whether exorcised or practiced, is unstoppable.

In your "Declaration of Intent," you describe Wu Ming as both "a laboratory of literary design" and "an autonomous political enterprise." The

relationship between politics (in all its forms) and art (in all its forms) has always been one of the thorniest questions of aesthetic theory and practice. How do you square this particular circle?

WM5: Declarations of Intent are more like idealized portraits of what already exists than openings toward scenarios yet to come. The definitions that we gave conclude by describing in an exact enough way the nature and the *modus operandi* of the collective: what made and what makes Wu Ming an “autonomous political enterprise” is not a prearranged design or a vague ambition, but the concreteness—flesh, blood, and mind—of the men involved in the project. Since the beginning they have had, for motives tied to personal history, a political urgency [*tensione*] and a drive toward self-expression, without which no one would pay any attention to problems regarding the connection between “Art and Politics.”

If anything, the problematic field is much broader: how to face one’s life—including one’s public (and hence political) life—with Style?

For Wu Ming the concept of Style is more important than theorizations about art. Style is incarnate, concrete; it redeems and condemns. Style walks in the streets, it’s not an inheritance from the Muses, it doesn’t fall from above, it’s not hostage to the critics who determine its presence or absence in the activity and expression of a man or a group of men. Style is self-evident, it doesn’t need to be explained or interpreted. It is, so to speak, a material *datum*, the plane on which ethics and aesthetics coincide and become act.

Our own “squaring of the circle,” then, is the pressure [*tensione*] to express the maximum of stylistic consciousness, project after project, which turns automatically into political coherence. As Charles Mingus said, Style is not the way you pull the notes from a double bass.

Wu Ming’s field of interests, it’s “social reason,” has to do with narration in a broad sense, in a socio-anthropological sense, if you like. The writers who work within the collective perform the function of constructing stories, indicating ways of escape, underlining sensitive nodes and eminent points. Literature is the privileged form that the collective has chosen to disseminate stories within the infosphere, but it is certainly not the only one.

Literary criticism and musical criticism are also narrations, constructions of stories. And so some critics narrate that Wu Ming “is

not art,” “is not even literature”; others think that the collective has an important voice from an artistic or literary point of view, and not just because of the originality of its mode of working and producing. For Wu Ming the “art-politics” problem is very marginal, because the collective recognizes that every story, every narration immediately has a political valence. Whether the stories that Wu Ming sets in motion are or are not Art is not something that influences either the daily work of the collective or the moods of the individual members.

So style extends far beyond the covers of any given book or books, the way Cary Grant (or Archie Leach) didn't stop being Cary Grant after filming finished? As a style of life (a question of “Being Wu Ming”) as much as the way any given sentence looks? But if that's the case, if Wu Ming is itself part of the story, how do you keep the focus and the pressure on the stories? How do you keep Wu Ming from taking center stage?

WM5: The kind of style that is a conscious representation of oneself is in some way artificial. But style as a material, objective *datum*, style as a field of unification, has nothing to do with wearing a mask, not even the faceless mask of Wu Ming.

It's more like one of those martial arts styles in which learning a certain range of movements leads to the discovery of an “originary nature.” It's like discovering that the way you spent a lot of time and energy learning to move is really the most natural and economic way of moving. It is a kind of existential Tae Kwan Do.

It's also like the idea of style that Mingus spoke about: something all-embracing, relaxed, open. Notwithstanding the martial reference, it's a question of something very far from the theatric or the paranoiac. Something alternative and irreconcilable to Mishima's idea of style.

Your novels are deeply historical, not only because they are set in the past but also because they rely heavily on historical events, lives, and documents, whether they were the Münster Rebellion, Carafa, and the Benefit of Christ in Q or the partition of Trieste, Cary Grant, and Hitchcock's To Catch a Thief in 54. This obviously requires a lot of research; I remember reading that Q had its roots in a seminar taught by the historians Carlo Ginzburg and Adriano Prosperi. But in writing

your novels your approach, your attitude, and your orientation to history are very different than a historian's.

wm4: Absolutely. We make use of historians' work, their research and their interpretations, but then we go on beyond the point at which they're constrained to stop. Testimonies, documents, and evidence are the insuperable limits for a historian, beyond which he or she can do nothing but formulate hypotheses.

The novelist, however, can free his fantasy and build narratives in the spaces left empty by the lack of documentation. We have a golden rule: maintain a radical verisimilitude, that is, complete the historical record with plausible and coherent stories. Nothing keeps us from imagining that Cary Grant could have completed a secret mission in Yugoslavia during the year he made no films, since he had already carried out missions for the secret service. He was bored and living through a mid-life crisis, and that decision would have been completely compatible with his character.

The most intelligent historians appreciate our work, because they understand that we don't want to steal their jobs; we only want to tell engaging stories dense with meanings. Adriano Prosperi, the greatest Italian scholar of the Inquisition, participated in a public presentation of our first novel *Q*, and he said that he considered it an homage to his really arduous work on the *Benefit of Christ* and the heretic Titian. On that occasion we reciprocated by presenting him as a co-author of the novel. In that case our difference of roles didn't affect our mutual respect and recognition.

"Spaces left empty" also seems to me a good way to describe the historical periods in which your novels are set. The break with the church in the sixteenth century and the end of World War II in the twentieth set up these empty periods when no one was quite sure what was going to happen, periods of great expectations, anxieties, and possibilities.

wm4: If we take a period like the sixteenth century, no doubt you're right. It was the moment of the beginning of modernity, the moment in which the foundations were laid for what we know and take for granted today: the state, investment capital, systems of covert intelligence and social control. We were interested in those things that

escaped or exceeded the fight between the Reformation and counter-Reformation, what the popes on one side and the leaders of the magisterial Reformation on the other wanted to exclude from the field of possibilities: the social revolt of the German peasants, Anabaptism, the Free Spirit heresy, and all the other phenomena that threatened the order of things at its very root. Their defeat didn't make those experiments any less important or interesting. It seemed to us that their trajectory captured in a nutshell a good part of modern and contemporary history and could furnish raw materials to the collective imaginary and popular fiction.

As for post-wwii, however, it's important to keep in mind that this era is often represented as a positive period, a time of the rejuvenation of the world, the peace after the storm, the Great Reconstruction, the Marshall Plan, etc. In reality, we know that it was also a dark period: the Cold War, the nuclear threat, decolonization, the wars in the so-called Third World. The fifties saw the prosecution of World War in a different but no less extensive scenario. Here too we found ourselves before a "bifrontal" historical period, represented at first sight through stereotypes, but which on a second glance held enormous surprises. Fiction allows this as well: to *re*-place historical periods in perspective by reversing them, revealing their dark sides, choosing the particular stories that cut across them.

What was Wu Ming's role in the G8 protests at Genoa? How did that involvement affect the designs and aims of the collective?

wm1: Those are painful things to recall. Memories of tragic events. We tried to give a contribution in terms of mythopoesis, in collaboration with many other people.

A few months before the summit we started to write epic texts such as "From the Multitudes of Europe" (and many more), you know, it was like an edict and it went: "We are the peasants of the Jacquerie... We are the thirty-four thousand men that answered the call of Hans the Piper... We are the serfs, miners, fugitives, and deserters that joined Pugachev's Cossacks to overthrow the autocracy of Russia..." Then we pulled media stunts in order to create expectations for Genoa. An example: on a quiet springtime night, we put placards around the necks of the most visible statues in Bologna (guys like Garibaldi and other

nineteenth-century national heroes), with messages encouraging all citizens to go to Genoa. Not to mention all the work we did on the web, on a now-defunct website called *tutebianche.org*.

We wanted to persuade as many people as possible to go to Genoa, and we ended up convincing as many people as possible to fall into a full-scale police ambush. Demonstrators were assaulted, beaten to a bloody pulp, arrested, even tortured. We didn't expect such mayhem. Nobody did. I regret we were so naïve and caught off-guard, although I think that was a crucial moment for the latest generation of activists. In a way, it was important to be there. That experience has created bonds between a transnational multitude of human beings. Today, if you say "I was in Genoa" in Italy (and the rest of Europe), it's like saying "I marched in Selma with M.L.K." forty years ago. Those are pivotal moments. We'll see the consequences of that "being there" for a long time to come, on a grassroots, extended, long-tailed level.

You say Wu Ming "tried to give a contribution in terms of mythopoeisis." It's a term that recurs frequently in your critical and occasional writings. For example, in a published letter to one of your readers wm4 writes, "We want to reconstruct a mythopoeisis for us, and not take one on loan from the generations that have come before us." Likewise, in a 2002 essay you wrote: "We believe that people are expressing a need for new foundational myths. Radically new, with the accent placed on both terms, as much on the necessary radicality (a going to the root, to the roots) as on the newness (post-twentieth century). Since another world is possible, it must be possible to imagine it and render it imaginable for others." Would you explain the importance of myth and mythopoeisis for your enterprise?

wm4: The creation of myths—of stories, legends, exemplary events, foundational episodes and moments—is at the base of every human community. And so it has been from the dawn of time.

The ancient Mesopotamian civilizations assembled around the legend of Gilgamesh, just as the Greco-Mediterranean world found a cultural point of origin in the myth of the Trojan War. Not to mention the "sacrifice" of Jesus of Nazareth, whose message extends two thousand years to today.

In more recent periods we can think to the birth of nation-states.

The great epics of the War of Independence and later the Civil War founded the United States of America; Washington and Lincoln are historical personages become legendary, symbolic, the same as probably happened to Gilgamesh. Examples could be multiplied. Even the smallest communities—even the largest—live on stories handed down and shared. Just remember that for the whole course of the twentieth century the world's working class acted in the name of a shared grand narrative: that of the proletarian revolution that would put an end to the exploitation of man by man.

Thinking more in detail, any family group or small kinship clan recognizes itself through the stories of the parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles, through the anecdotes that are repeated at every family reunion, a ritual without which those people would be almost unknown to each other.

But if from an analytical point of view all myths have the same value, it's not at all the case from a political point of view. Because myths live in the midst of human events, they change, they're shaped, they take on different meanings; often they're emptied of sense and remain mere rhetorical simulacra until someone comes along to reinterpret them.

The activity of the storyteller, as Wu Ming intends it, has to do with this way of seeing myths and stories. That is, as something living, something collective, something with which it's possible to interact. To tell a story is a political activity in the primary sense of the word. Because to tell a story is to share, that is, to make a community. To make a community is never a neutral activity, and neither, therefore, is choosing which story to tell or the way to tell it.

We often refer to the need to act narratively, to find significant symbolic stories, which will help us see the present from a new angle. We're not interested, for example, in exalting "heroes," understood as particularly determined individuals who impose their own will on the world. We're not interested in the great leaders, the demagogues, the famous characters who have their names printed in bold in history textbooks, except maybe to ironize them. What interests us more is presenting multiple communities and characters. The protagonist of *Q*, for example, has no name. He is an evanescent figure who cuts across several historical episodes and situations so that he becomes a kind of collector of experiences and memories until finally he gives

way to the multitude of characters met along the way, who are the true protagonists of the novel. The protagonists of *54*, our second novel, are several: it's a choral novel based on coincidences and based also on the way in which a small event that happens at the periphery of the world can influence the general course of history. The protagonist of the novel that we're writing now is a multiethnic family clan who has to confront war and the defeat of civilization.

Stories are not all equal. We've chosen a clear path.