

## WHY ARE AUTHOR NAMES SO UNCONVENTIONAL? AN OVERVIEW

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**Abstract:** An author is broadly defined as the person who originated or gave existence to something and whose authorship determines responsibility for what was created. Some might say that author names have no impact on linguistics. This point of view is not completely true when we work on literary onomastics, especially on contemporary fiction books. An author's name is the bridge between readers and the words they read. When it falls down the only way to know what is across the bridge is to guess. This paper aims to describe a phenomenology of author names and demonstrate its importance in onomastics.

**Keywords:** author names, death of the author, multiple names, band names, Luther Blissett.

We all know that the first proper name that appears on a book is undoubtedly that of the author. The name of the author is generally placed near the book's title, on the front cover. A proper name, in our specific case, is that of an author, and it immediately reminds us that the author is a person in flesh and bones and therefore an individual. That individual may also use a pseudonym, therefore not only differentiating the man from the author, but in some cases also for the sake of anonymity. An author is broadly defined as the person who originated or gave existence to anything and whose authorship determines responsibility for what was created. Narrowly defined, an author is the originator of any written work. We must not forget that this agent noun derives from the Latin verb *augere*, which means 'to enlarge'. The author's name has always been critically studied in the context of philosophical literary studies. In fact, as Jean Louis Vaxelaire said in *Les noms propres, une analyse lexicologique et historique* (2005: 322–323), "Creating a special category for the author's name may seem surprising, but this distinction exists in philosophical and literary criticism, although it has no impact on linguistics". But if we look at what philosophers have said about author names, we may find a lot of useful information for our onomastic studies. The first theory I would like to sum up briefly is that of Barthes' death of the author, written by the French philosopher in the late 60s. The *Death of the Author* is a concept stating that an author's intentions and biographical facts should hold no weight when coming to an interpretation of his writing. As David Robinson said:

In *The Death of the Author*, Barthes argues that writing destroys every voice and point

of origin. This is because it occurs within a functional process which is the practice of signification itself. Its real origin is language. A writer, therefore, does not have a special genius expressed in the text, but rather, is a kind of craftsman who is skilled in using a particular code. All writers are like copywriters or scribes, inscribing a particular zone of language. The real origin of a text is not the author, but language. If the writer expresses something “inner”, it is only the dictionary s/he holds ready-formed. There is a special art of the storyteller to translate linguistic structures or codes into particular narratives or messages. Each text is composed of multiple writings brought into dialogue, with each code it refers to being extracted from a previous culture. Barthes’s argument is directed against schools of literary criticism that seek to uncover the author’s meaning as a hidden referent which is the final meaning of the text. By refusing the “author” (in the sense of a great writer expressing an inner brilliance), one refuses to assign an ultimate meaning to the text, and hence, one refuses to fix its meaning. It becomes open to different readings (Robinson 2013).

From this historic moment every author has had to struggle with his name and his words. Let me tell you a short story, which can help us to understand this complicated state of things. In 1912, within the Orthodox Church, there was a huge controversy around the writings of Father Hilarion, *Na górach Kavkaza* [On the mountains of the Caucasus], and Antonij Bulatovitch, *Apologija very vo vo Imja Bozie the Imja Iius* [Apology of the faith in God’s name and in the name of Jesus], in which they analyzed the prayer of the name in use in some monasteries of Mount Athos. The Holy Synod condemned the monks of Mount Athos considering them heretics, while the monks claimed to experience the essence of God and His real presence by saying the name. In this theological dispute, the Russian philosopher Pavel Florenskij devoted an essay written between 1920 and 1922 entitled *On God’s Name*. Graziano Lingua in his preface to the Italian book *Il valore magico della parola* [The magical value of the word] emphasizes how

The debate on the glorification of the name in Florenskij not only affects its theological meaning (...), but more generally the centrality between language and reality that it expresses. The veneration of the name is an explicit example of the need to conceive a substantial link and not only a conventional one between the name and what is appointed. So deny *ineslavie* means deny the ontological value of language, reduce the word to an empty shell (Lingua 2003: 12).

Curiously enough, in 1968 something happened that was strictly connected to an ancient theological and linguistic dispute. Bringing death to the author (and, of course, the author’s name) was just a way to deny the ontological value of language. The reader was left alone, trying to achieve an interpretation of empty words in books. The only way to give meaning to these empty words was by means of interpretation, but each interpretation was as good as the other. Thus, it is easy to understand how an author’s role is crucial in every kind of art.

An author’s name is the bridge between a reader and the words s/he reads.

When the bridge falls down, the only way to know what is across it is to guess. Barthes soon became simultaneously the most loved and hated critic of his era. One year after Barthes' seminal essay, Michel Foucault underlined the importance of author names. For Foucault, this kind of name is not a simple element in a text, "it exercises in relation to the speeches a certain role. It provides a classificatory function; this name can be used to group a number of texts, delimit them, exclude some of them, compare them" (Foucault 1983: 10–11). Thus, according to Foucault, the name of an author works to characterize a certain mode of being in a discourse: for a speech to have an author's name, the fact that you can say "This one is the author", indicates that the speech is not an everyday word, indifferent, a word that quickly disappears into silence, but one that must be received in a certain way and that, in a given culture, must receive a certain status. In 1975 the importance of author names was revitalized by Philip Lejeune in *The Autobiographical Pact*. According to Lejeune,

It is thus in relation to the proper name that we are able to situate the problems of autobiography. In printed texts, responsibility for all enunciation is assumed by a person who is in the habit of placing his *name* on the cover of the book, and on the flyleaf, above or below the title of the volume. The entire existence of the person we call the *author* is summed up by this name: the only mark in the text of an unquestionable world-beyond-the-text, referring to a real person, which requires that we thus attribute to him, in the final analysis, the responsibility for the production of the whole written text. In many cases, the presence of the author in the text is reduced to this single name. But the place assigned to this name is essential: it is linked, by a social convention, to the pledge of responsibility of a *real person* (Lejeune 1989: 11).

However, this was specifically written about autobiographies. Indeed, Genette says in *Seuils*:

The author's name has a variable importance depending on the genre: not so relevant or almost useless in the fiction, much stronger in all types of referential writing, where the credibility of the witness, or the transmission, is largely based on the identity of the witness or the Speaker (Genette 1989: 40).

In a few years' time, these philosophers created a new interest around the name of the author. From that moment on, the authors were forced to reflect on their names. And very soon every author devoted parts of their novels to reflect on author names. Let me give you some examples. In 1979 the Italian author Giorgio Manganelli wrote a novel called *Pseudonimia*. In this story Giorgio Manganelli learns, from a friend, that he has published a book. When he goes to the bookshop and finds it, he declares that even if there is his own name, *Giorgio Manganelli*, on the cover, we are faced with a rare case of pseudonymity: "In fact I know that this is not a case of coincidence but a case of quadratic pseudonymity, which, as everyone knows, allows to use a pseudonym absolutely

identical to the authentic name. In this case, the name remains false and misleading” (Manganelli 1996: 12).

The author believes that the text means nothing and it cannot be understood by either the author or the reader, who are both nonexistent. Manganelli was clearly influenced by Barthes, but he moved towards his own conclusions about the role of authors and readers in literature. In Manganelli’s text, the author’s death follows that of the reader and when the author tries to read his own writings, he has to die, as Barthes said, if he wants to give an interpretation of what he wrote.

Another interesting case is that of Italo Calvino and his book, *If on a Winter’s Night a Traveler*, published in 1979. The book begins as follows:

You are about to begin reading Italo Calvino’s new novel, *If on a Winter’s Night a Traveler*. Relax. Concentrate. Dispel every other thought. Let the world around you fade. Best to close the door; the TV is always on in the next room. Tell the others right away, “No, I don’t want to watch TV!” Raise your voice – they won’t hear you otherwise – “I’m reading! I don’t want to be disturbed!” Maybe they haven’t heard you, with all that racket; speak louder, yell: “I’m beginning to read Italo Calvino’s new novel!” Or if you prefer, don’t say anything; just hope they’ll leave you alone (Calvino 1981: 3).

In this incipit the author is named twice and we can see clearly how the classifying function mentioned by Foucault works. After having read the author’s name on the cover, we find it is repeated in the text of the novel as well. Nevertheless, we all know that the protagonist of the book is the reader. As a matter of fact, the ghost writer Ermes Marana says in the novel: “How well would I write if I were not there”. In 1983 Daniele Del Giudice published *Lo stadio di Wimbledon* [The Wimbledon stadium]. This novel tells the story of a young man, who ponders over a certain character fifteen years after his death and goes about searching for friends and the friends of his youth, now very elderly. Who this character was – an original figure in literary life, a friend of poets and writers – does not matter because in the novel his memory emerges only indirectly and in the distance. The identity of the character fails to matter even though the young man pursues the traces left by his legend. The protagonist says the following about his research into people and their names:

It seems to follow the path that goes from paper to experience, although I do not know which path it is. I’ll probably start from names that resounded on the pages, now mere names, abstract and powerful; then I’ll go to the ambiguous voluminosity from which they were taken at the time of tracing. And again I have searched the duty of paper, reinventing the corners of representation. It must be that this is no longer a journey or pilgrimage, but only commuting (Del Giudice 1983: 76).

Thus, the writer, who shuttles between Reality and Representation, is a witness to an event of paramount importance. The name is separated from the “ambiguous voluminosity” to which it originally belonged to enter into the language system as a

mere name. Then, perhaps, the author's name and the character names for Del Giudice (and for almost all the writers working at the time) were united by a common destiny: both fulfilled a function in the linguistic system of which the text was composed. The writer was a ghost who wrote ghost words. Among these ghosts there are also the character names. This fate can be extended to every word the author writes in a text. The death of the author and the nullification of the novel as an act of communication are intimately related.

As one can clearly see, there was a sort of obsession in literature about artistic works without author names. The best an author name could do was to have a classifying function and nothing more. The impossibility of using names was the concrete demonstration that one cannot recreate reality on paper. Literature experienced the fact of being made of paper as a disease. Reality is tridimensional and the only thing the writer can do is to make a map of it. This is the drama of the post-modern writer. The power of names was extremely weakened by this state of things, but in other media things were different. In the mid-seventies and early eighties media such as music and avant-garde art worked on author names without artistic works. This is the case of the short-lived British band *Guns for Hire*:

A group of friends, who were regular gig-goers, decided to form a band of their own. The name for the band was to be Guns For Hire. All they needed now were some instruments and the ability to play them. The main core of Guns consisted of Vaughn Toulouse, Tony Lordan and Gary Crowley. The actual playing side of the project was a major consideration, but the lads decided to pre-empt fame by having Guns For Hire badges and stickers made up first. The music could wait. As the stickers gradually turned up on the walls and trains of the London underground system, and badges were distributed amongst friends, something rather strange happened. One night at a gig in Aylesbury, a punter came up to one of the (non-existent) Guns and gestured admiringly at his GFH badge. The punter then continued to extol the virtues of Guns For Hire, who, he claimed, he had seen playing live only the night before! Only one problem with this particular rock'n'roll swindle: unlike the Sex Pistols, Guns For Hire couldn't play a note between them, even if they had actually existed (Pepper 2003).

The avant-garde movements and music business quickly discovered the potential of names. It was easy to use a name as a medium. Therefore, the name became an undisputed leader in the world of mass communication.

At the time, many artists experimented with names. One of the most successful experiments is surely that of the multiple name. But what is a multiple name? The best definition was given by Stewart Home, one of the key figures of the Neoist movement:

Multiple names are 'tags' that the avant-garde of the seventies and eighties proposed for serial use. They have taken a number of forms, but are more commonly 'invented personal names' which, their proponents claim, anyone can take on as a 'context' or 'identity'. The idea is usually to create a collective body of artistic works using the 'invented identity'. The first of these 'collective identities', 'Klaos Oldanburg', was propagated by

the British mail artists Stefan Kukowski and Adam Czarnowski in the mid-seventies. A few years later, the American mail artist, David Zack, proposed 'Monty Cantsin' as the name of the 'first open pop-star', a name anybody could use. Factional differences between those using the 'Monty Cantsin' tag resulted in the 'rival' names of 'No Cantsin' and 'Karen Eliot', both of which emerged in the mid-eighties. A number of individuals and groups have independently 'originated' similar concepts. For example, a group centered around Sam Durrant in Boston (USA) proposed 'Bob Jones' as a multiple identity in the mid-eighties (Home 1995: 52).

Since 1994, the year the Luther Blissett Group was founded, a new possibility has been introduced in literature concerning co-individuals and multiple-use names. That is why I started talking about post-modern writers and then about bands and avant-garde artists. Luther Blissett had a wide range of influences and we had to take a look at some of them before discussing about the main topic.

*Luther Blissett* was actually a multiple-use name for five years, from 1994 to 1999. In the last year of Luther Blissett's life, the Group published a best-seller entitled *Q*. Let us follow the correct chronology. The multiple-use name *Luther Blissett* frequently appeared in the news in the nineties, as it was the signatory of thousands of scornful, artistic and media performances, which were expressly created to enlarge the Luther Blissett myth. These performances were only partially controlled by the members of the Group, and so they were possibly not in accordance with the original project. In fact, the fundamental proposal for the project was based on the idea that *anybody* could be Luther Blissett, becoming an authorized follower of his conspiratorial and trans-media adventures. However, this could clearly lead to problems with the concept of the name as a unique reference: anyone could be Luther Blissett, a person whose picture is disclosed. This picture is a mere *collage*, designed by five Italian artists, who destroyed the classical figure of an author by deciding to share this fictional identity with anybody interested. Nevertheless, it should be mentioned that *Luther Blissett* was not the first multiple-use name. Luther Blissett, the Italian group that created this multiple-use name, was the one that first brought the extreme consequences of using multiple-use names, as we shall see later.

*Karen Eliot*<sup>1</sup>, one of the first multiple-use names that appeared in the artistic world of the American avant-garde at the end of the seventies, was different from *Luther Blissett*. The reason is that before becoming a multiple name, it had been the name of

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<sup>1</sup> Once again Stewart Home helps us know multiple names: "Karen Eliot was materialised, rather than born, as an open context in the summer of '85. When one becomes Karen Eliot one's previous existence consists of the acts other people have undertaken using the name. When one becomes Karen Eliot one has no family, no parents, no birth. Karen Eliot was not born, s/he was materialised from social forces, constructed as a means of entering the shifting terrain that circumscribes the 'individual' and society. The name Karen Eliot can be strategically adopted for a series of actions, interventions, exhibitions, texts, etc. When replying to letters generated by an action/text in which the context has been used then it makes sense to continue using the context, i.e. by replying as Karen Eliot" (Home 1988).

a famous Anglo-Jamaican football player, who played in the Italian premier league for A.C. Milan and also made some caps for the English national team. In this case, we have a name that loses its unique reference: in fact, *anyone* could be Luther Blissett, but we are also faced with a name that from a unique reference turns into a multiple reference. This innovation in the universe of names is worth further investigation. Here, I will discuss some observations, which I hope will add another piece to the complex puzzle of names, as used in this context.

While the football player Luther Blissett was a man of flesh and bones, the multiple-use name *Luther Blissett* is just an invention. Nonetheless, the actions of individuals signing as *Luther Blissett* are completely true and could be included in the sphere of reality. We may talk, in this case, of *fictional creation*, as in Luther Blissett's storyline, and this storyline is used by the same writers that handle the football player's name – Luther Blissett was to be the leading actor of several events devised by the Group to spread its myth. Thus, what would seem a mere fictitious creation, reaches a higher level of complexity, which is the level of *fictional creation*, where real and imaginary fiction alternate in an inseparable manner. If we were once able to include the author's artistic work together with the world's representations, the *fictional creation*, we now have an entity that includes in itself both of these dimensions.

The Luther Blissett project has a difficult situation with the writer Giuseppe Genna, who literally takes into account what was said by the five Luther Blissett founders, using the name of Luther Blissett as his own signature for an essay which was published by Mondadori, long before the original would reach bookshops. A fascinating problem of attribution then arose. If anyone could be Luther Blissett, and for example Giuseppe Genna decided to use the name without being entirely subject to the rules of the original project, what happens when a book is signed with the name of the project?

On September 1, 1999, a few months after the release of *Q*, the original nucleus of the Luther Blissett Project decides to take the life of the co-individual Luther Blissett through a ritual suicide, seppuku. Suicide is the practical demonstration of the waiver of Blissett's survival as a logical and territorial identity. Thus, seppuku is not the end of Luther Blissett, but the beginning of a new phase, a new way to use his face and his first name. They changed their name probably because they were afraid of another Giuseppe Genna case. However, the group resurfaced in 2000 with a brand new name: *Wu Ming*. As the members of the group stated:

Wu Ming is not a multiple identity in the Luther Blissett style. That project was a 5-year plan and expired in December 1999. The following month we founded Wu Ming, which – to put it simply – is a band, only it is not a band of musicians but a band of writers. “Wu Ming” means “No name”, it's the signature used by dissidents in China and it is our tribute to dissent in that country and everywhere else. “Wu Ming” also means “unknown” and it is also a reference to the fact that we refuse the idea of the “Author” as a “genius” or a “star” whom the public contemplates in a passive way (Wu Ming 2003).

Wu Ming, the follow-up to what was called *Luther Blissett*, is defined by the

protagonists of the project as “a band of writers”. The concept of the five Bolognese writers was repeated several times and captivated the imagination of the critics so much that the book of Gaia de Pascale on Wu Ming is called *Wu Ming. Non soltanto una band di scrittori* [Wu Ming – not just a band of writers]. The band Wu Ming claimed this kind of name was borrowed from the world of music, at least in this second phase of their artistic project. Regarding the name *Luther Blissett*, however, the protagonists never talked about the band, even if we could call it that, of Luther Blissett, a band of writers open to external collaboration – everyone could write with the name Luther Blissett, thus participating in the project. Thus, we can see a strong difference between the two experiences, which can be summarized as follows:

a) Luther Blissett was composed by four writers open to endless collaborations. Everyone could be Luther, so *Luther Blissett* can be defined as a *collective proper name*.

Figure 1.  $\longrightarrow$   
Luther Blissett = 4 + n



Instead, Wu Ming consists of five writers open to external collaboration, as in *Asce di guerra* and *Ti chiamerò Russell*, but each of them also has his own solo career, in which they sign with the name *Wu Ming* plus a number that distinguishes them. In fact, Wu Ming talk about “solo projects” just as if they were an established band of musicians that dedicate the time they can spare from the band activity to other projects in which the band as a whole is not present.

b) Wu Ming = 5 individuals open to solo projects. The “+ n” put at the side of Luther Blissett is the heart of a thorny issue: through the variable name it loses its definition as a term of unique reference. Anyone can be Luther Blissett. Even you, who are reading this page right now, you may be, at least potentially, if between 1994 and 1999 you wanted to take part in this project. Your name and my writing are in the + n.

*Wu Ming* is a *proper collective name*, related to five individuals that coordinate well both for outputs in the name of *Wu Ming* and for solo releases in which the individual creativity of each of the members may have its own space. The elusive photo of the band, which recalls that of the Residents, complete with a provocative caption (“This revolution is faceless”), shows five faceless dancers (Figure 2):





Figure 2

What remains of the Luther Blissett experience is an important legacy: it was a new way that mixed literature and fiction. The author himself, Luther Blissett, through provocations signed in his name, was literature. Thus, the author was no longer simply the one who wrote a literary text, but someone who was part of the message. And we may say, when the author becomes the message, it must be carefully studied by onomastics. As James Earnshaw stated:

A look at how literary texts experiment with name might be instructive, e.g. Thomas Pynchon's *V*, narratives with nameless narrators; celebrities; factual names in fiction. This would open onomastics itself up to an experimental engagement with names and naming as part of its ongoing project (Earnshaw 2014: 140).

This is also why the experience of Luther Blissett as co-individual writer, with all its limitations, literary and otherwise, has been one of the most fascinating and genuine experiences in the Italian literature of the twentieth century. After these experiments, it became clear that author names could easily develop into brand names. But this is another story.

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