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# The Return of Proletarian Post-Modernism Part II (Luther Blissett's recent best-seller, 'Q')

By Stewart Home

*Q* is an intricate historical novel by four Bolognan authors deploying the name of the inglorious footballer Luther Blissett. Stewart Home, a champion of 'multiple identities' who has also published under this name, detects in *Q*'s cultural bricolage an ascending dialectical movement between rebellious practice and theory.

More than any other art form, even painting at the height of its 'realist' phase, the novel is tied to the rise of the bourgeois subject. It is for this very reason that fiction writing has tended to lag behind the other arts, and novels are nearly always ascribed to single authors. Indeed, that past master of bourgeois reaction, George Orwell, made books no longer being written by individuals one of the great horrors of his risible dystopia, *1984*. In many arts, and only most obviously music and film, openly acknowledged collaboration is the norm and the ongoing weakness of the novel as a mode of cultural expression can be ascribed at least in part to its one-sided and pseudo-individualistic development. Well established writers tend to find it difficult to collaborate because they insist the stamp of their own style should be left on everything they touch, leading to disagreements and a lack of cohesion when they attempt to work in concert. When one or more collaborating writers find it either difficult or impossible to accept the revision by others of their contributions to a group project, it is each author's weaknesses rather than their strengths that are multiplied. Innovative writers happily lacking a ready-made cultural reputation are in the fortunate position of being able to take a dispassionate view of those moribund artistic conventions rooted in the notion of style. Thus it comes as no surprise that the most successful recent example of a jointly effected anti-novel should be the work of 'young unknowns'. The book is called *Q* and although it is attributed to Luther Blissett, the vigour of its anti-narrative is rooted in the fact that it emerged from the combined imaginations of four young upstarts who just happen to live in Bologna and scribble in their native Italian. The gulf between *Q* and most of the books currently dominating the bestseller list is the difference between masturbation and sex.

*Q* is a great big brick of an anti-novel, a chronicle of the Reformation written in a form that parodies the best-seller style. This sprawling non-story takes place over twenty-five years and is told from multiple perspectives, chiefly those of an Anabaptist who becomes an armed rebel and his opposite number, a Papal agent called Q. This is a work of contrasts and the deliberately crude depictions of comradeship and battle in the earlier parts of the book bring to mind pulp Nazi atrocity epics by the exploitation authors Sven Hassel and Leo Kessler. The backdrop of religious heresy and peasant revolts will be familiar to many English language readers from paperback historical works such as Norman Cohn's *The Pursuit Of The Millennium* and Michael G. Baylor's anthology of translated documents *The Radical Reformation*. There is also a liberal dash of Machiavellianism readily evident in the form of Q's letters to his spy masters. These baroque missives cut against and draw attention to the just as self-consciously constructed 'rougher' passages ascribed to Anabaptist rebels, ensuring that from the off this text comes across as a tasty (post)modernist (de)collage. While the first part of *Q* with its Germanic setting is an entertaining read, it is only when the peasant wars are concluded and the emphasis shifts to a more explicit depiction of the machinations of nascent capitalism in the Italian city states and the political plotting accompanying it that the book's real merits emerge. If *Q* was a true example of its feigned genre, it would ultimately be as dry and tedious as the 'teach yourself to be a bourgeois subject' writing-by-numbers throughput of hacks like Agatha Christie and Sarah Dunant. Instead, Luther Blissett uses numerous tricks to avoid endlessly reproducing the narrative of closure, and among the more obvious of these is the length of the book. Running to 635 pages, *Q* is designed to

frustrate the expectations of readers wishing to passively consume a formulaic thriller. Anyone looking for the platitudinous revelation with which conventional mysteries conclude will be savagely disappointed. When Q's identity is finally revealed it transpires that, rather than being some fantastic villain who incarnates 'evil', he is actually all too human. Thus it is the role of the cop rather than its (fictional) human manifestation in the form of the Papal agent Q which is to be despised; indeed, it is the very burden of this role that results in Q the (fictional) man losing the qualities of a subject and taking on the appearance of an object.

It goes without saying that *Q* the book readily meets that major requirement of any (post)modernist text, viz. that it self-consciously draws attention to its status as fiction and the role the reader must necessarily play in its realisation. One of the ways such self-referentiality is very deliberately wrought as inescapable is through the expedient of having a book within a book, in this case a work entitled *The Benefit Of Christ Crucified*. The paramount importance of this conceit to a proper appreciation of both books (fictive and fictional) is woven into the triadic form of *Q*. Luther Blissett's anti-novel is divided into three parts: *One - The Coiner; Two - One God, One Faith, One Baptism; Three - The Benefit Of Christ Crucified*. It would take an imbecile (a term which if conjoined with the appellation bourgeois very accurately describes most of those who have to date reviewed *Q* in the English press) to miss that the anti-aesthetic architecture presently under consideration is dialectical, and that an upward swell of triadic movement has been worked into each of the various chapters and sections of the book; and, indeed, that this movement appears running from a lower to a higher level across the entirety of its span. At its most basic and simplified *Q*'s dialectic can be read as follows: thesis - rebellion; antithesis - recuperation; synthesis - autocritique leading to further and more effective rebellion. Thus the real dénouement of this anti-narrative is not the revelation of Q's identity, which is quite deliberately presented as an anti-climax, nor even the banality that in the middle of the sixteenth century (which is where we find ourselves at the end of the book) the process of capitalist class formation was still some centuries away from completion (to state the obvious, the global shift from the formal to the real domination of capital took place in the twentieth century). Rather, it is the injunction that proletarian post-modernists must continually reforge the passage between the theory and practice of revolutionary activity.

As a part of this process of autocritique the mechanics of sixteenth century print production and distribution become a major plot element within the third section of *Q*. The fact that the book was the first perfected capitalist commodity and it still retains its status as a star commodity should be taken as a given within the trajectory Luther Blissett traces. Naturally, Blissett's readers are credited with the intelligence to make the required conceptual leap to our own time, as well as to understand that discussion of *The Benefit Of Christ Crucified* can be read at points as an almost literal description of *Q* itself. The playful humour that is an integral part of Blissett's autocritique is evident in some of the descriptions of this book within a book. For example, *The Benefit Of Christ Crucified* is described on page 408 as: 'a mediocre book, it's a watered-down and synthesised version of Calvin's Institutes. But where does its strength lie? In the fact that it tries to make justification by faith compatible with Catholic doctrine! And what does that mean? That if this book is distributed and it enjoys success, perhaps among the cardinals and doctors of the Church, then perhaps you... won't have the Inquisition breathing down your necks for the rest of your days! If this book wins approval from the right people, the intransigent cardinals risk finding themselves in the minority, you know!' There are obvious substitutions that might be made within this and other passages: Marx's *Capital* for Calvin's *Institutes*, communism for justification by faith, democracy for Catholic doctrine, pundits and politicians for cardinals and doctors of the Church, the war on terrorism and the war on drugs for the Inquisition. Nine chapters later, on page 453, *The Benefit Of Christ Crucified* is described in terms that provide a 'straighter' fit with its 'parent' *Q*: 'It's a cunning little book, designed to stir up endless hornets' nests, because it's ambiguous in its content and expressed in a language that everyone can understand. A masterpiece of dissimulation, and it's already causing all manner of dissent. It was first published three

years ago, here in Venice. From that point onwards its fortune has never stopped growing. We already have fresh copies to shift, not just here, but in the territories to the west and south of La Serenissima'. In fact, *Q* was first published in Italy in 2000, and yet it wasn't issued in English translation until 2003. In the meantime, as the dust jacket of the almost posthumous British edition announces, it had become a 'cult European best-seller'.

One does not need to know about the personal lives of the four authors of this book nor indeed the history of the Luther Blissett Project to understand where this anti-novel is coming from, since numerous traces of its pre-history are openly displayed on its pages. Both the European avant-garde and the workers' movement are ongoing points of reference for Luther Blissett, as they were to the situationists. *Q* itself is one vast detournement, a calculated and provocative reuse of the artistic heritage of humanity for partisan propaganda purposes; and it was bricolage of precisely this type that formed the main plank of the anti-cultural programme advocated by the lettrists and situationists. Likewise, situationist notions of the drift and psychogeography are encountered repeatedly in *Q*. To give an example from page 81: '...in Nuremberg, whichever gate you enter by, if you instinctively follow the flow of the crowd you will sooner or later find yourself drawn by the invisible current to St Lawrence's Square...' Similarly, a sharp focus on the ongoing development of the media (in this instance the printing press) reflects the situationist stress on the notion of Spectacle, and there is also a shared obsession with peasant revolts and religious heresies. More prosaically, certain verbal formulations within the book can be traced directly to situationist texts, for example the phrase 'no useless leniency' which appears on page 278 of *Q* was previously the title of an article by Michele Bernstein in the first issue of *Internationale Situationiste*. However, it would be a mistake to treat *Q* as a subspecies of situationism, since it emerges from a broader cultural and political field, and, to cite just one example, the fascination scandal holds for Luther Blissett can be traced back through the situationists to the surrealists and elsewhere. Likewise, phrases from many very diverse sources have been collaged into this anti-novel: 'let the dead bury their dead...' on page 160 returns us to Marx; while the verbal formulation 'hath exalted those of low degree' on page 109 is lifted from *A Fiery Flying Roll* by the seventeenth-century English ranter Abiezer Coppe. Given the uneven development of capitalism, had Luther Blissett decided to produce a book with a similar content to *Q* but set mainly in the British Isles, inevitably the historical background would have been the English Civil War (the religious heretics of mid-seventeenth century Britain are, of course, almost overly familiar to English language readers through popular historical works such as Christopher Hill's *The World Turned Upside Down*).

Closer to home from the perspective of the authors and their initial Italian readers, the loving descriptions of the River Po to be found in *Q* emerge partially from Luther Blissett's theoretical debt to and admiration for the political analysis Amadeo Bordiga developed around post-war flooding of this waterway. For example, in the essay 'Murdering The Dead' (*Battaglia Comunista* 24, 1951) Bordiga observes: 'The wealth that disappeared was that of past, ages-old labour. To eliminate the effect of catastrophe, a huge mass of present-day, living labour is required. So if we use the concrete social, not abstract, definition of wealth, we can see it as the right of certain individuals, who form the ruling class, to draw on living contemporary labour. New incomes and new privileged wealth are formed in the mobilisation of new labour, and the capitalist economy offers no means of "shifting" wealth accumulated elsewhere to plug the gap in Sardinian or Venetian wealth, just as one could not take from the banks of the Tiber to rebuild the ones swallowed up by the Po... The basis of marxist economic analysis is the distinction between dead and living labour. We do not define capitalism as the ownership of heaps of past, crystallised labour, but as the right to extract from living and active labour. That is why the present economy cannot lead to a good solution, realising with the minimum expenditure of present labour the rational conservation of what past labour has transmitted to us, nor to better bases for the performance of future labour. What is of interest to the bourgeois economy is the frenzy of the contemporary work rhythm, and it favours the destruction of still useful masses of past

labour, not giving a tupenny-ha'penny damn for its descendants...'

*Q* has many amusing touches and one that particularly tickled me was the device of having the anti-hero of this anti-narrative constantly change his name, so that according to an incomplete list that appears on page 373, he has been 'Metzger, Niemanson, Jost, Boekbinder, Lot'. Gustav Metzger is a key figure within auto-destructive art, and the recycling of his name as an alias of Blissett's anti-hero is not an inconsequential joke but rather a pointer as to how *Q* should be read and understood. These two Metzgers link the past and the near present, the religious iconoclasm of Protestantism and the cultural iconoclasm of the twentieth century avant-garde. One of the many things Luther Blissett's deliberate and repeated invocation of very specific tendencies within the avant-garde does, is force the comprehending reader to reconsider where they stand on the issue of the status of art in relation to Hegel's system and its subsequent supersession by dialectical materialism (that is to say, as one ascends through what Hegel theorises as Absolute Mind, and moves specifically from romantic poetry upwards to theory/philosophy, does art wither or does it still have a role to play in the full unfolding/realisation of wo/man?). The specific debates being invoked stem from discussions that occurred in the 1840s among those most immediately connected to Ludwig Feuerbach's re-establishment (at a higher level) of the notion that 'man is the measure of all things'. At first glance it would appear that, like the situationists, Luther Blissett stands within the ranks of those who believe 'art is dead', but there is a radical ambiguity at work here. Let us not forget that the Young Hegelian circle to which Feuerbach belonged also included both Marx and Max Stirner. Alongside an obvious relish for the negative, there are inklings that Luther Blissett might also view the artist as a deformed harbinger of the realisation of our species' being in communism.

Every new book inevitably creates its own precursors and in the instance of *Q* it is unfortunate that *The Name Of The Rose* and *Foucault's Pendulum* currently rank first among them. Instead of these overly familiar novels of ideas, it would be better if *Q* was viewed as more closely resembling a newly reforgotten seventies blockbuster called *Ringolevio: A Life Played For Keeps* by Emmett Grogan. The first British paperback of *Ringolevio* (Granada, 1974) boasted on its front cover that this was: 'The most amazing true-life adventure since Papillon'. To me, *Ringolevio* comes across more like a work of fiction - the back cover blurb of the original British paperback says it all: 'He was the best Ringolevio player in Brooklyn when he started shooting heroin and pulling outrageous heists to support his habit. Then he went to an ultra-Establishment prep school in Manhattan and brought off a string of daring jewel robberies that completely baffled New York's finest. When things got too hot in New York, he took off for Italy and joined forces with the slickest hucksters in the Eternal City. In London he wrote hot-selling pornography... and took time out in Dublin for a little IRA work. He ended up in San Francisco at the height of Haight-Ashbury flower-power hippiedom where he took up the lifestyle that was to make him a legend'. Inside, on the first preliminary page we are told with reasonable accuracy that: 'Grogan attended a Dialectics Of Liberation conference where he received an ovation for his speech - and then told the audience the first man to deliver it was Adolf Hitler...' Emmett Grogan appears to have been an identity available for open use by all those involved with the San Francisco Diggers of the nineteen-sixties (they took their name from seventeenth century English religious heretics). Luther Blissett also began her cultural odyssey as a phantom identity adopted by hundreds of prank pulling activists albeit twenty-five years after Grogan. The collective who produced *Q* and various people associated with them authored numerous theoretical texts attributed to Luther Blissett before the appearance of this novel. Likewise, horrified by the uncritical reception the writings of the American anarchist Hakim Bey received in Italy, one of the group responsible for *Q* fabricated a fake book by this puffed-up guru. Presented as translations of English language texts downloaded from the Internet, *A Ruota Libera* was actually a spoof volume containing a speech by the Soviet dictator Stalin and other equally ridiculous material. However, the book's content didn't prevent Bey's anarchist fans from extravagantly praising the tome; and his regular Italian publisher even threatened to sue those who'd issued it for infringing their author's copyrights! That is, until it was revealed that *A Ruota*

*Libera* was actually a Luther Blissett prank.

Shortly after Luther Blissett's *Q* appeared in Italian, a book with the same title was issued in English, *Q: The Autobiography Of Quincy Jones* (Hodder & Stoughton, London, 2001). Like Emmett Grogan's *Ringolevio*, this Quincy Jones volume is not in any way a conventional autobiography. Mirroring Blissett's *Q*, the 'autobiography' *Q* by the jazz musician Jones is written from multiple perspectives. Chapters by Jones are intercut with biographical material written by various friends and family members. The book is in places self-evidently a put on in the classic tradition of blues bragging and Afro-American story telling. For example, on page 38 the trumpeter Clark Terry writes: 'Quincy had exceptional potential. I don't know how diligent he was with his practising, but he's the type of cat, anything he wanted to do he could've done. If he wanted to be President of the United States, he could've done that'. Given the ongoing domination of American civil society by a white racist elite, when Clark Terry says a fellow Afro-American could have become President if he'd wanted to, he clearly has his tongue in his cheek. These two *Q* books work well when read alongside *Ringolevio* because all three tomes are self-consciously the product of what Paul Gilroy calls the black Atlantic, and demonstrate admirably the stake everyone has in (post)modernity and its sixteenth century pre-history.

Q // Luther Blissett // translated from Italian by Shaun Whiteside // Heinemann // London, 2003 // ISBN: 0434010006 // 528p, pb // £14.99