

In diesem Heft: **Zadie Smith**
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Signatures in Narratology: The Case of *The Autograph Man* by Zadie Smith

Consider the act of signing: it may be one of the simplest ways of demonstrating one's literacy, yet its various metaphorical extensions are astonishing.¹ There is probably no other cultural convention as arbitrary yet set in stone as the signature convention, for whilst the act of signing one's name appears (at the outset) to truly signify ourselves (insofar as signatures come with the promise of a primary, i.e. physical, contact between signer and document), the truth is that we have no certainty at all of this contact and rather "enter into a zone of undecidability" (Agamben 56). Its status as a borderline phenomenon (*Schwelphenphänomen*) is also the reason for the signature's frequent occurrence in poststructuralist discussions. This is especially the case in the works of Jacques Derrida, a philosopher who has touched upon the borders of 'zones of undecidability' time and again, be it in his discussion of *parerga* in painting or in his various examinations of the signature conventions. The latter are not just limited to the two major essays solely dedicated to the topic ("Signature Event Context" and *Signéponge*, respectively). Rather, they also extend to various side remarks, for instance in a conversation on the situation of women in the field of academia ("Women in the Beehive"), his reading of James Joyce's *Ulysses* ("Ulysses Grammophone") and his essay on Friedrich Nietzsche (2000). Within the Derridean framework that I shall be referring to, signatures embody the many contradictions involved in writing (*écriture*). Although Derrida does not arrange the different signature notions into a systematic framework, I shall introduce a classification of sorts which will allow me to adapt Derrida's thoughts on the topic (especially his playful *Signéponge* experiment) to the field of narratology. This typology will be applied to a reading of Zadie Smith's second novel, *The Autograph Man* (2002), a postmodern satirical take on the topic of autograph hunting which is usually considered a minor work in its author's oeuvre, fading next to the impact of her debut, *White Teeth* (2000), and other titles. By examining the book on the basis of a deconstructive approach to textuality and Derrida's typology, I will suggest ways in which traditional signature modes (the application of which is usually limited to paintings and, to some extent, films) can be opened up for a narratological discussion, as a systematic look at signatures from the perspective of literary studies has not yet been proposed. The essay will examine three different signature modes as proposed by Derrida and add a final mode in the shape of the author-cameo, which postmodern writers (and filmmakers) have frequently included in their works.

The Conventional Signature

The most basic definition of a signature is the literal act of writing down one's name in order to accept responsibility for an utterance (Culler 125). According to Derrida, signatures signal to the addressee, "this is my name, I certify this, and, yes, yes, I will be able to attest to this again". Thus, the signature always amounts to "a yes, yes" ("Ulysses" 279), and Derrida closes his most influential interrogation of the signature phenomenon by affirming this gesture and signing the manuscript of "Signature, Event, Context" in order to acknowledge responsibility for his writing

1 A wider discussion of the signature phenomenon which also takes paintings, films and the 'alchemy of names' into consideration is offered in Schwanebeck [forthcoming].

(fig. 1; 109). This gesture, or enunciation, has a genuinely performative dimension to it, for it “produces its own subject” (Derrida, “Women” 200), which allows the signature to go beyond the mere expression of a semiotic relation, as Giorgio Agamben (another eminent philosopher to investigate the topic) remarks (40).

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "J. Derrida/". The signature is stylized, with a large, sweeping initial 'J' and a trailing slash at the end.

Fig. 1

At the same time, Derrida denies the possibility of a perfect signature, for the gap between “the absolute singularity of an event of the signature” and what is recognisable (and, ultimately, reproducible) is too large to be bridged (“Signature”, 107). In his essay on Nietzsche, he even goes so far as to say that the legitimization of the signature act is an outright fiction and borders on hypocrisy (13). Thus, even a conventional, pragmatic signature is not free of the *mise en abyme* structure: an official document is valid when it is signed; however, a signature is only valid if some previously defined version of it is already acknowledged. Thus, the signature is only legitimised in the moment of its production, which makes it a case of *différance* in practice.

What signatures offer in place of this deficit is an important promise: they function as a communicator of absence, on the basis of iterability, a *sine qua non* of all writing. In *Limited Inc.*, Derrida elaborates that “the graphematic mark (in general) implies the possibility of functioning without the full and actual presence of the intentional act” (58), hinting at the concept’s value for a discussion of signatures, which also entail “both ‘repetition’ (sameness) and ‘alterity’ (difference)” (Royle 68). Ultimately, this mode of functioning in *absentia* always entails the death of the *scripteur*,² the anticipated trace of a disappearance, for the signature will outlive the person, despite its function of verifying “the fact that it is indeed he who writes” (Derrida, *Signéponge* 54).

That signatures can (and do), indeed, outlive the signer, is nowhere more evident than in the milieu which Zadie Smith chose as the setting for her second novel, *The Autograph Man*, a book that deals with the topic of signatures on a multitude of levels. In her comic narrative, which is brimming with pop-cultural references, the author examines “the implosion of the boundary between mass consciousness and media phantasmagoria” (Terentowicz-Fotyga 62). She also introduces her readers to the character of Alex-Li Tandem, a London autograph dealer who still mourns for the father he lost as a child. Mourning and the collecting of autographs are firmly linked by the narrative, as Alex-Li enters the world of autograph-collecting the very

2 It was Roland Barthes who popularised the notion of the *scripteur* in his famous article, “La Mort de l’Auteur” (1968), as he proposes this term as a possible replacement for the author, i.e. as a way of conceptualising the figure who puts pen to paper and creates writing. In the context of our discussion, the *scripteur* refers to this basic process of producing *écriture* (Derrida); however, the role of the *scripteur* must be limited to this gesture, as the interpretative dimensions of the discursive system of literature (where meanings are negotiated via signatures, amongst others) invoke the more powerful figure of the author.

day his father passes away. The fact that, even as an adult, Alex-Li imitates his late father's signature illustrates the void left by the traumatic event. In the course of the novel, the protagonist's maturation process is illustrated by his attitude to signatures and the value attributed to them in the world of autograph men.

Autographs (as depicted in the book) must be distinguished from the conventional signature, for they are generally not legally binding. Many celebrities (like Greta Garbo, who features prominently in the book³) do not become famous under their real names, which makes their autographs worthless in legal terms. In addition,

[i]f she put pen to paper at all, Garbo tended to use a pseudonym, Harriet Brown. Garbo would demand that her bank chase up the whereabouts of any check she had written that had not been cashed. She wouldn't let her name go, even on a receipt. A Garbo autograph, even a bad one, is still worth about six thousand pounds. (Smith, *Autograph* 56)

On the other hand, however, autographs can be viewed as examples of the most literal equivalent of the primary signature mode, for they not only rely on the basic signature conventions but even magnify them due to their special status. With regard to iterability, i.e. the possibility of them being "repeated in principle again and again in all sorts of contexts [...], at the same time as being in some way singular every time" (Royle 120), autographs are determined by this very condition. This is because celebrities (or their secretaries) are used to signing hundreds of autographs (which had better look similar to each other), and yet they also carry the promise of an auratic touch (Benjamin) which recommends them as collectors' items. The auratic dimension of autograph-collecting is satirised in numerous episodes of Smith's novel, as the narrative voice characterises the interaction between celebrities and fans as a "gruesome, banal exchange" (*Autograph* 266), and as an entirely asymmetrical relationship, "warm and dark and infinite in one direction" (180). Yet this asymmetrical relationship is the precondition for making the fragile system work: the same deficit which causes us to invoke God when swearing an oath (in order to grant authority to what is said) also requires that the devoted followers acknowledge the celebrity's fame and grant authority to this celebrity's autograph: "People like you don't signify without people like [Alex-Li]", a friend of the protagonist tells a movie icon's fan-club president (222).

On the whole, the novel remains critical of the cultural worship invested in autographs and renders them "the epitome of 'empty' signatures" (Meinig 70). Their claim to authenticity is problematic, to say the least: like any other indexical, conventionalised form of identification, signatures are "cultural 'man-sign[s]'" (Gandelman 76), i.e. arbitrary and far from foolproof (a point repeatedly stressed in the story of *The Autograph Man*, which pokes fun at both the random mechanisms of celebrity culture and the omnipresence of forgeries on the autograph market). At the same time, the autograph business is controlled by mechanisms and conventions

3 Though the character of Kitty Alexander in the book is rather a B-movie icon, there are numerous parallels to Garbo's life (to whom Zadie Smith at one point dedicated an essay). Both Kitty Alexander and Garbo withdrew from the public, both signed few autographs ("Kitty Alexander signed even less than Garbo. Kitty was awkward and invisible as Jehovah. She was aloof. The public hated her for it. And in time she was forgotten, for the public do not like to be ignored"; 56). Garbo's Swedish origins are hinted at in the book when an alleged Kitty Alexander autograph is offered by a "notorious Swedish crook" (208). Another intertextual character of great importance is Norma Desmond, the infamous diva in Billy Wilder's *Sunset Boulevard* (1950); Kitty's relationship with her manager is clearly modelled on this movie.

unlike those that apply to ordinary signatures, a difference addressed in Alex-Li's exchange with Marvin, his milkman. Whereas Alex-Li's business is running on faith (i.e. on believing in the object's authenticity), Marvin only gets his commission when his customers actually sign the delivery notes in person. The value of autographs, on the other hand, is not assessed on the basis of their legibility or their legal value – they serve as metonymic indicators of fame and celebrity.⁴ They carry an almost transcendental and spiritual dimension in Smith's novel, where the characters' obsession with autographs can be read as a kind of *ersatz* religion. Although Alex-Li rejects his friend Adam's interpretation of the autograph business as a search for divine *inscription* and as a form of superficial spirituality, Adam's line of argument is hard to refute:

[Y]ou just want *God's* autograph. 'Scuse me, can I just trouble you, jusferramo ... You want Him to turn up with His wotsit – his lightning finger, finger with lightning in it, like a bolt – WHAM! Zzzzzz! Ha! Hahahahaha! Write it on your forehead? (315)

Another fragile convention which Smith toys with in her narrative is linked to the idea of absence. If signatures are generally designated to function in absentia, this inevitably invokes the problem of forgery. In the autograph market, the absence clause is the rule rather than the exception (most of the celebrities whose autographs are coveted by the dealers in the novel are dead). Yet, autograph dealers will offer guarantees on the items they sell, and the whole market would collapse if any doubts regarding the authenticity of the items were voiced. Paradoxically, expert testimonies are based on signatures looking alike, although, on the other hand, it is common sense that “no man can sign exactly the same way twice over. We are not so precise” (Smith, *Autograph* 145).

Finally, it is the notion of personality and uniqueness which the narrative most openly challenges. The central oxymoron at the heart of the novel is that Derrida's key premise for the signature's value – “I promise, that it is really I who signed” (Derrida, “Ulysses” 279) – crumbles in the face of the protagonist, who is an autograph dealer without a signature to call his own. This becomes evident whenever he is asked to sign something, as both Alex-Li's milkman and his doctor have trouble reading Alex's signature. Later, he will admit that he owes this lack of signature to his father's heritage, as he seeks to imitate the signature of the deceased, instead of producing his own: “I'd make him write it out so I could copy it. I'd make him write it over and over again, so I could watch the way his hand moved” (340). Alex-Li exhibits the void left by the traumatic event (his father's death), as the seal of his late father precludes the son from growing up.⁵ Consequently, the one major epiphany which the novel holds in store for its protagonist is to acknowledge

4 According to the narrator, when Alex-Li opens his bag, it is filled with “Elizabeth Taylors and Veronica Lakes, Gene Tierneys and James Masons, Rosemary Clooneys and Jules Munshins, back to back, separated by sheaths of plastic” (Smith, *Autograph* 51). Urszula Terentowicz-Fotyga argues that “an autograph evokes not a real person but a film star, itself a conglomeration of the real and the faked, the actor and the character he/she portrays, the person and the image, the private persona and the celebrity” (65).

5 The name of Alex-Li's father, Li-Jin, evokes the Chinese Yin, i.e. the seal which fulfils many of the functions the Western world attributes to personal signatures. In addition, Urszula Terentowicz-Fotyga points out that Alex-Li's name-change (from “Tan” to “Tandem”) may be read “as a symbolic transition from the reality of fixed identity (with a name as an indicator of background and origin) to the space of shifting meanings and multiplied signifieds” (59).

mortality, following various symbolic and literal encounters with death, many of which are linked to the notion of writing and signing in a Derridean fashion.⁶

As somebody stuck in the past, with unfinished ‘grief work’ precluding him from moving on, Alex-Li puts himself at the service of other people’s signatures instead of developing his own, although he refuses to acknowledge that his obsession with autographs has other than commercial reasons.⁷ It is at this point that the analysis of the novel has to move beyond the mere story level and take Derrida’s second signature type into account, in order to interrogate the link between signature and personality, and between individuality and recognisability.

“Signature Smith”/Kafka:

The Problem of the Artistic Signature of *The Autograph Man*

Derrida is very suspicious of the second signature mode, which one could call the ‘artistic signature’. However, although he criticises it as “a banal and confused metaphor for the first [mode]” (Derrida, *Signéponge* 54), it is an integral part of his signature experiment and one which must be taken into account within a thorough assessment of the phenomenon. Poststructuralists may (quite legitimately) argue that we must be wary of contributing to author myths and the ideological pitfalls of the artist idiom. Yet, the undiminished importance of this signature mode in discussing works of art means that the latter cannot be simply excluded from the debate, as the example of Zadie Smith’s career as a writer demonstrates. 20th-century criticism has seen an attempted assassination of the author at the hands of Roland Barthes, as well as Foucault’s critical reading of the author as an ideological product, a functional principle by which one limits, excludes, and “impedes the free circulation, the free manipulation, the free composition, decomposition, and recomposition of fiction” (Foucault 209). However, the idea of the author (and his signature) still prevails.

As soon as we consider the value attributed to signatures in the artistic field, a mere looking at the very literal dimension of signatures will not do, for the attributing of a work to an artist usually involves value judgements and a metaphorical dimension as well. In the case of literary texts, this in turn informs the way we

6 In one episode of the book, for instance, Alex-Li visits a dying autograph salesman in hospital. Shortly afterwards, he has a nightmare which sees him unable to identify various forms of writing, and he wakes up “[with] the feeling he [is] going to die.” (323) The link between death and signature even allows for a profitable outcome in the story, when Alex-Li cashes in on the fact that most people believe movie icon Kitty Alexander to be dead. Having acquired the exclusive rights to her archives, he literally makes a killing and sells her writings for her. Ironically, Derrida’s signature-machine does not cease to be productive just because someone is allegedly dead, as Alex-Li advises Kitty to carry on producing autographs: “Even when they find out you’re not [dead] then it’ll just be worth more because you’ll be the actress who everybody thought was dead and her autograph went for such and such on the day that everybody thought she was dead – and on and on. That’s the way it works. It’s all madness anyway. Take it, Kitty. Take it and bloody *rum*.” (329f.)

7 “‘I’m not a collector,’ said Alex-Li, loudly and slowly. ‘I’m a trader. It’s not really a personal thing. I prefer to think of it as a business. [...] I don’t hunt anymore and I don’t collect. I collect only in so far as I *trade*. I buy, I sell. Like any other business. I don’t wait outside theaters at midnight. That’s kid stuff.’” (64). Whilst Joseph gives up collecting as an adult, the narrator implies that Alex-Li lacks the kind of parental supervision that would force him to move on, hinting at the absent father again: “At fifteen Alex started to sell seriously, at twenty he had a business. But Joseph, ever under the spell of his father, never had the guts to make his hobby his career. There was cowardice in this, Alex thought, and he blamed it for the strained state of their relations.” (68f.)

interpret the story's discursive arrangement. André Chastel argues that signatures in the arts comprise "toute indication sur l'auteur de l'œuvre fournie par un procédé signalétique autre que les ressources mêmes de l'art" (qtd. in Burg 13). This goes far beyond the mere writing down of names or initials. Therefore, it does not come as a surprise that the notion of an artist's typical "handwriting" is ridiculed by Derrida. To him (as a poststructuralist), the idea of the allegedly inimitable artist idiom must amount to little more than a dubious revisiting of the 19th century's obsession with the monolithic, patriarchal structures of male, white artists in the Western world. Moreover, a text cannot be singular and void of meaning and, at the same time, be part of "a law and a typology of the idiom" (Derrida, *Signéponge* 20). This is one of the tenets of poststructuralism which turns both against the transcendental signifiers established by traditional logocentric philosophy and against the illusion of presence created in writing. The writing-machine establishes a presence in its own right, according to its own rules and mechanisms, yet inevitably determined by *différance*,⁸ i.e. decentralised in meaning, a dislocated texture of traces.

In practice, the idea of the artist idiom, which publishing houses continue to rely on (and which is the reason why the shelves in book-stores are still sorted by authors, not chronologically or by topic), has to fulfil a paradoxical, two-fold task: to guarantee the audience constant parameters on the one hand ("This book by your favourite author delivers exactly what you'd expect from the author!"), and a degree of originality on the other ("This book has some unique qualities which you will not find in previous books by the same author!"). When *The Autograph Man* appeared in 2002, readers had only been familiar with Smith's astonishing debut, *White Teeth*, hailed by English critics and the media as the first big publishing event of the 21st century. It speaks volumes that the book not only won several major literary awards but also one for the most successful marketing campaign.⁹ The impact of this turned the author into the epitome of youthful, dynamic storytelling within the field of Black British Literature, a constellation that would prove problematic for her fellow writers, whose style differed from Smith's.¹⁰ According to Smith herself, her goal was to write a second novel "that was as far from 'White Teeth' as I could imagine" (qtd. in Jones). To some extent, the critics were to agree, for *The Autograph Man* was generally considered a failure, "less accomplished and less felt on every level" (Mallon); allegedly written by an author trying desperately "to be clever by throwing in lots of digressive asides" (Stewart). Apparently, the only Black British writer who was suddenly incapable of writing like Zadie Smith was Smith herself. In the light of the success of *White Teeth*, of her subsequent novels,

8 Most introductions to the works of Derrida offer lengthy discussions of the implications behind the term's spelling, its fusing of *differencier* and *différer*, the emphasis on the written word (on simply hearing the word, the idiosyncratic spelling will elude the listener), and its connection with Jewish mysticism.

9 See Katarzyna Jakubiak's analysis of the marketing campaign behind *White Teeth*, which effectively turned the novel into a much more user-friendly, accessible book than is warranted by its content (202-208).

10 In his examination of young Black British authors, Mark Stein demonstrates how Smith's success story became a trap when it generated public expectations of a uniform school of writing, with several young authors receiving dubious praise as "[t]he new Zadie Smith" (Stein 170). In fact, the opposite is true: Black British Writing is very much characterised by its diversity and heterogeneity.

On Beauty (2005)¹¹ and *NW* (2012), and her short fiction, Smith's reputation as a writer can be linked to certain parameters: an epic scope, post-colonial topics, and an ironic tone likely to appeal to readers of some educational background (and which would later gain some attention under the heading of *hysterical realism*).

On the surface, it appears tempting to enter this discussion of whether or not *The Autograph Man* is, in fact, the least typical book by Smith just because (unlike any of her other three novels) it only consists of one major storyline, features rather few characters and puts no emphasis on post-colonial themes. However, this would lead to the very same pitfalls which Derrida criticises in his interrogation of the signature idiom. What an analysis of *The Autograph Man* can do, however, is to show that the book not only toys with signatures on the story level but also on the level of narrative discourse by incorporating a variety of other, allegedly original artist idioms. By taking a look at the various intertextual elements in Smith's oeuvre, one quickly recognises that the idea of a genuine, original voice (which the media were so infatuated with when *White Teeth* was published) is but an illusion. Her debut novel owes a huge debt to the writings of Hanif Kureishi and Salman Rushdie's Magical Realism, whereas *On Beauty* is modelled on E.M. Forster's *Howards End* and the tradition of the Campus Novel. From this it follows that what is most characteristic of Smith's writing is not its 'originality' but the way in which it incorporates intertextual reference points and other voices. Ursula Terentowicz-Fotyga argues that "the complex dialectic of the real and the imaginary, the authentic and the fake, the fictional and metafictional [are] written into the novel's bipartite composition" (58). *The Autograph Man* exhibits a postmodern love for pop-cultural allusions and quotes, which makes the book read like an "autograph dealer's auction catalogue" from time to time (Mallon). The presence of Kafka and Walter Benjamin is acknowledged on various occasions,¹² with Kafka references playing a particularly major role. Smith uses a quote from Kafka's *Letter to His Father* (1919) as an epitaph; the quote is taken up again later by the character of Esther, when she explains to Alex-Li that "[l]ife is more than just a Chinese puzzle" (151). Kafka himself is part of Alex-Li's Kabbalah and the narrator alludes to the

11 In addition to reviews which praised the book as a return to form, *On Beauty* won the 2006 Orange Prize for Fiction and was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize in 2005.

12 The novel includes several nods to Benjamin's works, particularly *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (1935). There are several arguments in the book regarding the auratic qualities of various celebrities. Alex-Li takes an uncritical stance, describing movie star Kitty Alexander, for example, as a "sacred thing" (227), even postponing their encounter so as not to break the spell. In New York, Alex-Li witnesses the reception of a young pop singer whose "aura was being effectively handled. Though the girl was only a hundred yards from Alex, she seemed a galaxy away" (which is an almost literal paraphrasing of Benjamin's definition of aura). Alex-Li's friend Honey, however, is not fooled into admiration and sees right through her: "Don't you know what that is over there? [...] That's dry shit on a stick" (250f.). On the level of the autograph business, one may point to Benjamin's dictum that there can be no exact reproduction of the auratic, which contradicts inherent beliefs of the autograph business, i.e. the idea of owning photographs "which the very famous themselves have touched and marked and which a man might purchase" (Smith, *Autograph* 153). This is an aspect which Benjamin emphasises in his essay on photography: "Tagtäglich macht sich unabweisbarer das Bedürfnis geltend, des Gegenstands aus nächster Nähe im Bild, vielmehr im Abbild habhaft zu werden" (378f.). In Benjamin's terminology, autograph men merely deal with relics of the aura, which is why Alex-Li is wrong to believe that he can actually "[have] the aura. He had it in a bottle. He possessed it. It was part of him, almost" (289). For a more detailed analysis of the link between Smith's novel and Benjamin, see Terentowicz-Fotyga 63-65.

famous first sentence from *The Trial* (“Someone must have traduced Alex T.”, 148). Furthermore, when the protagonist arrives in New York he looks at the harbour and “melancholy Brooklyn [...], and to a glimpse of the stone lady herself. The sword in her hand seemed only just to have been raised aloft, and the snow swirled about her form” (my emphasis, 191). This depiction of the Statue of Liberty is not “the result of bad fact-checking” (Rhodes-Pitts 7), as one reviewer claimed, but serves as an intertextual reference to Kafka’s fictional *Amerika* in the novel of the same name. There are further parallels between Alex-Li Tandem and Kafka’s protagonist, Karl Rossmann. Both are driven by guilt and (as is so often the case in Kafka’s works) influenced by an absent father figure; both novels can be read as modern twists on the *Bildungsroman*.¹³

The visible traces of Kafka’s influence on Smith’s novel are not without irony, for Kafka may well be the last bench-mark author of the pre-deconstructive literary age whose impact is beyond dispute. Moreover, Kafka’s central role in the shaping of (post-)modernism has also been acknowledged by poststructuralists, for his novels and shorter parables are the prime literary example of the alleged end of classic hermeneutics. At the same time, the poststructuralist infatuation with Kafka may well have contributed to the larger-than-life shadow of Kafka as a literary figure and to the vivid afterlife of his very own ‘signature’. The intertextual presence of Kafka certainly demonstrates the iterability of his signature, which is also the reason why Alex-Li and his friends get the feeling that “[they]’ve been here before” when they arrive in America (Smith, *Autograph* 190). This is, after all, the land they know from fiction and through images from cultural memory, which makes the setting of the novel read like an extension of the simulacra the book is so preoccupied with, “the matrix of postmodern mediaspace” (Terentowicz-Fotyga 61). In Derridean terms, one could conclude that the handwriting of Smith’s book is so preoccupied with other people’s handwriting that the idea of an inimitable idiom is very much put in doubt and essentially deconstructs itself. If there is a unique signature visible in the text, it is one that seeks to incorporate *other* signatures.

Éponge/Smith: The Signatures Within

Derrida introduces a third mode of signature in *Signéponge*, which transfers the place of signature into the text itself as a kind of “fold of the placement [*le pli de la mise*] in abyss [sic] where, after the manner of the signature in the current sense, the work of writing designates, describes, and inscribes itself as act” (54). He uses the example of the poet Francis Ponge, manifestations of whose name (*le ponge/l’éponge* = sponge) he traces in Ponge’s writings. Assuming that “[t]he thing is his name” (64), Derrida allows the name, i.e. the signature, to act as a prerogative for any interpretation of Ponge’s texts:

Insofar as it ingests, absorbs, and interiorizes everything, proper or not, the sponge is certainly ‘ignoble.’ Like its name, it takes in water everywhere [...]. Sponge sponges [*Eponge éponge*], the sponge expunges, the sponge is Ponge: for example a writing or a signature – it can also efface the traces of chalk on a blackboard, a table, or a slate. (72)

13 There are various similarities between Rossmann and the character of Kitty Alexander: both are *Verschollene* (which was the original title of Kafka’s novel), i.e. people who are both lost and legally dead after their disappearance (the latter notion being the major connotation of the term *verschollen* in Kafka’s time). Both are resurrected in a mythical America which is composed of cultural memory in Smith’s book.

This experiment is testament to Derrida's playfulness and, to him, is just as legitimate as a reading of Ponge's poems on the basis of biographical information. The punch line is, of course, the fact that Derrida actually gains results from this idiosyncratic approach. The name becomes part of the *différance*, since it is involved in the arbitrary texture of semantic relations, too. In other texts, Derrida never shies away from exploiting his own name (Derrida/*derrière les rideaux*) as well as his initials (JD/DJ – *déjà*). He thus gives credit to the role of the aleatoric: "It is not Derrida's fault or choice that his name can seem to be glimpsed '*derrière les rideaux*' [behind the curtains]" (Royle 123). Derrida will be the first to admit that reading *le ponge*/the sponge into Ponge's text will not lead to a conclusive interpretation, for Ponge himself "doesn't give a damn about the sponge" and the name will "never be more than a little, insignificant piece of the whole corpus" (*Signéponge* 116). So why would Derrida bother at all, and run the risk of becoming the apologist of all those who still treasure the romantic idea of the artist as a strong creator-genius controlling the meaning of his text, i.e. the exact opposite of *différance*? Derrida's reading of Ponge seems bizarre and unheard of in the history of criticism, yet we must take it as an ironic comment on the relationship between reading texts and the idiomatic artist-signature. It is inevitable that Derrida should criticise the second mode of signature (the creator-idiom), yet he is still unable to abandon it altogether. Transferring the signature into the text still means that its monument has to be erected in the first place, as the example of Kafka shows, i.e. "the signature has to remain and disappear at the same time" (56). In other words: deconstruction is always (and necessarily) preceded by construction.

This mode of signature again transgresses the boundaries between what is inside and outside the text. Ponge's signature manages "[to] sign itself, to signify itself [...], to become a writing-signature, and so to contract with Francis Ponge the absolute idiom of a contract: one single countersigned signature, one single thing signing double" (48). As for the place of this signature, it is neither part of the work itself (*ergon*), nor is it totally outside of the text (*hors d'oeuvre*); it is, on the contrary, situated in a room of neither/nor, beyond the dichotomies. We should remember that Derrida has often been characterised as "a thinker without borders, or rather a thinker of the always divisible border" (Royle 15); his *signature* works, so-to-speak, clearly support that. There have been attempts to transfer the Ponge experiment to other genres and media: Christian Keathley and Stephen Hock have suggested *Signéponge*-like readings of the films of Allen Smithee and Alfred Hitchcock, respectively. Hock uses *Signéponge* to subvert the notion of an alleged creator-presence within Hitchcock's films and even establishes the critic's role as a "necessary part of the signature experiment" within the film texture (202). It can be argued that Smith's novel manages to embed her name insofar as there are traces of the author on the intratextual level of narration, which is a precondition for *Signéponge*. In the act of narration, the Derridean *scripteur* determines a possible reading of the text, "and the key to this deciphering is in the author's name" (Keathley 125). Once more, it should be stressed that there can be no doubting the arbitrary relationship between signature and meaning. Yet, Derrida has shown that such an interpretation will not necessarily result in less legitimate readings than those revolving around the author's biographical background, i.e. the kind of interpretation that poststructuralist theory attempted to shatter so completely.

Therefore, it seems legitimate to extend the *Signéponge* experiment to *The Autograph Man* and to look for Smith signatures;¹⁴ after all, one of the novel's chapters bears the heading "Discovering the Footprints" (196). On the surface, the name Smith does not offer the same semantic richness which (*é*)*ponge* shows in French; it is merely the most common surname in the Anglo-American world. This would make Smith the epitome of the everyman, which is reflected in the proverbial designation *John Smith*, i.e. a thoroughly average person. The stereotype conjured up by the name is addressed in the novel when it turns out that Honey Richardson's real name is, in fact, Smith (209). Zadie Smith seems to toy with that connotation of her name in *White Teeth* as well. In this novel, Archie Jones explains to his friend Samad that his name carries about the same weight "[as] a 'Smith'. We're nobody" (84). In an effort to adapt to England as the country he was born in, Samad's son Magid later chooses the name Mark Smith for himself, so as to avoid drawing attention to himself with an exotic name. The everyman principle proves to be crucial to *The Autograph Man*, as any discussion of auratic phenomena will inevitably be linked to the difference between what is common and what is unusual. In this context, one cannot help but notice the long list of movie stars and icons of popular culture mentioned in the text, many of whom based their careers on pseudonyms: "Every person in Hollywood turned up with some nasty old name and the studios change it: Frances Gumm, Archibald Leach, Lucille LeSueur, Phyllis Isley – they all got nice new names, everybody did" (203f.).¹⁵ This is reflected in Alex-Li's calendar, which lists the real names of movie stars, not their pseudonyms (249). The key example taken up time and again in the book is Cary Grant (Archibald Leach), one of the major stars of the old studio system from the 1930s, whose public persona outgrew him (as would also happen to Hitchcock and Orson Welles). "Almost too good to look at", the narrative voice states admiringly and adds Grant's signature quote to the description of his photograph: "Everyone wants to be Cary Grant. Even I want to be Cary Grant" (50). This artificial refinement of the ordinary occurs in the book whenever Walter Benjamin's concept of aura is addressed. The same could be said, after all, for the name 'Zadie Smith'. Not only does the author use the more exotic spelling of her actual first name, Sadie (the trademark effects of which we are going to examine later on), but the name also hints at the topic of Jewishness in the book, as Sadie is the short form of Sarah (the wife of Abraham, mother of the Jews). In addition, Pascal Niclas reads the reinvention of Sadie-the-person as Zadie-the-media-persona as part of the publishing strategy:

The historical person Sadie Smith is caught up in this production, circulation and negotiation of a media-identity forming a *persona* which to a large extent is independent of the historical and empirical person. Even her own resistance against the commercialization of her persona is part of the system. There is no escape. (127)

The experiment could be taken even further: Christian Keathley stresses the bridge between Smith(ee) and its English root, *blacksmith*, which does indeed prove valuable for a discussion of the act of signing, as it suggests "a set of figures emblazoned on a shield [which] references the name of the bearer" (124). There is also a connection

14 For the following discussion, I employ Keathley's reading of the Smith(ee) corpus as a basis, yet I will also extend it by including aspects of other languages and anagrams.

15 The movie stars mentioned here are Judy Garland (born Frances Gumm), Cary Grant (born Archibald Leach), Joan Crawford (born Lucille LeSueur) and Jennifer Jones (born Phyllis Isley).

between the outdated form *smithy* and its modern-day equivalent, the *forge*.¹⁶ Smith/*forge* evokes a whole range of meanings, including the major problem that is always inscribed in the act of signing: the possibility of forgery, which, according to Derrida, “always defines the very structure of the event called signature” (Royle 120). Throughout the novel, we can trace the dichotomy between original and fake, not only (as shown before) on the level of the dealer crooks who take pride in their own forgeries. Evidently, Derrida’s controversial venture to employ the arbitrary in order to establish “knowledge where it is least expected” yields results (Keathley 126). The Smith/*forge* signature, generated from the name of the author, projects a number of metaphors into the text. Once this is accepted, the signature-machine can hardly be stopped. Derrida’s playfulness in tracing his own name (or his initials) inside the text goes so far as to include anagrammatical structures.¹⁷ From the name Zadie Smith, one can derive (imperfect) anagrams such as *Atheism* or *Death(s)*, which indeed hint at major themes of the book.¹⁸ The most productive and pure anagrams, however, can be derived from the Smith/everyman signatures. Using the original way of spelling Smith’s name (Sadie, not Zadie), one can produce the following statements:

- (1) Media Shits.
- (2) I’m shadiest. // *Shadiest Mi (*Me*).
- (3) *It is shamed.

The topics addressed here are directly reflected in the text: *The Autograph Man* presents a critical look at the media and features a narrator who is shady indeed, grounding his story-telling in playful metatextual and intertextual digressions, effectively “lay[ing] bare the novel’s condition of artifice, playing with fictional framing and the status of the author” (Terentowicz-Fotyga 67). Thus, the *Signéponge* mode of signature evidently shapes *The Autograph Man*, too, offering a narratological equivalent of what Gandelman calls rebus pictures in his discussion of signatures in paintings. They are certainly no more foolproof against forgery than any regular signature, since the reflection of the creator within the text itself is, of course, “no proof *per se* that the painter has been in contact with his creation” (Gandelman 83). Aside from speculations about autonomous creator-figures, the signature accepts its place at the periphery of the text, seeking the reader’s attention by leaving traces within the text that point towards it. We thus have to reconsider the border between what is inside and outside the text, as the locus of signatures cannot simply be defined as outside (*d’abord*). They leave a trace of the *scripteur* within, never to be extinguished from the narrative arrangement.

A Bonus Signature: Cameos and Trademarks

In order to trace a final, non-Derridean signature mode in *The Autograph Man*, I want to focus on one particular episode from the novel. When having lunch with two of his colleagues, Alex-Li encounters an autograph dealer named John Baguley,

16 On the other hand, a different language may turn the experiment against Derrida: the motif of the sponge (*l’éponge*) may be traceable in Ponge’s poetry, yet one may also argue that, in German, it produces *schwammige* results (*spongy*, i.e. vague, imprecise).

17 Alex-Li and Honey also play with anagrammatic names in the book, deciphering the names of movie stars: “‘Theda ... Bara [...] Yeah, that’s it – her name was like Arab Death, but all switched around – what do you call that again?’ – ‘An *anagram*?’ – ‘Yes, Mr. Dictionary, anagram.’” (Smith, *Autograph* 203)

18 For a detailed discussion of faith and death in *The Autograph Man*, see the article by Sigrun Meinig.

who is equally detested by the three of them, in spite of being the most successful one in the business: "My God, I hate Baguley. I never realized how much! With his bow tie. Thin mustache. The bastard" (95). What is more interesting than this strong emotional response is a little episode narrated by Baguley himself, who has just taken part in a charity auction:

We auctioned off character parts. In novels. Do you see? So you paid money and you got to be in this or that writer's book. Your own personal fifteen minutes, you see. I'm a good sport, me – I paid three hundred pounds. Lady writer. [...] And the trouble is, I haven't decided [...] quite what I'd like to be in it, though. In the novel, I mean. (96)

On hearing the story, one of the dealers suggests that the writer in question add Baguley to her novel in the form of a character "who organizes an auction and then buys his place [...] in a book as a character who organizes an auction and then buys his place in a book and asks ..." (97). On the one hand, the idea of adding a fictionalised version of someone to the plot serves as a footnote to the absurdities of fame, satirised on numerous occasions in the story. The book Baguley talks about would then become a self-centred postmodern text operating with metaleptic elements, cheekily aiming to challenge traditional notions of *diegesis*. It should be noted that one John Baguley, author of a book on *Successful Fundraising* (1996), did indeed take part in an auction carried out by the *Medical Foundation for the Care of Victims of Torture* in October, 2001. Here, he made the highest bid to have his name given to a character in Zadie Smith's new novel.¹⁹ Any correlations between the real John Baguley and his fictionalised version are, of course, both arbitrary and irrelevant. However, several poststructuralist critics have argued that there is no innocent reading of a text as such, which means that an informed reading of *The Autograph Man* is likely to invoke extratextual factors, too. When asked about his involvement in the book, John Baguley explained that he himself contributed the idea involving "infinite regression", and that he and the character in the book had nothing in common, "though perhaps I could grow into [him]" (Baguley). In the light of our discussion, the fact that he later met Smith again and signed her own book for her, "saying it was perhaps the first time an author had been given a signed book by a fictional character", makes for a fitting punch-line (*ibid.*). Similarly, the "lady writer" who is behind the Baguley episode will inevitably be linked with the actual author of the novel, Zadie Smith. It seems tempting to take the presence of this omnipotent narrator-figure in the text for a variety of signature usually associated with painting. It would then correspond to what Gandelman identifies as the "second system of signification" in his semiotic typology of signatures (78): an artist incorporates an enciphered version of himself in the picture, adding his name to an object in the picture.²⁰ Furthermore, this type of signature resembles the kind of iconic elements which are so characteristic of modern art and its characteristic tendency always to show that it is showing (98). Such a prototypical signature is one where "an iconic element (the representation of a human figure) inside the global icon designates with a gesture of the hand or finger the painter's signature" (95). The role reversal implied here (a

19 The list of authors participating in the event included Margaret Atwood, Robert Harris, David Lodge, and Ian McEwan. One should note that Alex-Li meets Baguley once more after that in the course of the story: at an auction.

20 Another typology of signatures in paintings is offered by Tobias Burg. Burg distinguishes between signatures outside the actual painting, floating signatures (which take a kind of in-between position, neither inside nor outside), slightly illusionistic signatures, illusionistic signatures and hidden signatures (see Burg 323-376).

fictional character alludes to the signature, not vice versa) resembles Smith's method. Her "lady writer" provides a truly paradoxical *trompe l'œil* case: the aesthetic effect (i.e. the illusion) will only work perfectly if the signature is not recognised as such. On the other hand, the degree of perfection can only be appreciated if the hidden signature is "recognized for what it is" (81).

This also applies to the cameo tradition in film, where "the physical presence seems to bear testimony of the creator's presence" (Schwanebeck [forthcoming]). If the presence of director Alfred Hitchcock (or of his fictionalised *Doppelgänger*) in his films is regarded as a symbolic signature, then why not extend this idea to literary texts? Despite the obvious differences regarding the nature of the two media (as literature's semiotic system does not operate so much via iconic forms of depiction as via symbolic *scripture*), the idea translates to postmodern writing. In the novels of John Fowles or Kurt Vonnegut, the narrator will often challenge the traditional limits of the intradiegetic world. In *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969), not only does Fowles' narrator reflect the writing process but he also claims to have witnessed several of the narrated events. In Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse Five* (1969), a narrator named Vonnegut claims to have spoken to the novel's protagonist, Billy Pilgrim: "That was I. That was me. That was the author of this book" (109). In a similar fashion, cameo appearances provide the illusion of making the creator-figure visible in the work itself. Smith's books resemble Hitchcock's films insofar as they recreate the cameo effect and establish a kind of running gag. We can trace Smith's presence both amongst Irie Jones's schoolmates in *White Teeth*, and in the milieu she depicts in her latest novel, *NW*, both of which are set close to home for the writer. *On Beauty* contains a chapter which depicts a faculty meeting at the fictional University of Wellington. During this meeting, someone escapes "through the squeaky double-doors – a feckless novelist on a visiting fellowship – but she did not retire unobserved" (324). Here, the author (who was a visiting fellow in Harvard when writing the book, with the campus of Wellington being modelled on Harvard) invites the reader to identify her as a character in the book, which in turn creates another signature mode. The "feckless novelist" resembles the "lady writer" just sufficiently to leave a visible trace, and the text itself backs this line of argument, as the comment that "she did not retire unobserved" lures the reader into the meta-textual guessing-game. The cameo-as-signature mode can be linked to one of the key elements of *The Autograph Man*: the vast number of celebrities who are mentioned in the text (or who make a guest appearance).²¹ Another influential text of Black British writing, Diran Adebayo's *Some Kind of Black* (1996), features a similar cameo case.²²

21 The list of cameos includes Leonard Cohen, a singer-songwriter well-known for having incorporated a signature into one of his most iconic songs: *Famous Blue Raincoat* (1971) ends with the line, "Sincerely, L. Cohen". Cohen features as an intertext in Smith's text time and again, for the book draws on both Jewish and Zen culture, which are major reference points to Cohen's work, too. Alex-Li's friend Boot bluntly remarks at one point that "there's only so much Leonard Cohen a party can stand" (166f.).

22 In *Some Kind of Black*, a mysterious character named Tayo Adeniran, who seems to enjoy the privilege of omniscience that is usually reserved for authorial narrators, shows up towards the end of the book, in order to arrange the *deus ex machina* reconciliation between the protagonist and his estranged father. The narrator concedes that "[i]t was a shame when he took his leave. It had been the nicest part of the evening." (170) Once again, the informed reader is likely to solve the signature puzzle, i.e. to decipher Adeniran as a near-anagram of the author.

The cameo gimmick may either be read as a postmodern strategy which playfully mocks the division between fake/authentic, or as a distinguished attempt to establish a kind of author-trademark (or brand) in contemporary Black British Literature. In the world of marketing, the concept of the brand designates the way companies establish recognisability for their products, aiming for simple yet poignant product identities which differ sufficiently from their competitors. Traditionally, artistic signatures have been linked to this economic aspect, too, as painters employed their signatures in order to establish their own unique marketability and to sell their works without the help of patrons. In *Theft*, his satirical depiction of the art market, Peter Carey resonates: “How can you know how much to pay if you don’t know what it’s worth?” (213).

As trademarks, signatures get even closer to the realm of the symbolic. Gandelman points out that the name *Degas* as a type of branding does not in the least prove anything about Degas’ actual involvement in producing the painting (just like purchasing a car of the *Ford* brand in the year 2009 does not prove that Henry Ford was actually involved in its making). From a semiotical perspective, these signatures have now become “*legisigns* in a symbolic coded system” (76f.) which actually offer neither proper information nor the original notion of authenticity (doing something by one’s own hand). Although branding is usually excluded from traditional typologies of signature (which do not look into the pragmatic aspects of selling-points and marketability), the key criteria designating brands (to be catchy and unconventional) also apply to author signatures. This becomes evident if we remember that Zadie Smith has become a brand in her own right, even though one should be wary of the idea of the traditional artist idiom, which points to very doubtful assumptions about the notion of originality. Smith and her publishers have shown particular qualities in establishing a brand via the media,²³ turning the author into a household name as a kind of literary prodigy (cf. Nicklas 126-129). In the process, the publishers even attempted “to regulate the authorial persona of Zadie Smith herself” (Jakubiak 211), a strategy that was to yield some genuinely bizarre articles on Smith, as interviewers



Fig. 2

and journalists struggled to make their actual encounter with Smith match the image circulated by publishers and agents. In Smith’s actual signature (fig. 2; “On Wearing the Wrong Thing”), we can even find some potential brand features, as it were: the stylised axis of reflexion is both attractive and memorable; her initials are energetic and somewhat reminiscent of the best-known Z signature in popular culture: that of Zorro.

23 All kinds of PR-related materials could be included here: newspaper articles written by Smith or about her, reviews of her books, photographs, public readings, video clips of Smith accessible via *YouTube*, the BBC adaptation of her first novel (*White Teeth*, dir. Julian Jarrold, 2002), her participation in charity auctions or her marriage with poet Nick Laird: David Lodge described their wedding as the “most coveted invitation of the year for the younger glitterati” (Lodge 92). A Laird signature is incorporated in *The Autograph Man*, too: the name appears as part of an advertisement (218).

Conclusion

In adapting Derrida's deconstructive signature experiment, one should not fall prey to the illusion that one is handling a systematic methodology. Derrida's reluctance to treat deconstruction like "a convenient instrument, a short treatise, a viaticum or even an organon or packet canon" (Derrida, *Truth* 12) is well-documented. His various musings on the signature problem are particularly ambiguous in that respect: playfully toying with the idea of the metaphorical dimension of signature (in the sense of an artist idiom) on the one hand, sabotaging it and exposing it to ridicule on the other. In spite of Derrida's critical attitude towards the allegedly genuine qualities of signatures (which we are so infatuated with and which we continue to rely on, no matter how fragile their foundations turn out to be), it appears that these notions are hard to ignore when discussing the impact of a contemporary writer. This holds true even when that writer's work subverts the notion of originality, as it does in Smith's case. Thus, her signature boils down to various layers of intertexts.

The Autograph Man in particular presents its readers with a unique case of a book examining the idea of signatures on a multitude of levels, both in a literal sense (on the story level) and beyond it in a metaphorical, wider sense (on the level of discourse). The final signature mode as suggested by Derrida, as well as the fourth dimension added here (the cameo effect), suggest that the signature may even fold in on the story and blur the borders between the extradiegetic and intradiegetic levels.

The question remains whether this concept can be extended to a great many other literary texts. This is because Smith's satirical portrayal of identity issues and the themes of authenticity and forgery in the autograph market prove extremely idiosyncratic, given the inclusion of cameos, the intertextual structure and the way the novel allows for an aleatoric reading in the vein of Derrida.²⁴ The place of these signatures remains *différent* in the original sense: never clearly definable, neither fully inside nor outside the text, observed from the periphery (*les marges*) of language and of thought, yet hardly to be overlooked. As Jonathan Culler remarks on the concept of the *parergon*, "the marginal becomes central by virtue of its very marginality" (196). Similarly, Derrida explains that the *parergon* can never be localised, as its basic condition is one of *différance*: "Il y a du cadre, mais le cadre n'existe pas" (qtd. in Culler 197).

Narrative signatures are located in the fold, in the inevitable disruption emphasised by poststructuralists. The latter take pride in making their own positions as critics part of their readings, accepting a place in the texture: "what one sought to describe as a theme exceeds the thematic; it folds back on it as it names it" (Culler 211), just as Smith's narrator refuses to be reduced to the level of the narrated world. Ultimately, signatures appear just as fragile within the texture of *différance* as all the other linguistic signs or speech acts which so often cause misunderstandings in

24 Other texts which might be included are the books of Peter Carey, most notably *My Life as a Fake* (2003, a meta-fictional take on the *Frankenstein* myth, where the fictional alter ego of a poet comes to life and the signature claims the *scripteur*), the aforementioned *Theft: A Love Story* (2006), as well as a hilarious short story by the late John Updike, called "Three Illuminations in the Life of an American Writer". In this story, Updike's fictional alter ego, the author Henry Bech, is faced with the depressing task of having to sign thousands of copies of a book for his publishing house, deconstructing himself in the process.

For his helpful comments on the subject, I am indebted to Prof. Stefan Horlacher (Dresden University of Technology).

The Autograph Man. Alex-Li tries to bridge the gap between signifier and signified by resorting to gestures, often to no avail (see Meinig). We, the readers of the novel, are similarly trapped. As long as the signature remains a powerful signifier, we have no choice but to sustain Derrida's verdict given in *Signéponge*: "we are under its law" (18f.).

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