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ZADIE SMITH'S NEW ETHNICITIES

The cultural diversification of postmodernity – and especially of postcoloniality within it – entails the coexistence of a multiplicity of identities and of overlapping social and discursive practices in the domain of social life. In this highly mobile context, which has disputed preconceived notions of identity and hegemonic versions of dominance and marginalization, hybridity emerges as a keyword for the interpretation of culture and it is faced with the challenge to find and to found an aesthetics seriously able to encapsulate the complexity of the new processes of signification without erasing difference to surrender to local or global forms of indifference (Vivan: 2002a, 148).

In this regard, Zadie Smith's literary production may help to illustrate the potentialities – and, perhaps, a few of the inconsistencies – of a narrative perspective which engages in the representation of the political and aesthetic issues which are related to multiculturalism. This young and successful black British writer devotes great emphasis to the themes of migration, the legacy of imperialism, national affiliation, multicultural society and hybridity (Vivan: 2002b, 37-42; Head: 2003, 106-119), in particular as they are perceived and elaborated by the young generation. Such emphasis, which confirms the role played nowadays by ethnic and cultural conflicts as dominant historical dynamics and, also, by the age factor in these conflicts (besides race, class and gender), makes of her writing an ostensibly emblematic site of representation of what the critic Stuart Hall has defined “new ethnicities”(1988) and an appropriate case study of that poetics of re-inscription of cultural values which is being carried out by postcolonial novelists.

Born in London in 1975 and author to date of two novels – *White Teeth* (2000) and *The Autograph Man* (2002)<sup>1</sup> – the London-

<sup>1</sup> *White Teeth*, London, Hamish Hamilton, 2000; New York, Random House, 2002. *The Autograph Man*, London, Hamish Hamilton, 2002; New York, Random House,

based Anglo-Jamaican writer has been widely acclaimed for her original mapping of the new subjectivities emerging out of the unprecedented connections which have seen the light in the human and cultural mosaic of postcoloniality. Such narrative focalisation, which pushes to the foreground some fundamental questions regarding the problematic social construction of the self, is well in accordance with the ongoing debate on what should constitute national identity. The incessant dialectic between self and other has progressively moved the boundaries of Englishness – in itself a historically exclusive notion – towards the inclusiveness and open indeterminacy of Britishness. Both of Smith's novels, in fact, investigate the issues of hybridisation in multicultural Britain, trying to show, in a sense, all the possible extension of cultural miscegenation. Indeed, the unpredictable developments which may open up to individuals and communities in the crucible of postcolonial society can be credibly selected as the macrotheme of Smith's novels, though hybrid identity is investigated in the two works under different perspectives and with varyingly successful aesthetic results<sup>2</sup>.

*White Teeth* explores a sector of the so-called Black Britain – a now fashionable and culturally-emergent definition identifying that part of the British population of non-white origins that has proudly reclaimed Britishness throughout decades of racial struggles<sup>3</sup> – for the span of three generations, focussing on the complex interrelationships, established through ties of family and friendship, between West Indians, Bangladeshis and Britons. A story of “helpless

2002. Both books are here quoted from the paperback Penguin edition, London, 2001 and 2003, respectively, and will be abbreviated to their initials in subsequent references. Smith's novels have been published in Italian by Mondadori, with the titles of *Denti bianchi* (2000) and *L'uomo autografo* (2003).

<sup>2</sup> While *White Teeth* has proven an incredibly successful novel and has collected several literary prizes – including the 2000 Whitbread First Novel Award, the *Guardian* First Book Award and the James Tait Black Memorial Prize for Fiction –, *The Autograph Man* has elicited a much less unanimous critical response. However, critics generally recognise that, in spite of the book's faults, Smith has already developed a narrative voice of her own, and a very seductive one. See, for example, Covacich (2003: 35).

<sup>3</sup> Black British culture emerges from a number of complex historical and anthropological phenomena which have shaped Britain as a multi-racial nation. As Donnell (2002: 11) well summarises, “In a nation state that has experienced the collapse of Empire, large-scale immigration from its former colonies, the mass women's movement, black power and nationalist movements, institutionalised racism, Thatcherism, multiculturalism, globalisation, and a supposed ‘flood’ of refugees and asylum seekers, questions of identity, politics and cultural values have undergone enormous, if not radical, change”.

heterogeneity that Zadie Smith recognises and celebrates” (Phillips: 2000, 11), weaving together the histories of several generations across the globe, the novel is interspersed with historic retrospectives: the 1857 Great Indian Mutiny, British Jamaica in the early twentieth century, the British army in Bulgaria during the Second World War. Its main setting, however, is contemporary London and, more precisely, those multi-racial areas of London that have been inhabited by the subsequent waves of immigrants in recent decades after decolonisation. One of them, Willesden Green, is also the neighbourhood Zadie Smith herself grew up in. The city functions, therefore, as the structuring backdrop to the story.

*The Autograph Man*, on the other hand, deals with the existential angst and the professional qualms of a few spiritually-exhausted young London Jews, with a mixed background, having African and Chinese origins. This time the setting is polycentric, since the story takes place in London again and also in New York, both cities being hubs of the fragmented postcolonial world. Resorting to “a pastiche of forms and philosophies” (Olson: 2002, online) and to a New Age ambience playing with a diffusive and unfocused spiritual search for authenticity, the novel quotes unconvincing bits borrowed from several cultural codes, especially from Judaism, introduced into the text in an intellectually minimal version which is neither ironic nor irreverently subversive. “It suffers less from nerves and more from embarrassment” (Greenlaw: 2002, 21); it shows, perhaps, the dangers incurred by writers when their creativity is colonised by the pressures and the deadlines of the literary industry.

Doubtless, Zadie Smith’s own mixed background, resulting from an English father and a Jamaican mother, her youth, and her profile as a sophisticated Londoner, who graduated from Cambridge with a first, have all contributed to establishing her as a literary star at incredible speed and to giving flair to a career which flavours – a bit too much, one would suspect, after looking at the list of her successes duly emblazoned on the two book covers – of the efforts of literary agents, evidently aware of the market appeal of hybridity and on the chase of a suitable ‘multicultural’ spokesperson to launch. No wonder, then, that Smith should have appeared to publishers as the perfect prototype of the multicultural writer, and for a number of reasons: her indisputable literary talent, all the striking personal traits listed before and also – in a culture very reactive to visual images where writers’ pictures often appear on book covers – the fascinating ‘indistinctness’ of her looks, which do not immediately reveal her origins (African, Asian, West Indian?) and make of her an

enigmatic and seductive signifier<sup>4</sup>.

The deliberate and potentially very manipulative trespassing of the boundary between Zadie Smith as a writer and Zadie Smith as a charismatic multiethnic icon seems to have characterised her career from the start. Thanks to a skilfully-orchestrated marketing campaign<sup>5</sup>, Smith's reputation, which skyrocketed after the exceptional success of *White Teeth*, had already gained momentum even before its actual publication in January 2000 in the United Kingdom and in April 2000 in the United States. In fact, *White Teeth* was sold to Hamish Hamilton at a "heated auction", where the writer received an officially unknown but allegedly huge advance payment for two novels "on the basis of a partial script of around eighty pages (...). Because of this reputedly high advance level, Smith's youth, and also her ethnic origins, attention was already attracted to *White Teeth* before it had even been written" (Squires: 2002, 14). Salman Rushdie's commendatory remarks, after reading an advance copy of the novel, were also very helpful to create genuine interest.

The evident pressures of the literary market on this fashionable writer, then, make the more necessary a lucid analysis of multiculturalism as it is thematised in her works. The two novels have elicited, in fact, quite a different response from the reading public and critics. *White Teeth* turned out to be a very pleasant read and it was celebrated as such by a unanimous chorus of enthusiastic reviewers. *The Autograph Man*, however, has been received as a much more disappointing novel than its predecessor, being perceived as a strained story twisting around an incoherent plot and trying to deal with too many complicated issues simultaneously and superficially. In particular, though the main character in the book is an English Chinese Jew, Chinese culture is practically neglected except for a few references to alternative medicine, while the pedantic and fragmented quotations from Judaism and Jewish lore betray Smith's highly imperfect understanding of the complexities of Jewishness.

Nevertheless, it is interesting to remark that Smith's achieve-

<sup>4</sup> Head (2003: 106): "Smith now has an Asian look. And this demonstrates an indeterminate ethnicity. For a book that purports to speak authoritatively to a wide range of ethnic experience – including Caribbean British and Asian British experience – the ability to adopt different guises suggests a substantive hybridized identity that goes beyond the more cynical marketing objectives".

<sup>5</sup> Very useful information of the publishing atmosphere in which *WT* saw the light is provided by the reader written by Claire Squires (2002).

ments and failures are both pertinent to the purpose of this essay, since they help to illuminate a few intrinsic ambiguities of a multicultural world and of the innovative forms of aesthetics emerging from hybridity. In particular, Smith's work is an excellent introduction to the unavoidable ambivalence arising from the conflicting coexistence of diverging cultures and subcultures in local communities and to the difficulties of fully grasping the emerging hybrid culture with all its implications, as the enculturation process involves one generation after another along local as well as global trends.

Negotiating differences is simultaneously negotiating identities – working out how I or we relate to others is simultaneously working out who I am or who we are. The radical disarticulations and rearticulations of contemporary social life radically unsettle social identities, and the search for and construction of identities is a constant process and a major preoccupation, but it should be framed in terms of the problems of learning to live with difference (Fairclough: 1999, 76-77).

What marks a step forward in Zadie Smith's fiction in comparison with previous postcolonial literature is – one would be tempted to say – the effort, no matter how successfully carried out, to give voice to the peculiar experience of a young generation of mixed-background British citizens, born and bred in the United Kingdom, influenced like their peers all over the world by the homogenising global trends of mass culture and, at the same time, encumbered with the conflicting needs of their cultures of provenance.

It is understandable that the generation gap should entail very different responses to histories of dislocation and migration: every generation meets different challenges and, quite naturally, time enfeebles the harsh impact of past experiences and emphasises the pressing relevance of new others. It is also understandable that communities, whichever their ethnic backgrounds, should be similarly affected by their youngsters' rejection of tradition with its roles and its expectations, an attitude which is doubtless a powerful factor in the social dynamics of the Westernised world.

Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* describes, among other things, how young people, divided as they are between peer pressure and senior values, manage to negotiate their identities and to invent their own founding narratives in Britain's multicultural society, a space they quite naturally recognise as theirs from birth, but where they need to reposition themselves while growing up. Attention is given to the conflict between religious traditions and contemporary Western culture and to the ways different generations experience it. While

guilt-ridden adults cling to traditional faith reluctantly and confusedly and are unable to make their beliefs sound meaningful in the changed cultural context, the young people all react to conformist observance in ways which range from outspoken agnosticism to virulent fundamentalism. Choosing attitudes which appear superficially different but are in fact strikingly similar in their common rejection of parental values, all the teen-agers in the book – Magid and Millat Iqbal, Joshua Chalfen, and Irie Jones – resist their seniors’ expectations with oppositional strategies which, by being extreme as is characteristic of adolescence, show the dubious quality of their alleged autonomy.

The black Iqbals are religiously indifferent but respectful of tradition. Of their two twins, Millat, who is brought up in Britain, turns out to be a pot-smoking disreputable guy and a militant Muslim fundamentalist, burning Salman Rushdie’s *Satanic Verses*. Magid, who would like to be called “Mark Smith” instead of “Magid Mahfooz Murshed Mubtasim Iqbal” and is sent back to Bangladesh by his father to get detoxicated from his Anglophilia, becomes a lawyer mimicking old-fashioned English mannerisms to the point of ridicule.

There is something peculiar about him. When I told him Millat was in Chester, he did not say a word. Just a stiff-upper lip. He hasn’t seen his brother *in eight years*. But not a little squeak, not a whisperoo. Samad says this is some clone, this is not an Iqbal. One hardly likes to touch him. His teeth, he brushes them six times a day. His underwear, he irons them. It is like sitting down to breakfast with David Niven (*WT*, 424).

Joshua Chalfen, a white kid who is the son of two intellectual snobs – the father is a genetic engineer who is breeding the prototype of the perfect FutureMouse, the mother a plant biologist – joins an animal rights movement and decides to help to set free his father’s inbred mouse. Mixed-background Irie Jones intends to study dentistry in spite of her parents’ opposition, then she gets pregnant by one of the two Iqbal twins, after having sexual intercourse with both in the course of a few hours, and ends up happily, years later, as Joshua’s lover.

Irie’s child can never be mapped exactly nor spoken of with any certainty. Some secrets are permanent. In a vision, Irie has seen a time, a time not far from now when roots won’t matter any more because they can’t because they mustn’t because they are too long and they are too tortuous and they are just buried too damn deep. She looks forward to it (*WT*, 527).

The same extended metaphor of the teeth, which provides the

title of Smith's first novel, alludes, on the one hand, to the trauma of eradication and displacement experienced by the first generation of migrants, on the other, to the inevitable act of emancipation from the colonial past carried out by the young. It is a painful process which Smith narrates, however, without self-indulgence and with great comicality:

(...) immigrants have always been particularly prone to repetition – it's something to do with that experience of moving from West to East or East to West or from island to island. Even when you arrive, you're still going back and forth; your children are going round and round. There's no proper term for it – original sin seems too harsh; maybe original trauma would be better. A trauma is something one repeats and repeats, after all, and this is the tragedy of the Iqbals – that they can't help – but re-enact the dash they once made from one land to another, from one brown mother country into the pale, freckled arms of an imperial sovereign. It will take a few replays before they move on to the next tune (*WT*, 162).

Though trying to “move on to the next tune”, *The Autograph Man* lacks the creativity and the emotional range of *White Teeth*, a signal, perhaps, of the actual difficulties of repositioning one's culture in the commodified anonymity of the global village. In *White Teeth* it is Irie Jones who gives eloquent voice to this generational misunderstanding, as in this exchange with her father's long-time Bangladeshi friend, the Muslim Samad Iqbal:

“These days, it feels to me like you make a devil's pact when you walk into this country. You hand over your passport at the check-in, you get stamped, you want to make a little money, get yourself started... but you mean to go back! Who would want to stay? (...)

And then you begin to give up the *very idea* of belonging. Suddenly this thing, this *belonging*, it seems like some long, dirty lie... and I begin to believe that birthplaces are *accidents*, that everything is an accident. But if you believe that, where do you go? What do you do? What does anything matter?”

As Samad described this dystopia with a look of horror, Irie was ashamed to find that the land of accident sounded like *paradise* to her. Sounded like freedom (*WT*, 407).

The exchange is a wonderful example of how the question “Where is postcolonial identity situated?” can be answered very differently according to different psychologies and personal histories, since “human agents are made and make themselves rather than being born in one already finished form” (Gilroy: 1996, 227).

Actually, this is the main appeal of *White Teeth*. From the yet



unvoiced perspective of migrants' children and grandchildren, the novel mirrors the face of a nation which has rapidly become multiethnic and multicultural, is interrogating itself about its changed identity, and is looking for new narratives since the canonical ones are found inadequate. While the Empire was based on the hegemonic assumption that there existed a stable national self and the colonised other, and that they were clearly divided by invisible but palpable borders, the postcolonial, post-imperial experience is, on the contrary, of endless miscegenation and mutations, of thousands of different faces in the urban crowds, of a myriad of different voices, colours, flavours, and sounds, bringing to the senses as well as to the brain a universe of new impressions. Border-crossing implies the search for new forms of representation of hybrid identity, through voices which now speak up from the centre itself of the former Empire and no longer from the margins.

No wonder, then, that these voices inhabiting the in-betweenness of cultures should be resonant with an often jarring polyphony, mixing feelings of surprise, excitement and, also, displacement in the face of a fast-changing and unrecognisable world. In fact, though differently, both of Smith's novels deal with the search for identity and seem to emphasise the perplexing gap which opens between discordant modes of belonging, no longer authorised or censored by a credible cultural consensus, in so far as it is homogenous. For example, Muslim religious tradition is represented in evident conflict with Westernised individualistic needs of gratification and self-fulfilment. But, at the same time and not so paradoxically, even Western egocentric self-development results in alienation. In *The Autograph Man* successful celebrity Kitty Alexander is a victimised product of the international motion pictures industry. The film icon has devoured the life of the real person, so that she has ended up being a captive in the hands of her psychotic agent Max. Like her flimsy celluloid existence, where images count more than actual experience, the actress's rare autograph, which is however easily imitated, has become a marketable simulacrum to be exchanged at the Autographicana Fair in New York, a 'meta-media' event where, it would seem, any surviving boundaries between life and its fictionalisation are removed.

Possibly, part of the faults of *The Autograph Man* lies with the insufficient comprehension of the dilemmas of identity in postmodernity and of its relevance as a central site of political struggle, a struggle of which the enervated young people, unconvincingly portrayed by Smith, seem now totally oblivious, as if hybridity had already lost all the vitality deriving from cultural cross-fertilisation



and its power of subversion. Significant issues such as multiculturalism, mass culture, and their overlapping areas of influence are oversimplified to the detriment of active engagement with the complex challenges facing the Third Millennium. Cultural deterritorialisation is, instead, the predominant attitude in the novel, an attitude which implies that “production, consumption, communities, politics, and identities become detached from local places” (Kearney: 1995, 552). Autograph trading, the improbable job referred to in the book title, is an extreme example of the loss of meaningful communal and professional relationships.

While the local setting of the novel, the depressing suburb of Mountjoy – a “commuter village on the northernmost tip of the city of London” of “cheap houses sitting directly in the flight path of an international airport” (*AM*, 8) – is connoted by anonymity and shabbiness, the rest of the world has turned hyperrealistically global. Alex-Li Tandem, a half-Chinese and half-Jewish ‘autograph man’, is on the chase of the signature of star movie Kitty Alexander, whose 1952 film *The Girl from Peking* has left an indelible trace on his boyish imagination. His peculiar mixed background and his unusual profession put him in contact with a crowd of eccentric people “who give voice to Smith’s musings on the confluence of popular culture and religion. (...) Within this layered text, Smith uses the language of religion to describe the commonplace – and the effect is to suggest the spiritual emptiness of modern life” (Olson: 2003, online).

Opting for all verbal clichés of mass culture and, as if it were not enough, also for non-verbal ones – a stereotypical body language made of what Smith calls ‘International Gestures’ – the young people in the novel give an overall impression of absurdity and seem to have substituted the delusory sensations of movies for first-hand experience. Every now and then, however, they are still forced to grasp some bits of the reality principle, as it surfaces in banal exchanges such as these: “You are not the world. There are other people in this film we call life” (*AM*, 61), or “But you don’t get no rewind in this life, as the black grandmothers in the movies like to say” (*AM*, 161).

The dominant practice narrated in *The Autograph Man* is not even cultural diaspora, since diaspora has after all resisted disappearance and saved difference through the creative interpretation of tradition in alien contexts. It is, rather, cultural dyslexia, that is, the inability to forge a new meaningful synthesis, no matter how provisional, out of a cultural system. It is an attitude in sharp contrast with the opposite acts of spatial and metaphorical

appropriation which represented the typical founding gestures of migrants and shaped the main themes of their literature. *White Teeth*, contrariwise, is openly indebted to, and enriched by, what is now regarded as a well-established postcolonial literary tradition – V.S. Naipaul, Buchi Emecheta, Salman Rushdie, Hanif Kureishi, and many others, of course – whose iconoclastic vitality has indeed rejuvenated English literature.

This is to say that Smith's new ethnicities are not 'so' new. The weighty presence of multicultural heritages surfaces in her fiction in a surprising mix of old and new. In a metafictional sense her narrative, too, is hybrid, since what Fairclough defines "semiotic hybridity" shapes her novel design and discourse.

Working across differences entails semiotic hybridity – the emergence of new combinations of languages, social dialects, voices, genres, and discourses. Hybridity, heterogeneity, intertextuality are salient features of contemporary discourse also because the boundaries between domains and practices are in many cases fluid and opened in a context of rapid and intense social change (Fairclough: 1999, 76).

Intertextuality, a general characteristic of postmodern writing, contributes to the workings of that poetics of re-inscription, specific to postcolonial writers, which involves the irreverent appropriation of the canon and the contestation of imperial hegemonic values. The great literary tradition is deprived of those sacred, canonical qualities that congealed its ideology out of the flow of history, but the most vital aspects of its aesthetic are nevertheless reclaimed and made functional to alternative imaginary architectures and communicative intents. The areas of the canon which are revitalised are those perceived as flexible enough to carry the burden of new signifying processes.

The re-inscribing attempt of such a poetics is more evident in *White Teeth* than in *The Autograph Man* since, as has already been observed above, the latter is not concerned with the issues of decolonisation but, rather, with those of mass culture and globalisation. The plot and the design of *White Teeth*, on the other hand, are clearly modelled – hybridised – after the nineteenth-century multi-plot, metropolitan novel, especially Charles Dickens's. Here is what the black British writer Mike Phillips writes about his encounter with London and about the city working as an imaginative filter shaping his mental maps:

I set out to learn about London (...). I began travelling by bus to the West End, then walking back by various different routes (...). What I

remember was the odd sense of everything being unexplored and mysterious, but at the same time somehow already part of my memory. Walking on Waterloo Bridge for the first time I recognized the view immediately. I had read about all this, in textbooks, in novels, especially Dickens's novels, and although it wasn't very much like the way they described it, everything seemed half-familiar, like something emerging from my imagination (Phillips: 2001, 17).

Better than other novelists of the Victorian age, Dickens creatively understood the role of the metropolis of London as the imperial heart and the dominant icon of modernity, with all its hopes and ambiguities, captured the extraordinary social chemistry of the urban setting, and managed to infuse his insights into highly successful books whose appeal cut across class lines. The democratic quality of Dickens's fiction, addressed as it was to both a learned and a popular audience, should not be downplayed if one tries to understand in depth why he is still so influential – 'effortlessly' influential, because deeply rooted in the language – in English-speaking cultures.

A historic battlefield and, at the same time, a fascinating and disquieting oneiric image surfacing from the secret dreams of the master narratives of modernity, the urban space is refigured by postcolonial writers through the lenses of contemporary complexity, a complexity they have fully experienced in their lives and in their poetics:

London lurked in our language like a virus, carried on a stream of words and ideas which had acquired the power of myth (Phillips: 2001, 30).

This mythical and escapist image of London has to be incessantly attuned to the responsible, political engagement with the actual city and with the needs of the real communities which inhabit these places, overdetermined by multiple histories:

By the end of 1960s it was clear that if there was a way of being black in London we would have to create it ourselves (...). Necessity had been the source of our reinvention. The music, the black-run organizations, the churches, and the social life which went with them, were both expressions of our own identity and essential tools of survival (Phillips: 2001, 56, 58).

Not surprisingly, then, thanks to the revitalising process of cross-cultural osmosis and to affirmative action, London – the core of the former Empire – still stands as a vibrant nucleus for postcolonial

writers. The overlapping discourses of multiple cultures and, therefore, of multiple symbolic and imaginary worlds – imperial, colonial, postmodern and postcolonial – weave unpredictable imaginative synapses, while readers find themselves situated in estranged and estranging fictional cities along the fragmented paths of postcoloniality and feel all the extent of the loss of previous references, a loss which is both exciting and depressing and is ambivalently experienced as emancipation and anguish. As has been seen, Smith’s fiction veers between these two moods.

*White Teeth* is openly indebted to the Dickens world, and not only for the choice of the urban setting. Explicit references are made to Dickensian characters, for example to Uriah Heep the notorious hypocrite in *David Copperfield*: “Round and round the kitchen he went, bending his head and rubbing his hands over and over like Uriah Heep” (*WT*, 57). Indirect allusions are evident in the theme of the double, so exquisitely Victorian and Dickensian: the two physically identical Iqbal twins, Millat and Magid, turn out to be the mirror-like opposite of each other in terms of personality, to their mother’s utter surprise:

She confided to Clara: *By God, they’re tied together like a cat’s cradle, connected like a see-saw, push one end, other goes up, whatever Millat sees, Magid saw and vice versa!* (*WT*, 220).

As in Dickens, insanity is understood as a disease of an entire society, not as a personal idiosyncrasy. Funnily, then, and quite unsurprisingly, given the present composition of British society, Zadie Smith portrays insanity as multi-racial:

Now, the children knew the city. And they knew the city breeds the mad. They knew Mr White-Face, an Indian who walks the streets of Willesden with his face painted white, his lips painted blue, wearing a pair of tights and some hiking boots; they knew Mr Newspaper, a tall skinny man in an ankle-length raincoat who sits in Brent libraries removing the day’s newspapers from his briefcase and methodically tearing them into strips; they knew Mad Mary, a black voodoo woman with a red face whose territory stretches from Kilburn to Oxford Street but who performs her spells from a bin in West Hampstead; they knew Mr Toupee, who has no eyebrows and wears a toupee not on his head but on a string around his neck (*WT*, 174).

The creative energy of Smith’s language recalls that of the Victorian writer. Puns have a Dickensian flavour and a disquieting contemporary tinge, as in this reference to the violent racist riots ignited by right-wing leader Enoch Powell, here ironically rebranded ‘E-

knock', after his 1968 notorious speech 'Rivers of Blood' where he stirred popular hostility towards immigrants to the point of aggressiveness.

Willesden was not as pretty as Queens Park, but it was a nice area. No denying it. Not like Whitechapel, where that madman E-knock someoneoranother gave a speech that forced them into the basement while kids broke the windows with their steel-capped boots. Rivers of blood silly-billy nonsense (*WT*, 62).

There are also a few easily recognisable citations from Dickens's novels. The narrator's aside – "Ah, you are not convinced by coincidence? You want fact fact fact?" (*WT*, 220) – echoes the opening lines of *Hard Times*, which make fun of Benthamite obsession with matter-of-factness in the classroom. Later in the novel, however, readers find out to their amusement that education has come a long way since Victorian times: at Glenard Oak, the Victorian monstrosity which was formerly a workplace, then an asylum, and now is the comprehensive school attended by the young people in the book, students are above all "passionate about fags (...) just fags, any fags. Fags, fags, fags" (*WT*, 291). Dickens again whispers in Zadie Smith's ear when she invents her insignificant micro-histories: middle-age and depressive Archie Jones, who very much resembles Arthur Clennam, the male protagonist of *Little Dorrit*, a defeated dreamer like him, quotes the phrase 'Nobody's fault' from Clennam's interior monologue.

*Nobody's fault (...), nobody's fault but my own*, but he wondered whether there wasn't some higher pattern to it. Maybe there will always be men who say the right thing at the right time, who step forward like Thespis at just the right moment of history, and then there will be men like Archie Jones who are just there to make up the numbers. Or, worse still, who are given their big break only to come in on cue and die a death right there, centre stage, for all to see (*WT*, 23).

The last sentence anticipates the discussion between Samad Iqbal and Archie Jones of the episode igniting the Great Indian Mutiny and of the role supposedly played in it by Samad's ancestor, Mangal Pande, maybe a hero "fighting against the new, holding on to tradition" (*WT*, 180), maybe "a drunken fool" (*WT*, 254). The parody of history, whether it involves the colonised Indian subcontinent, British Jamaica, or the Second World War, is a recurrent modality in *White Teeth*. Again, Smith's irreverence for historic mythography, imperial and colonial as well, seems to betray the impatience of the

young generation, pulled as they are by the diverging forces of national heritage and tradition, local appurtenance and global trends.

In this thematic perspective, then, *The Autograph Man* follows *White Teeth* quite naturally. After leaving behind as irrelevant the struggle for the appropriation of physical and cultural spaces and the negotiation of national identity, which are no longer such pressing concerns for Zadie Smith's indigenous and hybrid generation, the focus now shifts to post-national identity, virtual reality, immaterial jobs and deterritorialised areas, where depleted selves, such as Alex-Li Tandem, wander overburdened by an excess of cultural codes. It is a set of attitudes which can be labelled, quite effectively, narcissistic "globo-claustrophobia", as in the words of no-global spokesperson Naomi Klein:

Of course it's a classic symptom of teenage narcissism to believe that the end of history coincides exactly with your arrival on earth. (...) Still, there is a part of my high-school globo-claustrophobia that has never left me, and in some ways only seems to intensify as time creeps along. What haunts me is not exactly the absence of literal space so much as a deep craving for metaphorical space: release, escape, some kind of open-ended freedom (Klein: 2001<sup>2</sup>, 63-64).

The hope remains that the incredible human potentialities of a world turned global will not be sold out as debased multicultural commodities at the supernational, post-imperial shopping-mall of marketable goods. Where Zadie Smith will situate herself as a novelist, which place she will occupy between self-centred narcissism and political involvement, which creative acts of signification she will invent out of the multiple traditions and discourses of hybridity, is still an open question.

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