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Research Article

"God, Absence, and the Autograph: Kabbalistic Echoes in Smith's Fiction"

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ABSTRACT

In this article, "God, Absence, Age, and the Autograph: Kabbalistic Echoes in Smith's Fiction, the Jewish Mystical Perspective, researcher analyzes the Zadie smith's novel The Autograph Man, in light of Jewish mysticism, or Kabbalah. It examines how themes such as the absence of God, the quest for meaning and the concept of a divided self-shape the characters' emotional and spiritual existence... It is Alex-Li Tandem, the protagonist, for whom this is particularly the case. Smith, the study says, uses Jewish mystical motifs such as the breaking of vessels (shevirat ha-kelim), divine absence (tzimtzum) and the longing for repair (tikkun) to investigate contemporary challenges including faith, loss, identity and the worship of celebrity. In the book, God's silence is terrible and deep, but it's also where people fill in with their own meaning. In tracing Kabbalah to semiotics and trauma theory, Homolka shows us how Smith merges spiritual and postmodern inquiries—particularly those surrounding language, symbols and what is real. We are pleased to have this reading across professions as part of a series on The Autograph Man. It shows how Smith's one-of-a-kind manner of negotiating metaphysical absence and emotional longing in a world of many cultures and mass media. The article extends this method to offer concepts from theorists like Gershom Scholem, Jacques Derrida, and Cathy Caruth.

Keywords: The autograph man, Zadie smith, jewish, God, Kabbalistic

Introduction:

After White Teeth's phenomenal success, Zadie Smith wrote The Autograph Man (2002), which got mixed reviews from critics. Some critics called it "overambitious" or "overloaded with ideas". If we observe carefully, we find that the aim of the novel reveals a profoundly philosophical story that connects popular culture, religion, and philosophy in subtle but meaningful ways. By providing a philosophical reading that shows how fame, language, and the holy are always interacting, The Autograph Man goes beyond and above the typical parody of celebrity culture. Smith's protagonist Alex-Li Tandem's obsession with autographs is emblematic of a spiritual emptiness and longing that echo elements from Kabbalistic Jewish mysticism. The book is a postmodern, secular meditation on human nature, identity, and the quest for transcendence; it is also a scathing indictment of the media's obsession with the present.

The main character is Alex-Li Tandem, a British, Jewish-Chinese autograph dealer whose world revolves around the signatures of famous people. But there is a more profound spiritual need that underlies Alex's obsession with signatures, tangible traces of long-gone darkroom personalities. And he doesn't just want a list of names; he wants to be physically present with them. "An Autograph Man's life is spent in the pursuit of fame, of its aura, and all value comes from the degree of closeness to it one can achieve. But now he had the aura. He had it in a bottle. He possessed it. It was part of him, almost." (Smith 290)

This paper contends that The Autograph Man is postmodernist Kabbalistic literature. It deploys Jewish mysticism, and specifically the notion of Tzimtzum (the divine retreat to make room for the act of creation) to investigate how in a secularised world, fame, language and collecting serve as surrogates for the divine. With Kitty Alexander, a reclusive retired actress, Alex's obsession parallels the mystic's search for the hidden face of God. In that sense, the book can be seen as a space where the autograph, as a Kabbalistic vessel, 'holds and points to the absence of presence.

A beautiful rendition of this idea is captured in a thought of Alex's: "He felt himself breathing the artificial air of a chiller cabinet, like he was being refrigerated, artificially preserved for something. He could feel himself growing hysterical. And they just keep on collecting! As if the world could be saved this way! As if impermanence were not the golden rule! And can I get Death's autograph, too? Have you got a plastic sheath for that, Mr. Autograph Man?" (Smith 242). It is an imprecation of respectful piety; the signature as a wonder, the name as a ghost. "It is no longer a question of imitation, nor duplication, nor even parody. It is a question of substituting the signs of the real for the real, that is to say of an operation of deterring every real process via its operational double, a programmatic, metastable, perfectly descriptive machine that offers all the signs of the real and short-circuits all its vicissitudes." , as described by Jean Baudrillard's Simulacra and Simulation (Baudrillard 2) The signature is spectral residue; it stands in for something that has passed and is no longer available — a kind of simulacrum. Not only is Kitty Alexander's autograph one of the rarer ones there is-but for me, it represents an encounter with a lost past, person, and moment, all unavailable. Just as in Kabbalah one cannot literally utter the Name of God but is required to borrow from mystical texts and symbolic fragments, so the signature becomes an aura relic, a trace of the sacred in the profane world of exchange.

The Jewish themes in Zadie Smith's work are more than just decorative; they provide a conceptual foundation for the novel's explorations of ontological issues. Kabbalah is the only form of Jewish mysticism that is truly literary, both in its dependence upon the text and in its imaginative daring says Harold Bloom in his Kabbalah and Criticism essay about the practice. Smith draws on this canon by casting her hero as a guy of language, signs, and pieces. Lists, signatures, television scripts, and made-up ideologies like Wu-Wei—which blends pseudo-Zen distancing with millennial absurdism—make up Alex's textual universe. However, underneath his linguistic games are a profound emptiness, a metaphysical hush that reflects the fundamental structure of the Kabbalistic cosmos following the divine departure.

Those who have panned the book because they don't like the plot or the characters may have failed to notice its metaphysical structure. As formal tactics, the novel's emotional and narrative hesitances reflect the ineffability and fragmentation inherent to Jewish mysticism, rather than flaws. It is necessary for the language of mysticism to be paradoxical because it talks in order to convey what cannot be said, as Gershom Scholem explains in Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism "For it must be said that this act of personal experience, the systematic investigation and interpretation of which forms the task of all mystical speculation, is of a highly contradictory and even paradoxical nature. Certainly this is true of all attempts to describe it in words... It is well known that the descriptions given by the mystics of their peculiar experiences and of the God whose presence they experience are full of paradoxes of every kind."(scholem 4–5)This paradox is performed by Smith's novel in exactly this way: it mentions fame but implies faith, signatures but denotes holy names, collectors but invokes mystics.

The narrator says,"Adam knelt down where he was, and for a second Alex feared he was going to ask him to meditate or pray and he now knew—with more certainty than ever before—that those two acts were beyond him, no, more than that: he didn't want them. He wanted to be in the world and take what came with it..." (Smith 401)This shows that Alex's ostensibly worldly interest hides a spiritual need. This is a dichotomy that describes the postmodern condition: not believing and wanting to matter at the same time. It goes along with Derrida's theory of "différance," which says that meaning is never fully present but is instead delayed.

This reading of The Autograph Man says that it is more than just a book about success and failure; it is also a literary midrash, a modern look at what life means when the sacred is gone. Smith does not promise either easy secular redemption or the return of the divine. Instead, she lives amid the broken and shattered bits of the holy alphabet's missing letters. The book becomes a spiritual object in its own right since it hints at meaning and refuses to be resolved.

2. The Autograph as Talisman: Relics, Signs, and Lost Presence

Alex-Li Tandem, as a purveyor of the autographs of the famous, confers mystery on them." By investing the autograph with that "mystique," Zadie Smith is fabricating a secular, postmodern sacred, a spiritualist medium that conjures meaning, memory, presence, in a world of magics, through which these things pass.Smith further complicates the notion of a signature right from the outset. It's more than a name on a piece of paper, it's a legacy; it's a legacy of a person that is no longer here. "It was easy to forget, when one was an Autograph Man, that names on paper are the very least of what is traded and shifted round the world. Autographs are a small blip in the desire network, historical flotsam." (Smith 115), Alex reflects. If not participating in real life, the signature turns into a ritual object. This is willfully religious language — "miracle," "conjured" — suggesting that the signature no less than the seven is a form of holy ritual, a method of making presence from absence. This aura is what underpins Alex's intensity to get it. To inhabit that universe is to have a signature. The fetishisation of artefacts with spurious connections, however flimsy, has echoes of the religious relic tradition, where it is the meaning of the object rather than its properties that possess power.

The emotional framework here is in line with what Roland Barthes calls a kind of deferred presence in his semiotic theory of photography as presented in Camera Lucida. Autographs, like photographs, exist in that liminal region between memory and materiality, present and absence; they capture a fleeting moment of

existence that is both emotionally charged and emotionally charged with loss. Wholeness, coherence, and a stabilised identity in a world of upheaval are what the autograph promises to Alex. The sign is slick, delayed, and partial, though, as are all signs.

Jean Baudrillard is well-known for saying in his book Simulacra and Simulation that modern society has replaced reality with signs and symbols. He says that Simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being, or a substance. It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal. The territory no longer precedes the map, nor does it survive it. It is nevertheless the map that precedes the territory—*precession of simulacra*—that engenders the territory."(Baudrillard 1). Smith's handling of the autograph fits here: the replication of the person is more important than the person themselves. For example, Kitty Alexander is rarely shown as a real person. Instead, she is an idea, a symbol, and a depiction of a lost cinematic past. The narrator says, ""It is a face, as Hedda Hopper had it (the alliteration itself brings on nostalgia!), to be conjured with, it is made of magic, and it is no more." (Smith 267)This flattening, this turning of people into symbols, is what the hyperreal is all about.

But Smith doesn't just make fun of this situation; she gives it depth. The autograph may be turned into a product, but it is also full of desire. Alex's obsessive cataloguing and love for his collection show this very clearly. "Look, you have your work, Joseph, yes? And Rubinfine has his family. And Adam has his God. And this is what I have. My little obsessions. You used to have them too, but you grew out of them. Lucky you. But I didn't, all right? Do you understand? This is what is between me and my grave. This is what I have." (Smith 200) In this case, the autograph acts as a screen against the turmoil of human closeness, a carefully chosen collection of things that stay the same in a world that is always changing.

This idolatry of the autograph as quasi-sacred object is reminiscent in many ways of Jewish mysticism. For instance, both traditions hold the written word to be sacred and regard texts and letters as extremely powerful. It this system of Kabbalah, the letters of the Hebrew alphabet are not only cosmic signifiers, but also are agents which facilitate creation rather than just being representations of divine perfection "Its chief subject-matters are the elements of the world, which are sought in the ten elementary and primordial numbers—Sefiroth, as the book calls them—and the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet. These together represent the mysterious forces whose convergence has produced the various combinations observable throughout the whole of creation… [God] drew them, hewed them, combined them, weighed them, interchanged them, and through them produced the whole creation and everything that is destined to be created." (Scholem 76) Smith deploys these philosophical meanings to demonstrate that the signature is a modern reflect of sacred writing. Alex is as frightened by the signature as a Kabbalist is of divine phrases.

Smith intentionally blurs the distinction between sacred and secular materiality. As a young boy, Alex has always been dreaming of a world where autographs are a real treasure. Someday our autographs will be in all the museums of the world. Presidents and porn stars, movie stars and queens. In retrospect, we will have a word for it: we'll call it our faith. "I am the kind of person who thinks of autographs as historical documents, and any museum of cinema would be deprived if it did not have you in it." (Smith 130) Seen in the anthropological sense, the autograph may exceed the thing form; it is then a fetish, not a Marxist object of alienated labour.

According to Susan Stewart The collector's distinction does not rest solely on the material mass he or she accumulates, but on the production of an identity by the appropriation of objects.And so, by being around important people, things that endure and the past, Alex's collection of autographs becomes a biographical archive, a story of who he is. It keeps you stable in a mind that is otherwise unstable. Stewart's is a smart observation that allows us to read the autograph not simply as a sign, or as a literalized fetish, but as a self-writing thing: an object which, for Alex, acts as a supplement and an accessory to the emptiness of his life.

In short, Smith's treatment of the autograph is not at all silly. It works as a complicated sign of presence, desire, and holy replacement. Smith turns what may be a shallow object into a place of spiritual resonance by using complex descriptions and layers of meaning. The autograph is a thing of value, a fetish, a relic, and a symbol of how people want to capture, keep, and believe. It is a modern talisman that takes the place of the sacred relics of the past. It may not be as powerful, but it still shows how much we need to touch what is missing.

3. Tzimtzum and the Withdrawn God: Spiritual Absence in Modern Life

Tzimtzum is one of the most important ideas in Jewish mysticism. It was developed by Kabbalist Isaac Luria in the 1500s. It tells the account of how God drew Himself out of the universe to make way for creation. This first act of absence makes creation possible, but it also creates a universe where loss, distance, and longing for divine presence are all present. Zadie Smith's The Autograph Man is a postmodern echo of this mystical structure: a world where God has left, and signs, names, and fragments are desperately looking for meaning. Smith uses Alex-Li Tandem's spiritual bewilderment, compulsive behaviour, and desire for an elusive presence—whether it's God, a father, or a celebrity—to build a story based on divine absence.

."Why is it," said Alex, feeling combative, "that Adam has a mystical experience twice a week and that's just fine, that's dandy, but when I do, finally, everybody thinks I'm a lunatic?" (Smith 87) He didn't believe in God, but he couldn't stop talking to Him.This paradox sums up the state of the postmodern subject: they are both sceptical and yearning, and they don't believe but have a metaphysical need. Smith's description of this tension

is similar to what Gershom Scholem calls “For it must be said that this act of personal experience… is of a highly contradictory and even paradoxical nature. Certainly, this is true of all attempts to describe it in words… It is well known that the descriptions given by the mystics… are full of paradoxes of every kind.” (Scholem 4-5).

Alex looks for other things to fill this void. His fixations on Kitty Alexander, the autograph, and Wu-Wei (his phoney spiritual system) all show how he is trying to fill the hole that God left when he left. In Alex's mind, Kitty is like the Shekhinah, the feminine half of God that is exiled in Kabbalistic tradition. When the vessels that hold divine light break, the Shekhinah is sent into exile in Lurianic cosmology. The mystic's goal is for her to come back, which is called Tikkun or mending. Alex's long pursuit of Kitty also ends in an anticlimactic meeting with an old woman who no longer fits the image he loved: “And now, you have the revelation, now we have met. I am no one at all. Just an old woman with a big mouth and too many problems. A terrible deception has been practiced on you, Mr. Tandem—” (Smith 441) This paradox sums up the state of the postmodern subject: they are both sceptical and yearning, and they don't believe but have a metaphysical need. Smith's description of this tension is similar to what Gershom Scholem calls the mystic's state of "speaking in the presence of silence" in Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism. “It is well known that the descriptions given by the mystics of their peculiar experiences and of the God whose presence they experience are full of paradoxes of every kind.” (Scholem 4–5)

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It is the immaculately invented spiritual philosophy that Wu-Wei is, that speaks volumes. It borrows from Taoist concepts, but its artificial ingredients and consumer-makeover packaging mock the quest for spiritual clarity in a commodified era. But below the irony, Wu-Wei is also an unself-conscious articulation of Alex’s yearning for tranquillity, significance, and connection. He chants its slogans the way a penitent chants prayers: “Wu-Wei says: sometimes not doing is the most powerful doing” (Smith 88). It’s an obvious joke, but it also reflects his deeper desire for spiritual footing. Without any authentic belief systems guiding him, Alex makes his own postmodern belief system—and this is a familiar postmodern strategy of bricolage, as outlined by Jean-François Lyotard in The Postmodern Condition and here referred to as that in which grand theories have been replaced by local or fragmented ones . Wu-Wei provides Alex with his local myth, his ad hoc theology where God has receded.

There are also language effects when the divine is taken away. Alex has a hard time being honest with himself throughout the book. His discourse is full of irony, quotes, and ways to avoid answering. In his universe, language has lost its meaning, and names don't mean what they should anymore. This loss of real language is another sign of Tzimtzum. Just as the divine light faded away to make room for the world's birth, meaning too fades away from language, leaving behind empty shells of expression. Derrida says in Writing and Difference that the absence of the transcendental signified extends the domain and the play of signification infinitely.Alex lives in this never-ending game, where even the holy becomes a copy, and the signified (presence, God, love) is always put off.

But even if Smith is missing, he lets moments of silent transcendence happen. Alex feels a kind of respect for Kitty as he watches her in an old movie. “In the film, Kitty’s eyes are taped down as ever, and she is lost in New York, again, a Peking girl with no friends. … Alex’s heart cleaves to her as he watches her slender form slipping into cinemas, sitting in the dark. … Alex watches Joey watching Kitty watching the huge flickering faces of people she presumes to be gods.” (Smith 159)

His collection, uncertainty, and contradictions are like the state of a world trying to remember something it never truly understood. Smith doesn't utilise the Kabbalistic model to give spiritual salvation. Instead, he uses it to show how absence may shape us, how emptiness creates want, and how withdrawal makes room—for language, for longing, and for existence.

4. The Sacred Name and Jewish Mysticism

In the world of Zadie Smith, the names are not just names. They signify something magical, social and spiritual. Religiously, this is most akin to Jewish mysticism..Alex-Li Tandem exists in the dazzlement of fame through the name as a sacred remains, a manifestation that God is here even if one isn't here only God haunts.

It is crucial in Jewish theology. “Abraham Abulafia is… compelled to look for an, as it were, absolute object for meditating upon… An object which fulfills all these conditions he believes himself to have found in the Hebrew alphabet, in the letters which make up the written language. … For this is the real and, if I may say so, the peculiarly Jewish object of mystical contemplation: The Name of God, which is something absolute, because it

reflects the hidden meaning and totality of existence; the Name through which everything else acquires its meaning and which yet to the human mind has no concrete, particular meaning of its own." (scholem 155)
Kabbalah teaches that names are more than just words. They claim to link the material and immortal worlds and effect the entire universe. In drumming up that old feeling of stupefaction, which was once the font of wonder, Smith turns her wonder gaze on the world of celebrity, in which someone can be famous, like Kitty Alexander, for writing a name, remembering a name, repeating a name.
Alex is obsessed with names, especially of celebrities — it's practically a religion to him. He guards them, trades them, takes them down and collects them. "The Path of Spheres. The Path of Letters. The world is broken. … Most pleasing to Alex is a far corner of this wall, up near the cornice of the ceiling. Nine black-and-white photos in Kabbalah formation. The postcards are of famous faces. They go with the autographs Adam sheepishly requests every now and then." (Smith 127)"They meant something" is the phrase we see again at the beginning of this sentence and it reveals further the need the narrator has to establish that these names are not simply mnemonic devices to hold on to. They're like Kabbalistic vessels (kelim) that once carried heavenly light; they're containers of meaning. These names are shattered, empty, and the meaning of scattered all over the place, in a similar way to the Lurianic story of the shattering of the vessels (Shevirat ha-Kelim). Tikkun is the moniker for a mystic who wanted to "fix what was broken. It is what Alex is working to discover or re-infuse into things.
. This hunger is even stronger in Kitty Alexander, the elusive movie star whose signature is the most valuable autograph Alex has ever collected. Kitty is not a ___ to Alex. "Brian brought the autograph within inches of his eyes. 'Oh, yes.' … 'Kitty Alexander. Worth a bundle.'" (Smith 169)Kitty respecters are to Kitty what Jews are to God's name, which they have no right to cross out or write over wrongly. The autograph and it becomes a bible are under Alex's care.
Jewish mysticism and semiotics also share the assumption that the name encapsulates the spirit of the thing described by that name. As Walter Benjamin elaborates in his essay "On Language as Such and on the Language of Man", the proper name is the praxis of language" and through it one is able to reveal the essence of the things or people.In The Autograph Man, that's what names do for Alex; they give him a hint of his real self, or at least he believes so. The tendency people have to dream of names isn't merely some trivial crush on famous figures or empty ego boost; it's an urge deep down that is not understanding where to channel itself when getting buffed around as it's been.
Here Smith's book takes a dark turn and speaks to the present. In a secular society saturated with media, names have replaced essences. We are not introduced to people, we are introduced to brands, labels, tags. "And now Alex opens a folder called KITTYLETRS that represents the only evidence he has of thousands of words he has written over many years. THE KITTY LETTERS. They begin life as standard Autograph Man fare. They are fan letters and at the same time, autograph requests." (Smith 149) The French sociologist and cultural theorist Jean Baudrillard term for into believing that it is more real that the real: the simulation is more real than the real. "We live in a world where there is more and more information, and less and less meaning**.**" (Baudrillard 79). This is what becomes of a name when all that is left of someone is their name. Who Kitty really is no longer matters. Names and letters are but instruments; they are energies which give the machine divine strength to do its work. Smith's treatment of this subject in the postmodern (mod in fact–never mind that) celebrity-obsessed milieu is just excellent, although not overt. Alex's "box of names" becomes a kind of secular ark, a box of people and memories whose time has come to be reassembled into something vital. He's not just happy; it's another way for him to try to find his way in a world that has lost its religion and what is left behind from that faith.

The name of Alex, Alex-Li Tandem, is itself a hyphenated, multi-layered, and complex object to work with in terms of nomenclature. His name is a melange of monikers from British, Chinese and Jewish customs. He's caught between cultural signals and feels the weight of his name without feeling like he belongs. In this paradigm, his need-to-know other people's names could also be understood as a bid to shore up a stable sense of self, by incorporating fragments of other people's essences. When discussing cultural identities, Stuart Hall writes, "we are… always in process of becoming" (Hall 223). For Alex, the shifting relies on the names, which can be religious or not religious, to which he attaches meaning and seeking refuge.
The scene in which Alex consults a rabbi in search of guidance about Kitty's autograph and not God is the place where the sacred and the secular meet most harmoniously. And instead of getting enraged the rabbi says, "In the end," said the rabbi, as they closed in on the confused cherry tree, "it's a *tzidduk hadin*, an acceptance of divine judgment. Instead of cursing God for our loss, we rise and praise him. We accept the judgment. He gave, he took away. We accept. "But I don't. I don't accept it," mumbled Alex… (Smith 397) In this book, Smith links religious mysticism to something people find interesting today. The autograph, it can be said, is a modern manuscript of a new kind of holy book, and the autograph collector is a new kind of mystic.
In the end The Autograph Man has names betrayed at the centre of some philosophical comedy, in which the sacred is not lost but displaced. Smith turns to Kabbalistic traditions and Jewish mystical beliefs about names to demonstrate that the most mundane features of contemporary existence express an intense spiritual yearning. Names in the book are more than words. They are places, signs, artifacts and how to reach people, I mean. Smith gets the reader to ponder the idea that names carry meaning, even if people no longer remember

what the names once stood for. He achieves this through the empty sonority of Kitty Alexander's name and the loops in her signature, which seem to have been scrawled by hand.

5. Language, Loss, and the Postmodern Crisis of Meaning

He's the Autograph Man because of an obsession with words, words as a means of finding out who you are and words as a means of getting lost. Zadie Smith's writing is crammed with puns, quotes, fake philosophies, typographic experiments and shattered conversations. These stylistic choices are not just strange; they are the way language operates in a postmodern culture where meaning is elastic, deferred and sometimes irretrievable. In this part, we consider the way Smith constructs a world of language rooted in postmodern theories of language and semiotics, above all theories attributed to Jacques Derrida, Paul de Man, and Roland Barthes. He does this by placing it in a Jewish mystical frame that recognizes the divine power and danger of language. Alex-Li Tandem knows very well that language can be unreliable. He often uses sarcasm to hide behind, speaks in riddles, euphemisms, and clichés, and rarely speaks honestlyYeah, well, whatever. Breathe in the universe, breathe out love," said Lovelear, making that most goyish of all International Gestures, the quote-unquote motion with his fingers. (Smith 107) This metafictional statement effectively sums up Derrida's idea of différance, which says that words never directly relate to things but to other words, and meaning is always put off. In this environment, writing or speaking puts you in a system of never-ending delays where you can't be sure of anything. Alex is not just stuck in this language loop; it makes him who he is. Smith's writing shows this condition through changes in tone, typographical play, and layers of text. Smith portrays language at its most fake and broken, from the silly "Wu-Wei" dictionary at the beginning of the book to the formal pastiches that appear throughout the story. Wu-Wei, Alex's made-up spiritual philosophy, is a mix of fake Taoist non-doing and millennial lethargy. "And how's that book of yours?" inquired Darvick, very jolly in his voice, but unmoving in every other way. "The one about this is the opposite of that, yada yada and so on.""I got tired of it, finished it," said Alex, performing a mock salute before walking away. (Smith 322) It is both a joke and a sign of something wrong: a caricature of spiritualism and a real effort to put together a philosophy from bits and pieces of postmodernism. Lyotard says in The Postmodern Condition that we no longer have "grand narratives." Instead, we make sense of the world through micro-stories, language games, and localised truths. Wu-Wei is one of these micro-narratives: it's useless but full of meaning.

Smith's attitude toward language is reminiscent of Kabbalistic beliefs in the magical qualities of the alphabet. The Hebrew letters are not mere random signs, as the Sefer Yetzirah tells us in ancient Jewish mysticism. They are the essential atoms of creation. It's divine manipulation that makes them all fall into place and sorts them, changes them and jumbles them. But in The Autograph Man, language has fallen; it is no longer sacred but broken and profane. By Alex's reckoning, the words are as the shattered vessels (kelim) of Lurianic Kabbalah. They are fragments of a lost divine order. His obsessive listing, cataloging, and word games are attempts to repair things (Tikkun). But when those things shatter, rather than bringing us back together, those actions often divide us further.

The relationship between the autograph and the individual is the best example of this. As was said in earlier parts, the autograph is a linguistic trace, a name on paper that stands in for the person who is not there. "It is no longer a question of imitation, nor duplication... it is a question of substituting the signs of the real for the real itself" (Baudrillard 2). Kitty Alexander is more genuine as a name and picture than as a person in this way. Symbols have taken the place of her speech, thoughts, and feelings. "That is the face. The one he loves. Why subject it to Buddha's rules of impermanence? This is the face... It is a face, as Hedda Hopper had it (the alliteration itself brings on nostalgia!), to be conjured with, it is made of magic, and it is no more." (Smith 267)This ontological crisis isn't only happening to Kitty; it's happening to everyone in a world full of signs. But Smith isn't just a complainer about the decline of language; she's a critic of its emotional and philosophical implications. Not only is Alex too immature to speak honestly to the people closest to him, including Adam, Esther and Joseph, it's that he's impossibly dumb. It does so by charting a more profound linguistic wound, which resonates with Paul de Man's assertion that every language harbours the germ of its own dissolution. In Allegories of Reading, de Man argues that language is never straightforward but is always figurative and in it might stand rhetoric, irony, or ambiguity. Alex's euphemisms-laden, second-guessing speech is a huge clue that he's a basket case. Alex's dialogue, full of euphemism and second guessing, demonstrates just how unstable he is. He says, "No, start again—what I mean is—I'd really like to say—without, you know, going on—just how much I've admired you—I mean, not just like for the films—but more, you know, as a person who—" (Smith 271)It's a shield and it's a prison because it doesn't get at emotions and uses cliches instead of the real thing.

Even Smith's voice in the story is ambivalent. The narrator sometimes sounds like a philosophical essay and other times like a farce. This polyphonic style, or the ability to talk in different registers, is like the many things that make up the postmodern reality. Mikhail Bakhtin states that the novel is a type of dialogism since "many voices speak". Smith's work isn't just about how Alex can't talk to other people. It's also about how life in the postmodern world is full with different voices and indications that people have to figure out what they mean. The Autograph Man is sardonic and disconnected, yet he wants a more real linguistic moment, a term that means what it says.

So, Alex's encounter with Kitty's autograph is a very good example of this. He stares at the signature, repeatedly, focusing in on its curves, its power, and the pressure of the pen. Her handwritten name in ink on paper by her. That meant something to me. "From a sleeve of cardboard Alex drew out a pristine signed photograph of the popular actress Kitty Alexander, signed boldly to the lighter portion. He reached out an arm for Marvin, to steady himself. ... If it wasn't real, he wasn't Alex-Li Tandem. The inscription: To Alex, finally— Kitty Alexander." (Smith 205)Urgently repeated "It had to" betrays a longing for presence in the absence and a wish for the sign to return with its sacred mission. This desire is identical with the Kabbalist's quest for the Name of the divine in heaven, that is, a divided being, which is sought albeit broken and concealed.

6. Collecting the Self: Celebrity, Aura, and the Fetish of the Famous

The protagonist of Zadie Smith's The Autograph Man suffers from a fixation on fame as a fetish, which enables her to take a close look at the psychological (and intellectual) aspects of being a famous person fan. Alex-Li Tandem is a born autograph dealer and hunter. He believes stardom is more than a cultural circus — that it's also an avenue to authenticity, aura, identity. The celebrities he can't get off his mind aren't mere celebrities; in a world where religion doesn't really mean anything anymore, they're icons. Smith pans Alex's heavy emotional attachment to celebrities and autographs by outlining how it transforms the human presence from the 'real thing' into the image and semblance of self. But she's not entirely downbeat in her assessment. Normal human craving to have famous men for companions becomes a secular equivalent of people looking for god, and fame replaces faith as a spiritual need for immortality and recognition.

"In anthropology, 'fetish' has a whole different definition," he said, referring to the idea of an object that people believe to possess magical powers and often worship because they believe it is connected to the spiritual realm. Later Marx shifted the meaning to use the word to mean goods which hide the work that went into producing them, making the things that people bow down for nothings. Freud believed, on the other hand, that fetishism was the mind's way of turning away from something bad by putting something else there instead. In The Autograph Man, its the celebrity autograph that merges these senses. It's a thing, a mental entity, a shard of history. They purchase it, sell it, produce counterfeit duplicates, steal it, worship it. It is also a mirror for Alex. Smith doesn't beat around the bush: Alex is attempting to socialize via his acquisitions from the get-go. He doesn't just want his famous people's signatures, he wants to have their presence in the world, a little corner of their permanence. He thought about the moment she touched the ink, the pen, the paper. If he could touch where that paper touched, maybe he could touch a part of her. Just ink. Just letters. The real thing... As if it mattered! The little difference that makes all the difference. What a way to make a living, eh?" (Smith 171)

As theological assurance has declined, fame has stepped in as the metaphysical policy in civilisation. PUBLISHERS WEEKLY In the modern world, celebrities are the closest thing we have to transcendentals-- to saints or angels. "They are and have something of a better evidence than humanity, which they are a paraminority." Walter Benjamin, in his famous essay "The Work Of Art In The Age of Mechanical Reproduction" points out that the aura of a work of art is its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be.Today, the aura of the celebrity has replaced the aura of the holy object, Smith's book claims. In the simulacrum- and share-saturated universe, the autograph becomes elevated to the "original," a sign of aura.

It was a good point that Smith made that this broke the topic into symbols. The long-retired movie star whose autograph Alex covets above all, Kitty Alexander, is an icon more than a human being. A picture, like film, has cost her her identity. She wasn't a woman; she was a legend. Since the woman had eaten the legend. This process obviates what Baudrillard writes in Simulacra and Simulation: "We live in a world that has moved beyond reality — beyond truth, beyond certainty, beyond facts and beyond logic — to a kind of hyperreality." Kitty had been turned into a simulacrum, a copy that does not have an original. But there's this live replica fact that Alex wants more than any other, that is weird." He does not want the person; he wants the aura.

This process has a lot to do with how people establish their identities. Susan Stewart says in On Longing that the collection is a technique to build the self by collecting things that have meaning. Alex's collection of autographs isn't only a financial asset; it's also a biographical archive, a symbolic autobiography made up of other people's names. Alex thinks that having other people's names will help him stabilise his own name, which, as we've seen, is itself broken up and culturally mixed. "He had always longed to be close to greatness. To keep it, like a charm. "It was easy to forget, when one was an Autograph Man, that names on paper are the very least of what is traded and shifted round the world. Autographs are a small blip in the desire network, historical flotsam." (Smith 115) This confession sums up the psychological heart of fetishism: projecting worth externally to make up for a lack of value inside.

The book looks at this need in both a critical and caring way. Alex's obsession with fame isn't just because of capitalist consumer society, though that is a big part of it. It is also a means to deal with spiritual dislocation by replacing lost rituals with new ones. The autograph signing turns into a kind of ritual, and the collector's search turns into a pilgrimage. Alex's respect for Kitty's autograph is like holy awe. He even has a moment of realisation when he finally gets it: "'It's just a name,' she said, guiding the two of them through the arch made by another couple's stretched arms. 'It's not me. It doesn't take from me. It's just ink.(Smith 315) The glow isn't real; it's a sign, an emotion, or a spiritual thing. For Alex, the aura is real, even though it comes from a cultural source.

Smith adds a meditation on honesty to this theme. There are a lot of false and forged autographs out there, so it's getting harder and harder to find the "real" one. The book uses this idea to talk about the postmodern issue of authenticity: how can we tell when something is true when all indications can be copied? Umberto Eco says in Travels in Hyperreality that American culture loves simulations that say they are more real than real.Smith takes this idea into the world of identity: if the self is made up of pieces, borrowed signs, and media projections, is there such a thing as a real self?

Alex is not here just a spiritual or emotional problem but an ontological one. His infatuation with Kitty, his difficulty being attached to others, his need to bury himself in catalogues and rituals all suggest a larger terror: that he is nothing without someone outside himself to make his life matter. Thus, the celebrity functions as a transcendental signifier that remains as a fixed point in a fluid system of signifiers. This quest for a final signified, Derrida would argue, is what constitutes metaphysics . In a postmodern world, as Brodzki suggests, the pure, stable signified" does not exist in The Autograph Man, which is about the search for except perhaps in the realm of Jewish identity. He does not make a joke of this desire, but rather he makes a scene of it, to show you how much it means to him.

The book also skewers the business of fame, this one in the circles of the religiously inclined, and demonstrates all to easily how the soul's desire can be transformed into a product. Smith appears to suggest not that it's bad to want, but rather that the problem comes with the system that turns that wanting into goods.

7. Conclusion: The Empty Throne and the Persistence of Belief

Alex-Li Tandem is looking for a meaning to his life, because people still want to believe in something, once everything's there's nothing. His path, with its foolish ceremonies and misplaced veneration, doesn't dispense with the sacred; it merely preserves it in an odd way. In this work, the autograph, name, aura, and fragment all function as secular sacraments. It grieves for the death of God — while also portraying faith in lasting shapes.

"That empty throne is a very strong image in the book, which is a picture that comes out of Jewish mysticism where God is hidden and hard to find. In The Autograph Man, God is strictly whatever-is-not, be it an empty room or the place at which something once was Smith is writing about what it means to live in the nothing now that God is dead ... and then to fill that nothing with names, lists, touchstones and symbols, whether we are aware of what we are doing or not He desires to commune, he searches for omens, he believes in representation, and he has his holy celebrities. Smith uses this to show that how people think lasts much longer than what they believe. In Culture and the Death of God, Terry Eagleton remarks that "the death of God has not resulted in the extinction of religion but in its migration into culture, art and politics.For Alex, religion is part fannishness, part collecting, part the way people speak.

But Smith doesn't make it a love story. And nothing that she says is so dangerous. Religion has become an enterprise, people are manufacturing meaning, and fake or shoddy goods are being peddled. All of this hints that the sacred is still there, just not as precious. How much warmer Kitty, the symbol, feels compared with Kitty, the old woman, is probably the saddest gauge of how much things suck. When Alex finally does meet her, she isn't a star or characters in her books (ones who everybody can count on); she's a real person. And it's what really pisses him off: "For me, it is not so scary as it is tedious—Max barely allows me to leave the house because of this. I am like a prisoner now because of this boring maniac who has nothing better to do than follow an old woman and her dog around New York. It is ridiculous. (Smith 277) Smith sounds forgiving, but you can also hear him gently chastising how nuts people go for symbols. It sounds like she's explaining that the real holiness is not in the signs of it, but in the fact that things are broken.

Smith's invocation of Jewish mysticism can help us make sense of this shift. In Kabbalah, the world falls apart because it can't handle too much light shimmering down from above. Performing tikkun is a way to make the world a better place through spreading good, doing good and reminding ourselves of what is good. Alex's acts may seem silly, yet they are one part of a larger magical plan. He is working to heal a broken symbolic order by thinking about names, being sad about his father's death and respecting signatures. The task of the mystic is not to apprehend the divine but to reply to its absence with a task of repair.This is Harold Bloom in Kabbalah and Criticism. This isn't very good work, and it can be silly, but it's also human.

Language is also a site of misfirings and emergent forms. We discussed that Smith's postmodern mind shows that maybe language is not so obvious anymore. And the way Alex speaks is a cliche that takes time and scripts to see through. But this shift of language is not just a postmodern game. It's similar to how difficult it would be for a mystic to find the words to say God's name. Alex searches like the Kabbalist, who reorders letters to comprehend the shape of the divine, behind the names, behind the words. His fractured language reads like a contemporary Jewish midrash, a longing look at absence and a wrestling match with a God who's no longer penning notes.

Smith doesn't offer an answer at the end of the book. No one has been converted for the last time, no truth has been unfolded, no easy way to heaven has been found. Alex slowly recovers some of his ethical grounding when he encounters Kitty as a human being rather than an image and takes a seat next to her matter-of-factly. He can't recover the holy name, but he can show people why it disappeared.

There are a few problems with The Autograph Man. It is a tale that seems not to have religion and yet is teeming with it, a satire that is full of reverence and a postmodern story that longs for the sacred. Smith uses Alex-Li

Tandem to explore the emotional and spiritual values of a world where no one believes in anything. Using Jewish mysticism, poststructuralist theory and contemporary culture, she conjures a society in which God might vanish, but people still long for him — not in temples, but in names, lists, ink and desire. People still stand in front of the throne, whispering to the silence, stretches of murmuring incorporated into a space where there isn't any.

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