Within the field of literary studies, when we read novels in relation to the sociohistorical contexts of their production or narrative content, we seem for the most part to move centrifugally—that is, from the content of the novels to the context of their production. Such centrifugality is purely methodological; after the sobering lessons of New Historicism we cannot pretend naïveté as to how novels—or, for that matter, any literary text—unilaterally reflect the historical matrix around them. So when a political scientist and area studies scholar like Benedict Anderson arrives at the novel by moving inward from the collective impulses of nationalism and anticolonialism after a rigorous assessment of social-scientific data, the event is an especially memorable one. One might call Anderson’s approach centripetal, except that we have no reason to assume the novel is the center of his archive in the first place. Not that he reads novels exclusively for their sociological content—there is clearly a significant aesthetic dimension to his relation with them—but it is probably fair to say that in an epistemological sense, the novel is a secondary object of his inquiry.

Joseph R. Slaughter has achieved something unique in his book Human Rights, Inc.: The World Novel, Narrative Form, and International Law. If we understand human rights as a sociopolitical issue that originates outside the narrative parameters of literary discourse, and if we see the novel as primarily an aesthetic document, his study avoids a methodological trajectory that originates in either one or the other. Inasmuch as his appointment in a department of English and comparative literature helps to define him as a literary scholar—just as Anderson’s affiliation with a school of government might certify him as a social scientist—Slaughter’s work goes beyond the usual measure of interdisciplinarity we find in literary scholarship. This book is no more about human rights than it is about the novel, and vice versa, in that neither phenomenon has methodological priority over the other. His subject, rather, is the relationship between the two. In this the book is true to the terms it lays out in the significantly titled preamble. In fact, the book—the last chapter of which is a codicil rather than an epilogue—reproduces the structure of a constitutional document. “This book,” as Slaughter declares in the preamble, “is about the sociocultural, formal, historical, and ideological conjunctions between human rights and the novel, particularly the coming-of-age genre, the Bildungsroman, whose plot we could provisionally gloss as the didactic story of an individual who is socialized in the process of learning for oneself what everyone else (including the reader) already knows” (3).

Slaughter provides the serendipitous prehistory of theorizations of the early English novel and the discourse of human rights: “Like mythical twins separated at birth by the geographical accidents of British imperialism, two Watts—Ian and Alan—found themselves grappling with the battered legacy of the Enlightenment’s emancipatory promise in the aftermath of World War II, converging on Robinson Crusoe as a signal literary marker of the historical emergence of rationalized individualism” (45–46). At the same time that Ian Watt, the seminal theorist of the early English novel, was at St. John’s College, Cambridge, engaged in scholarship that would lead to his pioneering work The Rise of the Novel, across the English Channel, Alan Watt, the Australian delegate to the United Nations, was in Paris, revising the text of the United Declaration of Human Rights, to be adopted by the
General Assembly in 1948. More striking than this coincidence is the manner in which the same figure became the subject of interest both for the U.N. participants in the human rights debate and for the theorist of the novel. This was the figure of Robinson Crusoe. For the U.N. delegates, Crusoe was the literary character around which to debate the question of whether human personality developed independently or only in relation to some larger social entity. Champions of libertarian individualism stressed the aggressive individualism epitomized in the character of Crusoe, while those who favored a socialist model also enlisted Crusoe the marooned adventurer to illustrate their argument. What is more striking than the resolution of this debate is the fact that the debate itself—the independent versus the social development of the human personality—became the core of the concerns that made up the juridical definition of human rights.

Joseph Slaughter seizes this opportune moment to remind us that the novel’s primary concern is also the development of the individual in relationship with the social structure of which he is a part. The subject is usually a “he,” as the normative subject of modernity to which the novel charts its path is the bourgeois white male citizen. The historical coincidence behind Ian Watt’s history of the English novel and Alan Watt’s human rights declaration, in other words, has much more behind it. The novel and human rights discourse, especially in terms of its current international-juridical significance, encapsulate a strikingly similar set of concerns: “If literary critics can be trusted in matters of self-interested, disciplinary claim-staking, the project of human personality development legislated in contemporary human rights might properly be described as novelistic” (51).

Crucial to both projects is the emergence of the narrative of modernity that identifies “the bourgeoisie as a political class and of the bourgeois white male citizen as the universal subject” (52). Studied in the emergent light of bourgeois modernity, moreover, the conception of the human both in the novel and in human rights legislation clearly departs from the humanism of the European Renaissance. It is not so difficult to accept the idea that within the narrative matrix of the novel, human character or personality realizes its potential only in relation to a social network. More disturbing is what Slaughter identifies as the antihumanist conception of the human that forms the current core of human rights discourse in the international legal community. This human subject is profoundly Althusserian in that its emergence depends on its successful interpellation in the social matrix of modernity. Human personality development is a product of collective labor of society, rather than an internal, autotelic process. Human rights make sense only in the context of this social development of the individual. That the same holds true for the novel is demonstrated most obviously by the bildungsroman. This subgenre of the novel is the fullest and most exemplary illustration of the individual’s growth and induction not only into the fabric of society but also into those states whose sovereignty helps to ensure the international legibility of human rights.

We see the dregs of humanism in such caveats as that issued by Mary Robinson against the bureaucratization of human rights, with which Slaughter opens his chapter on the relation of human rights and the bildungsroman. But such caveats notwithstanding, “Human rights are not yet the rights of humanity in general; they are the rights of incorporated citizens—the rights of persons acting in their corporate capacity as state” (89). In his chapter on the global interrelationship of human rights, literacy, and literature, he goes even farther: “Humanitarianism is not, of course, the precise contemporary equivalent of classical imperialism, but... they share enough structural features that they are, though imper-
fectly, homologous. Similarly, although human personality development is obviously not the same as capitalism, it is inflected by and expressed within a heavily marketized international economy of both human rights and ‘world’ literature” (274).

If the novelistic conception of the human personality as socially intertextual is not news to us in literary studies, the grimly Althusserian conception of the category of the human in international human rights law is more of a shock. Slaughter arrives at this antihumanist dimension of human rights law in tracing legal and diplomatic history. A literary theorist, however, cannot help but wonder how this juridical antihumanism relates to the critical onslaught humanism has encountered in humanistic thought and scholarship since the 1960s. The Althusserian conception of human subjectivity, with its Lacanian, Marxist, and structuralist antecedents, played an important part in the critique of the humanist conception of the human to which many of the traditional categories and assumptions of literary studies clearly trace their origin. At a very pragmatic level, this affirmation of our disciplinary antihumanism from the perspective of international law is intellectually reassuring. It goes to show that structuralist and poststructuralist attacks on humanism are no mere philosophical flights of fantasy. But on another level, the profound unease that this antihumanist conception of human rights evokes is also an act of faith. This unease indicates our deep-seated unwillingness to see our conception of the human subject unsettled to this degree, along with our belief that human rights can in fact be made available to those who need them the most. While Crusoe was the exemplary figure for the U.N. debate about the emergence of the human subject, Friday received no attention from the delegates. One wonders if the disciplinary resilience of humanism in literary studies, making itself felt in the return of questions of aesthetics, affect, and form, has something to do with this act of faith. The late Edward Said is justly understood to be the most intense and powerful embodiment of this political, intellectual, and ethical contradiction. One of the most vocal critics of global power-knowledge grids, he nourished a lifelong ambivalence for theory’s onslaught at humanism, returning at the end of his life to the corrective of critical humanism as a way of sustaining the humanistic enterprise in the academy and the public sphere.

If the narrative of human rights is novelistic, its most normative example has to be that novel of novels, the bildungsroman. Slaughter uses Goethe’s Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship as the exemplary account of the emergence of the bourgeois white male citizen as the universal human subject—that is to say, the emergence of the subject through its interpelation by the ideology of liberal society, as the ideal citizen of the modern nation-state. In macro-historical terms, this novel also encapsulates the transition from a more traditional order to that of modernity. As Slaughter explains, “Positioned ‘at the transition point from one [epoch] to another,’ the plot and form of the classical bildungsroman [bridge] the transition from ritual, feudal, agricultural, and cyclical time to modern, secular, historical time” (109). I wonder if this argument would lose any of its force if we were to replace the word bildungsroman with the word novel here. If so, would that mean that Slaughter has conflated the genre of the novel with the subgenre of the bildungsroman in his book? This raises some important questions. Are all novels bildungsromans? Is there a novel that is not a bildungsroman? If narrative is wedded to temporality, then is novelistic temporality necessarily a progressive one? And would such progression necessarily signify the education of the individual and the historical development of a community? These questions perhaps lie outside the purview of Slaughter’s project. But given the micro- and macro-historiographic import of the bildungsroman that he seeks to establish, the question of whether the bil-
dungsroman is an all-encompassing novelistic form might be an interesting one for theorists of the novel to pursue.

Slaughter’s more immediate concern is the novelistic character of human rights law. Like the novel, and especially the bildungsroman, human rights law shares the “plot” of human personality development that performs “the progressive harmonization of the individual and the state” (91). Human rights law, therefore, enshrines a narrative of demarginalization through which individuals are progressively impressed in the service of modern citizenship, eliminating on the way “the impulse of the revolutionary plot of rebellion” (91). This civilizing mission of human rights law authorizes the globalizing forces of colonialism and neocolonialism. Some of the most intricate instances of close reading in the book are those Slaughter devotes to the postcolonial variants of the bildungsroman, which serve as the testing ground for the success or failure of the generic plot of development. Understandably, he reserves praise for novels that disrupt this plot, such as Michael Ondaatjee’s Anil’s Ghost and Tsitsi Dangarembga’s Nervous Conditions, and withholds praise in turn from novels that honor this “contract” between the individual and statist modernity. By honoring this Eurocentric contract, a novel like Marjorie Oludhe Macgoye’s Coming to Birth preserves the deeply ideological plot of human personality development, which is even more problematic within the context of the nonmetropolitan global south than within that of the European narrative of modernity.

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