

The Posthuman Bildungsroman: The Clone as Authentic Subject

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Joseph R. Slaughter, in his seminal *Human Rights, Inc.*, states that human rights law is legitimised and naturalised through literary forms. He says that 'legal and literary forms cooperate to disseminate and legitimate the norms of human rights, to make each other's common sense legible and compelling' (3). He argues that the pre-eminent novelistic form which naturalises human rights is the *Bildungsroman*. *Bildungsroman* is a notoriously hard word to translate, and the *Bildungsroman* an even more difficult literary genre to pin down to a single definition. Marc Redfield, in the *Oxford Encyclopedia of British Literature*, finds a working definition, saying that it is a 'generic term for a novel that focuses on the psychological and social development of its main character' (191). The subject of these novels is 'possessed of a coherent identity that unfolds over the course of an organically unified narrative oriented toward an ending in which melancholy is tempered by affirmation, or at least resignation: "maturity" functions as a metaphor for the protagonist's accommodation to social norms' (191).

With this basic idea of the socialisation and maturation of the subject in mind, Slaughter elaborates elsewhere on the connection between the *Bildungsroman* and human rights law, asserting 'human personality entered international law as both the product and medium of social relations in article 29 [of the UN Declaration of Human Rights]: "Everyone has duties to the community in which alone the free and full development of his personality is possible"' ('Enabling Fictions', 1406). 'Indeed,' continues Slaughter in *Human Rights, Inc.*, 'both the law and the *Bildungsroman*... posit the human personality as an innate characteristic (or, better, a drive) of the human being that seeks its freest and fullest form of expression in publicness...' (20). Although in this paper I will not examine in detail

Slaughter's assessment of human rights law, the idea that the human is defined by socialisation will be crucial to my argument.

Slaughter thus equates the *Bildungsroman* form with the rise of the liberal, autonomous bourgeois subject, coeval with the rise of modernity and modern capitalism and, in particular, with the founding of the modern nation-state. The 'free and full development' of the human, enshrined in the liberal idea of man realizing his individual, ideal potential, only reaches its highest form in socialisation; the individual is only legitimised as subject and citizen through becoming a part of society and, more particularly, through contributing to the institutions of the nation-state. Thus Slaughter looks at the way in which the German idealist *Bildungsroman* enacts a process of 'becoming positively what one already is by natural right'; Wilhelm Meister, for example, in Goethe's prototypical *Bildungsroman* of the same name, abandons his irresponsible career in the theatre to become the *meister Bürger*, the father and the member of the Society of the Tower that by family and social status he should always have been. The form thus positivizes what is seen to be the 'natural' fulfilment of human personality within the strictures of bourgeois institutions. The subject of the *Bildungsroman* comes to be seen as the 'authentic' human within the modern liberal state.

Yet Slaughter also addresses contemporary and non-typical instances of the *Bildungsroman*. In a postcolonial situation, or a situation of oppression, the marginalised subject is unable to become a full citizen through participation in state institutions. Slaughter examines the way in which the postcolonial, or 'dissensual' *Bildungsroman*, articulates a 'claim to rights' for this marginalised subject. However, Slaughter is also aware of the fact that, 'although a rights claim speaks to historical exclusion from the regime of rights and to the hypocrisy of their actual practice, it tends to reify the legitimacy of the very principles that had institutionalized the acceptability (the "rightness") of the claimant's prior exclusion' (*Human Rights* 138). What I will ask, and what will be my subject today, is whether certain narratives examining the extremely marginalised, posthuman, subject (which are, in my opinion, extreme versions of the *Bildungsroman*) can, unlike Slaughter's postcolonial, 'dissensual' *Bildungsroman*, express dissent from the system which excludes her, *without* reinforcing the inequities of the same system. More importantly, however, I will ask whether these types of narratives of the human force us to question the continuing

validity of the type of subject presented to us by the *Bildungsroman*, given the conditions of global capital in which we live. In other words, can we still consider this type of subject to be the authentic human?

To turn to the posthuman *Bildungsroman* more closely now, recent texts which focus on the posthuman subject, particularly a clone figure, examine the way in which the subject's life has become instrumental. The clone is created and raised for a certain purpose and without the situatedness of origins or family or the freedom to choose her own path of development. Clone figures in my small survey of literary and science fiction texts tend to be remarkably similar – a marginalised figure who makes a claim for inclusion. *Cloud Atlas* by David Mitchell contains two sections about a clone called Sonmi~451, who becomes 'ascended,' meaning she rises above the low level of intelligence for which slave clones such as her are 'genomed.' Originally bred to be a 'server' in a corporation bearing a strong resemblance to the McDonald's franchise, she is taken away to be studied at a university where she herself is allowed to study. She is eventually smuggled away from the university to join what we believe is a resistance movement against the totalitarian state known suitably as 'Corpocracy.' This state is controlled centrally by corporations who force citizens – known universally as 'consumers' – to spend a certain quota. As the sections progress, Sonmi gradually learns about her origins and about the destiny of her fellow clones: instead of being sent to live out their remaining lives after service on an Edenic island known as 'Xultation,' they are killed and their bodies harvested to provide the food that living clones eat. Sonmi literally claims rights for other clone-slaves when she creates her *Declarations* for the rights of fabricants.

Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* is like *Cloud Atlas* in that it centres around a female clone whose life is instrumental. Ishiguro's narrator, Kathy, has been raised at Hailsham, an exclusive boarding school for clones. She and her friends gradually realise that they, like many other clones, have been bred and raised to act as organ donors for non-clones who are ill or who wish to extend their lives. Upon leaving school, they act as 'carers' for other clones who are gradually losing their organs; finally, they will become donors themselves until they 'complete,' or die, usually after donating four organs. Kathy's narration, and her attempts at the end of the novel to have her donation process deferred, are her attempts to claim rights for clones.

Yet why is this figure of a marginalised, instrumentalised clone so enduring, in these and other literary and science fiction works? I suggest that clones are a continually fascinating and homogenous figure because they are an embodiment of our own posthuman condition. Pheng Cheah describes how *technē*, rational or technological knowledge or skills, has contaminated the human. He says that 'As a function and expression of global capitalism, the international division of labor can be understood as the composite product of technical, instrumental, or rational-purposive imperatives and actions. But although *technē* as a form of intentional or final causality requires rational consciousness and therefore implies humanity's freedom from nature, it is also paradoxically inhuman. As the Frankfurt school argued following Kant, *technē* is inimical to the achievement of freedom because, taken to its extreme, a technical attitude toward other human beings reduces them to objects for instrumental use.' (1554). I see the clone as an embodiment of *technē* and our own inhuman condition under global capital. Under this system of international labour forces and continued nationalist interests, the human is commodified; the clone is thus an exaggerated form of today's commodified human.

Cloud Atlas's Sonmi is a typical clone figure, in that she is without control over her origins or future. Yet there is some sense that she has developed and gained maturity, a consciousness of her place in the world, however limited that may be. At the end of her testimony Sonmi says that her *Declarations* for the rights of fabricants were her own, that they were 'germinated,' 'nurtured,' 'strengthened' and 'birthed' by her experiences thus far (363); in this way, her education, or *Bildung*, are her own and have a teleology: she takes positive action and leaves a legacy in the world. Yet, ultimately, Sonmi's life and freedom are cut short. The revolutionary movement is revealed to be a stooge of the government and Sonmi will be executed; the small amount of knowledge and personal enlightenment she gained serves only the state's needs. Moreover, Sonmi reveals that she knew all along that the resistance movement was staged. She goes on to say 'My arrest was dramatized for Media... Six airos sharked over the water; one landed in the back garden. Agents jumped out, priming their colts, and bellysnaked towards my window with much hand-signing and fearless bravado. I had left the doors and windows open for them, but my captors contrived a spectacular siege with snipers and mega-phones.' Thus Sonmi realises that she knew she never had agency, that all along this was a 'theatrical production' or a series of 'scripted

events' as the text goes on to suggest. She must be a willing accomplice within this staged production simply in order to have some voice, to have written the *Declarations*; hence the contrast between her leaving the doors open and the agents making a piece of theatre out of her arrest. Mitchell thus suggests that within this posthuman space, autonomous agency is not possible; moreover, the way that Sonmi's apparent agency in this story literally feeds a larger state system of manipulation may provide an allegory for the way in which, in our posthuman condition, all of our apparently autonomous actions may in fact be predetermined by the needs of global capital and nationalism.

The larger question, however, is whether or not Sonmi's enslavement in Corpocracy is essentially different from the condition of the 'consumers' in her society. Organised into various strata, their lives are predetermined, with their employment and spending requirements dictated to them. Ultimately, Mitchell asks us to examine the way in which our lives are instrumental and without agency, dictated by the strictures of Cheah's *technē*, by global capitalism and nationalism. Sonmi's truncated *Bildungsroman* is in this way only an exaggerated form of the *Bildungsroman* principle in general. The socialisation aspect of the *Bildungsroman* – where the individual reaches his full potential through becoming a productive member of bourgeois society – is taken to the extreme in this and other clone narratives, where the clones' only identity is in their social function. Thus the socialisation of the *Bildungsroman* only has to be slightly exaggerated for its traditional liberal humanist subject to be imperilled. The novels expose the threat to liberal identity in a posthuman world.

Moreover, the larger question is whether a figure who is without the power to make the *choice* to become a socialised individual can still be considered the 'authentic' human, as defined by the pre-eminent novelistic form? Ultimately, can we ourselves, given our own posthuman condition, be defined as 'authentically' human, according to this definition?

Thus the *Bildungsroman* form, taken to the extreme, reveals a crisis in the idea of liberal *autonomy*. Yet also crucial to the idea of the liberal *Bildungsroman* subject is his power to choose his path in life, to make a unique, and therefore, authentic, story. Paul John Eakin has written extensively on the subject of self-narration. He argues that 'narrative identity' is seen as key to defining the self. He says that the 'structure' of 'normal selfhood' is 'that of

the extended self, stretching across time, and it's apparently this temporal structure, sustained by memory, that supplies the armature for the meaning of experience, the content of a "life," of an "existence"...' (121). Eakin goes on to argue that this is a limiting view of selfhood, given that people with some sort of memory impairment or certain kinds of autism fail to see their 'extended sel[ves], stretching across time.' Yet nevertheless the idea remains crucial, both to the *Bildungsroman* form and to our conception of what it means to be human.

Kathy, in *Never Let Me Go*, grows up being given hints about her identity, until the final revealing of her fate does not come as a shock. She thus gradually realises that she has less and less control over her own life-narrative because narrative possibilities have been closed off to her: leaving the relative freedom of school, she will become a carer and then a donor. This is in many ways unlike the traditional *Bildungsroman*, where the protagonist reaches maturity and finds that he has at least a certain amount of control over his own actions and a certain amount of command over his place in the world.

In an especially pertinent part of the novel, Kathy discusses the clone's pre-occupation with their 'possibles,' with the people from which they are cloned.

'The basic idea behind the possibles theory was simple, and didn't provoke much dispute. It went something like this. Since each of us was copied at some point from a normal person, there must be, for each of us, somewhere out there, a model getting on with his or her life... Beyond these basics, though, there wasn't much consensus. For a start, no one could agree what we were looking for when we looked for possibles. Some students thought you should be looking for a person twenty to thirty years older than yourself – the sort of age a normal parent would be. But others claimed this was sentimental. Why would there be a "natural" generation between us and our models?... Then there were those questions about why we wanted to track down our models at all. One big idea behind finding your model was that when you did, you'd glimpse your future... we all of us, to varying degrees, believed that when you saw the person you were copied from, you'd get *some* insight into who you were deep down and maybe too, you'd see something of what your life held in store' (137-8).

What this passage reveals is Kathy and the clones' desire to be able to plot a life narrative, with 'natural' origins and an open future, a desire to see themselves as having an 'extended self, stretching across time.' However, their stories are ultimately not their own, but revolve around an extremely predetermined plot with a predetermined outcome. They may have

fantasies of living out their lives according to their full potential, but they will not be allowed to do so.

It may therefore seem as if this narrative is very different from other traditional *Bildungsromane*. However, in many ways it is also only an exaggeration, this time an exaggeration of the pre-scripted or predetermined nature of the *Bildungsroman* in general. Like other *Bildungsromane* protagonists, they do not want complete freedom in choosing their futures, but want a sense of destiny and of becoming what they 'already are by natural right.' In finding their 'possibles' they would get 'some insight into who you were deep down, and maybe too, you'd see something of what your life held in store' (138). Kathy and her friends want to be liberal, autonomous subjects, but only in the sense that they want to become integrated into the British and world capitalist system. Kathy's best friend, Ruth, for example, wants to be an unexceptional and ubiquitous worker in an office; others want to be a postman or farm worker (141). Thus in *Never Let Me Go*, the condition of the human under global capital is only exaggerated: instead of having lives which are predetermined by class or market forces, the clones have lives which are entirely pre-scripted. In this way, the novel challenges the idea of the freedom of the traditional liberal subject of the *Bildungsroman*. This exaggerated *Bildungsroman* shows us how the genre itself replicates standard narratives of socialisation, whilst allowing us to see how this replication of form is mirrored in the instrumentalisation or replication of the human in our posthuman and commodified condition. *Never Let Me Go* thus problematizes the idea of the authentic liberal subject both at the levels of both form and of content.

These clone narratives are thus not science fiction in the strictest sense, in that they are not about creating a technical description of a future or alternate world in which cloned humans are a reality. Rather, the posthuman clone figure is used as an exaggerated representation of the kind of human that we, in our posthuman condition, already are. The clone figure shows how it takes only small exaggerations in the *Bildungsroman* form for the liberal autonomous subject of the *Bildungsroman* to reach a crisis point. Sonmi and Kathy may lack the power to act autonomously and to choose their own life-narratives, yet what these novels show us is that this is only a slight exaggeration of the *Bildungsroman* paradigm, where, in order to become 'free and fully developed,' the subject must sacrifice personal freedom and submit to the exigencies of the bourgeois nation state; the subject's

life is already to a certain extent pre-scripted. Thus the situation in these novels is only an exaggeration of the condition of global capital now, where the lives of humans are, to a certain extent, instrumental and their prospects in life predetermined. These novels show how, in modernity's commodification of the human, the liberal autonomy of the subject of the *Bildungsroman* is a fragile, if not illusory, ideal.

I asked earlier if it would be possible for these novels to go one step further than Slaughter's postcolonial, 'dissensual' *Bildungsroman*, which express dissent from the system that excludes the marginalised subject whilst, in their claim for inclusion, reinforcing the inequities of the same system. These clone novels certainly do express dissent; dissent from the system of global capital which make these clone figures only exaggerated versions of modernity's commodified human. Yet they do not seem to be advocating a claim for inclusion into the *existing* system; both novels show the *undesirability* of reinforcing liberal autonomous values, despite their characters' desires; they show how this would only reinforce the system that excludes them. Thus we have noted *Cloud Atlas's* hesitations regarding autonomous agency and *Never Let Me Go's* questioning of its protagonists' desires for careers that would feed the bourgeois nation-state. However, they also show the *impossibility* of being able to claim inclusion in a liberal autonomous system which was always already in crisis and which, indeed, was always already founded upon the exclusion of certain types of subjects. Ultimately, these posthuman *Bildungsromane* question the very idea of an 'authentic' human, when that definition is based on the figure of a homogenous, liberal subject with certain duties to the bourgeois state. This definition of the human results in the replication, rather than the uniqueness, of the liberal subject and of the *Bildungsroman* form which naturalizes this subject; the human by this definition is thus neither unique nor autonomous and thus not 'authentic'. True 'authenticity' perhaps lies in infinite difference, thus resisting a definition of what is 'authentic' altogether.

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