The Question of Gender and Form

Psychoanalysis, literary theory and feminism

The strand of feminist narratology with which I am concerned in this chapter began to emerge from points of intersection between the crosscurrents of feminism and psychoanalysis within literary criticism in the 1980s. The rising influence of psychoanalysis within literary studies generally, and more specifically in the study of narrative, was in part a response to the limitations of structuralism (Amiran, 2000: 212). Peter Brooks’ highly influential work on narrative dynamics (Reading for the Plot) begins by asserting this position, describing it as ‘an attempt to move beyond strict allegiance to the various formalisms that have dominated the study of narrative in recent decades’ (1984: xiii). Like many others, Brooks’ work attempts to go ‘beyond’ these limitations and engages with psychoanalytic models of dynamics and desire, which Clayton suggests became ‘one of the master tropes of contemporary criticism’ (1989: 34). Brooks’ study of narrative is ambitious, combining the analysis of ‘how narratives work on us, as readers’ (p. xiii) with a study of the ‘text itself as a system of internal energies and tensions, compulsions, resistances, and desires’ (p. xiv), resulting in what he describes as an ‘erotics of art’ (p. xv). Throughout, he explicitly draws on the work of Freud (and to a lesser extent, Lacan). Thus he describes the trajectory of plot structure as ‘a form of desire’ which is likened both to Freud’s notion of Eros and, in its move towards closure, the death instinct. There is something intuitively attractive about Brooks’ arguments in which we might recognize the ‘pull’ of a narrative during the act of reading. However, his analysis is not unproblematic and has been critiqued for a range of reasons, not least of which is its apparent gender bias, a critique that should be understood within its wider context.
The feminist revision and appropriation of psychoanalysis has also been seen as part of a reaction to formalism in literary criticism (Gallop, 1987: 314). Writers such as Hirsch (1989) and Chodorow (1989) argued for the use of psychoanalysis in achieving the feminist ends of understanding how ‘we become gendered subjects’ (Hirsch, 1989: 18). They challenged the phallocentrism in male psychoanalytic theorists’ work, asking how women’s desires and pleasure might be articulated and reconstructing the narratives of absent female figures from the Oedipal myth (De Lauretis, 1984; Yaeger, 1988; Hirsch, 1989). This formulation of feminine ‘alternatives’ (a term used by both Hirsch, p. 2, and Yaeger, p. 3) can be understood within the second wave feminist work of recovering texts by women who had previously been excluded from the literary canon (for example, Showalter, 1978; Spender, 1989). It is within this practice of exposing sexism in literary criticism that Brooks was critiqued by those who had interests in either psychoanalysis or narrative theory or both (for example, Clayton, 1989; Hirsch, 1989; Winnett, 1990). Hirsch is the most exacting and lengthy in her discussion, arguing that Brooks’ work is ‘gender blind’ (p. 53), founded upon a ‘sexual and psychological model which is exclusively male’ and analyzing ‘no novels written by women’ (p. 54). Brooks’ description of plot is indeed gender biased, and constructed as male. I quote the following passage at length, as his gendering of plot is most explicit here.

The ambitious hero thus stands as a figure of the reader’s efforts to construct meanings in ever-larger wholes, to totalize his experience of human existence in time, to grasp past, present and future in a significant shape. This description, of course, most obviously concerns male plots of ambition. The female plot is not unrelated, but it takes a more complex stance toward ambition, the formation of an inner drive toward the assertion of selfhood in resistance to the overt and violating male plots of ambition, a counter-dynamic which, from the prototype Clarissa on to Jane Eyre and To the Lighthouse, is only superficially passive, and in fact a reinterpretation of the vectors of plot. The ambitious heroes of the nineteenth-century novel [...] may regularly be conceived as ‘desiring machines’ whose presence in the text creates and sustains narrative movement through the forward march of desire. (1984: 39)

This description of plot raises some problematic issues. First, Brooks elides the content of the narrative, ‘the ambitious hero’, with the cognitive process of ‘the reader’s efforts’. Not only does this association lack any