

Psychoanalysis and Narratology: An Interview with Prof. Peter Brooks

Luo Xuanmin

Peter Brooks, Tripp Professor of Humanities and Chair of the Department of Comparative Literature at Yale University, is the author of numerous articles on French and English literature as well as narrative theory and psychoanalysis. His works include *The Novel of Worldliness* (1969), *The Melodramatic Imagination* (1976), The widely praised *Reading for the Plot* (1984), *Body Work* (1993), *Psychoanalysis and Storytelling* (1994). He is also the chairman of the editorial boards of *The Yale Journal of Criticism* and member of the board of *Yale French Studies*.

Luo Xuanmin is Professor and Vice Dean of the College of International Studies, Changsha Railway University. His publication includes articles and books on linguistics, translation studies, and comparative literature. He is Vice Chair of the Institute of Translation Studies, Chinese Comparative Literature Association, and editor of *Foreign Languages and Translation*. He is now a Visiting Fellow at Yale University.

Luo: My interview with you today will concentrate on psychoanalysis and narratology. However, I would like to ask something about your graduate study at Harvard University before we start?

Brooks: You ask about my study at Harvard. It was quite traditional, but benign. I wrote my dissertation under the direction of Harry Levin, an extraordinarily learned man, and I taught the "New Critical" introduction to the Study of Literature directed by Reuben Brower, which was an excellent training in "close reading."

Luo: What was your dissertation about?

Brooks: My dissertation was on the French 18th-century novels, and was later published as *The Novel of Worldliness* by Princeton University Press. It's about how the French novel (unlike the English novel) appears to come from a tradition of worldly sociability.

Luo: Then, when and how were you interested in structuralism and in the study of narratology?

Brooks: I really knew nothing about French Structuralism until I arrived at

Yale in the fall of 1965. There, Jacques Ehrmann was preparing the issue of *Yale French Studies* on Structuralism, and I began to read in the field. Then, in 1967-68, I had a sabbatical leave in Paris, and attended Roland Barthes' seminar—the seminar that became his book, *S/Z*—which remains to my mind an indispensable work in narratology. I was also interested by Frank Kermode's *The Sense of an Ending*, and the work of Tzvetan Todorov and Gerard Genette. I think I became a "narratologist" only when, with a group of colleagues, I constructed the course now called "Narrative and the Forms of Fiction"—the introductory course in the Literature Major—in 1970.

Luo: In your textual psychoanalytic approach you have provided an insight which tells the structure and the rhetoric of literary text, puts an encounter between literature and psychoanalysis, which thus becomes primarily a narrative art, rather than a technical method, as assumed by most people. What is more interesting is that your attention does not go to the psychoanalytic study of authors, readers, or even, fictional characters but, in your own words, "the text itself as a system of internal energies and tensions, compulsions, resistances, and desires," (Peter Brooks, 1992:xiv) How did you develop your approach?

Brooks: My textual psychoanalytic approach was, I think, a combination of my early training in New Critical close reading and my personal discovery of Freud, during the 1970s. Some of the French Structuralist work—especially, that of the linguist Emile Benveniste and that of Jacques Lacan—led me to understand that Freud was, among other things, an analyst of rhetoric, of the poetics of psychic process.

Luo: You observed in your early article "The Idea of a Psychoanalytic Literary Criticism" that classic psychoanalytic criticism displaces the objects of analysis from the text to some person, be it the author, the reader, or the characters, all of whom are viewed as independent personalities rather than as functions of the text itself. Would you give us a few examples? Do you think there is enough attention to your observation?

Brooks: Classic psychoanalytic criticism can be found in Freud himself—in his essays on *Hamlet*, on Dostoevsky, on Leonardo, on Michelangelo, for instance—and in such works as Ernst Kris, *Psychoanalytic Explorations in Art* and Simon O. Lesser, *Fiction and the Unconscious* and—where the reader is concerned—Norman O. Holland's books. The more recent rhetorical kind of psychoanalytic criticism is represented in work by Shoshana Felman, Sarah Kofman, Malcolm Bowie, Leo Bersani, Neil Hertz, Jane Gallop, Jacqueline Rose, Toril Moi—to give a very incomplete

list. It is difficult to assess the current situation of psychoanalytic poetics—so much energy currently is invested in cultural, political, and ideological criticism that the discipline of psychoanalytic textual study is not so much in evidence.

Luo: In his book *Freud as a Writer*, Patrick J. Mahony points out: “Peter Brooks argues the *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, with its exposition about repetition, detour, beginnings, and ends, is a master-plot for narration, he does not, however, apply that model to Freud’s own text except in one intriguing but undeveloped remark: ‘*Beyond the Pleasure Principle* is itself a plot which has formulated that dynamic necessary to its own detour’.” (Mahony, 1987:52) What was your response to the criticism?

Brooks: To be sure, Freud’s *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* itself represents the plot it speaks of and expounds. While acknowledging this, I did not develop it, since I was more interested in showing the relevance of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* to texts we normally call literary. But in my chapter, “Fictions of the Wolf Man,” and in the section of *Body Work* called “Talking Bodies,” I did develop some of Freud’s own narrative strategies.

Luo: You mentioned at the beginning of the interview with Rickard and Schweizer that your work in narrative theory developed originally rather untheoretically, from reading of novels themselves. One thing, it seems to me, could account for part of your motivation of writing the book *Psychoanalysis and Storytelling*, that is, you naturally developed your narrative theory by answering the questions proposed by the critics like Terene Cave, Mieke Bal, Stanley Fish and Max Black, who hold different view-points in reading your book *Reading for the Plot*. By doing so you have amended and defended your narrative theory in your book and, at the same time, projected your long-time thinking about psychoanalysis and storytelling in the form of a book. Is that right?

Brooks: You are quite right. *Psychoanalysis and Storytelling*—which had to be a short book, just three lectures—gave me the opportunity to develop the theory of my practice, so to speak. I tend to work from texts, encountering theory in an *ad hoc* way. I would be incapable of sitting down to write a book of theory. But *Psychoanalysis and Storytelling* gave me a chance to think retrospectively about what I had been doing, and to formulate it in more abstract terms.

Luo: It is also in that book I have found a lot of exemplification on Freud’s theory in narrative activity, some of which are directly related to Freud. You have your interpretation and hermeneutics. I am afraid if people would

call you neo-Freudian narrative psychoanalyst?

Brooks: I don't think I would mind being called a "neo-Freudian narrative psychoanalyst." It is a kind of analysis and study of narrative taken from Freud, and it is often quite different from what Freud explicitly says about literature. For instance, the most famous chapter of *Reading for the Plot* is based on Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. Freud is not specifically talking about literature at all in that essay. It seems to me that he is implicitly saying something about it. It is an implication to be teased out from Freud's texts.

Luo: Besides Freud, who have influenced you in your psychoanalysis in literary studies? How do you think of C. G. Jung' notion of "collective unconsciousness?"

Brooks: Besides Freud, I have been influenced by Jacques Lacan and some of his followers in France (Moustafa Safouan, for instance), by Melanie Klein and D. W. Winnicott, Juliet Mitchell and Jacqueline Rose, in Britain (where some of the most interesting work in psychoanalysis is currently being done). I don't think Jung has been an influence: Jung is too vague, already too "literary"—in a bad sense—to be usable by me. The collective unconscious? As Freud said, of course the unconscious is collective—by its very definition. But to explain literature through myth, archetype, and the collective unconscious is to engage in a not very illuminating tautology.

Luo: Have you ever extended your researches on the narrativity to other forms of literature?

Brooks: I take your questions to mean: what are the other forms of narrative besides narrative fiction? Those forms are so numerous it is hard to give an exhaustive list. It is clear that an attention to "narrativity" has now come into many different fields of study: many of the social sciences are now talking about stories and storytelling—I recently saw a book on economics that used narrative analysis. Narrative history is back in favor, anthropologists, sociologists, legal scholars all point the power of stories to convey the concrete experience of individuals and social groups in a way that more abstract argument cannot. Storytelling can force people to pay attention to neglected or excluded kinds of experience, those of groups that have been marginalized by the dominant discourses, for example.

Luo: You have also applied your narrative analysis to the case studies of law, and you are giving a seminar on "Narrative and Rhetoric in Law" this semester to the graduates both in the Law School and in the Department of

Comparative Literature. Right? What are your interests on this aspect?

Brooks: That's right. In my own work on the law, I am interested in bringing to light and analyzing the often unrecognized, or repressed, narrative nature of legal procedure and judgment. Narrative construction is everywhere in the law, from the courtroom to the retelling of stories by appellate judges to the narrative of the U.S. Constitution spun by the Supreme Court.

Luo: In *Reading for the Plot*, we can find your efforts in plotting those novels by Stendhal, Charles Dickens, Gustave Flaubert, William Faulkner, Henry James, and so on. Have you plotted in those even more recent writings, for example, Toni Morrison's *Beloved*?

Brooks: I have not written very much on contemporary fiction (though there is a section on Marguerite Duras in *Body Work*, and comments here and there on one of my favorite writers, Jorge Luis Borges).

Luo: "Character, Personality and Identity," a course you used to give to the students are three different but closely related concepts which can be traced from the points of psychology, sociology, philosophy and literature. How do you analyze them and what is the thread goes through and link the three?

Brooks: It would take me a book, at least, to analyze these concepts and the links between them. I was very interested in the study of characters in fiction. I think that structuralist narratology did not do a very good job on character. But certainly psychoanalysis has something to say about the formation of character. I also have found useful some recent work in moral philosophy, such as Charles Taylor and Alasdair MacIntyre, who are interested in thinking about character. The word "character" has a very broad semantic range. It means a person in a fiction, it also has a moral implication, as when we speak of strength or character, for instance. In the 19th century novels, both those aspects turn out to be very important. So the course attempts to talk about how people understand the notion of character, how to portray character. We also pay attention to paintings, such as self-portrait, where artists look into the mirror and paint themselves. How did they attempt to portray their characters visually. I have not given that course for three years, but I will come back to it. Maybe I will write a book some time.

Luo: Then can you tell us how identity affects the other factors—character and personality. In what way do they relate to each other?

Brooks: Identity is the key concept in psychoanalytic theory of personality and character. It is often as well an important novelistic theme—the

achievement of identity appears to hold the key to what one is, and how one can be portrayed.

Luo: I am not sure if my next question will be offending. Have you ever heard by now any criticism from the side of feminists about your book *Body Work* which, taking female bodies as objects for psychoanalysis and narrative analysis, implies a study of human bodies as whole at first glance?

Brooks: I expected that *Body Work* might be criticized by feminist critics, though I always thought that such a criticism would be based on a misreading, since I was not subscribing to cultural attitudes to ward the woman's body that I was describing. But in fact, there has been little such criticism--which perhaps show I was read with more sympathetic understanding than I anticipated.

Luo: I think so. The female body is closely related to what you depicted in your book as "sexuality", the large conceptualizations of the self as a sexual being. When a photographer takes a picture of a female body, the photo itself is a discourse or text narrating itself. So do painters.

Brooks: Exactly.

Luo: How do you think of the book *Feminism and Psychoanalytic Theory* by Nancy J. Chodorow? The author, a leading feminist theorist, traces the development of her views on the psycho dynamics and culture of gender in the book. A book review in the New York Times praise her for putting both Freud and feminism to the text through her deepening reflections on gender issues and her study of the reality of women's lives.

Brooks: I can't really say much about that book, because I don't know it well enough. I think for my purposes it is not so useful since it relates psychoanalysis more to lived experience than to a theoretical model. But it is not a book I can make comments on, so let's just go.

Luo: Psychoanalysis, as an approach to literary studies, is still very popular at Yale. We can see many other scholars, Geoffrey Hartman, Harold Bloom, John Hollander, Shosana Felman, to name only a few, working in this field. How can we get an overall picture of psychoanalytic researches from all of you? In other words, what is the characteristics of each of your studies?

Brooks: What you really ask me is the system of this work, the value of putting all of it together. Am I right?

Luo: Yes. Each of your studies contributes a certain aspect, and all your studies can form a system in which they are relative, integrate and complementary.

Brooks: You are certainly correct in noting the prevalence of psychoanalytic studies at Yale. Most of it is concerned to marry a concern with psychoanalysis, and psychodynamics, to rhetoric, that is, the structure and texture of the work, its strategies and lapses, its affirmations and denegations, its temporalities and their disruptions. We all like a text-based psychoanalysis. I am not sure if we have ever tried to integrate very much, but there is no unified "school of thought" here. I don't know how you explain the dominance of psychoanalytic studies at Yale—a certain interaction among colleagues, certainly, and the presence of some psychoanalysts interested in larger issues (there is a faculty seminar in Psychoanalysis and Humanities that meets once a month).

Luo: As the Chair of the Department of Comparative Literature, what do you think of the recent evaluation by National Research Council in which Yale Comparative Literature, along with English, French and History, ranked number one in the national universities?

Brooks: I am of course pleased that the Yale Department of Comparative Literature was ranked number one in the country. I think this may be a recognition that the Department has remained faithful to the teaching of textuality and "literariness," rhetoric and poetics, at a time when many other programs in Comparative literature have turned to "cultural studies," often with a consequent of close rhetorical analysis. All of us in the Department are interested in interdisciplinary or paradisciplinary work—it's become a definition of Comparative Literature in practice—but we don't see this as a reason to neglect the one real expertise we can claim: our training in close reading. We don't want to become amateur sociologists or historians, but to use our textually-based discipline to cross boundaries and to read other discourses with the same kind of attention we bring to literary texts. Literary studies are perhaps above all a certain form of attention, and we should not lose that. Our Department has always been constructed in an *ad hoc* manner, looking for people who are doing powerful and exemplary work.

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