Recurring for Configuring the Passional Simulacra: A Greimasian Semiotic Perspective of the “Repetition” in Narratives

Ke Tang, PhD candidate, Fudan University

Received 23 Jan 2014 Accepted 10 Mar 2014

Abstract—This essay aims at investigating the various types of repetition in narratives as the recurring modalizations and interrelated modal arrangements from the Greimasian semiotic point of view. The passional competence they create can be independent of the narrative program, while regulating and evoking the performances of it. Through Greimasian analysis which can offer a creative and heuristic perspective, the writer argues that the repetition in the energetic-dynamic model of narratives can be traced by the generating process of signification itself. In both novels analyzed in this essay, the repetition is a key contrivance in the causal chain of the life story from being conflicting to being insoluble. And this contrivance bares particular significance for the transformation and development of modern Chinese literature.

Index Terms—Greimasian semiotics, Narrative, Passional simulacra, Repetition.

I. REPEITION AS A POETIC INSTRUMENT

The concept of “Repetition” has not only been dwelled upon by Plato, Friedrich Nietzsche, Gilles Deleuze, among other philosophers during the past two millennia, but is also a significant poetic instrument that has been investigated from a variety of perspectives by critics of literature. Tzvetan Todorov, who is recognized as one of the leading figures of French Structuralism, discusses the process of narration in terms of a metaphorical “narrative transformation” of “the same-but-different” (Brooks 27), yet it is a pity that he talks little about the dynamics of how the transformation performs.

In his monograph Fiction and repetition: Seven English novels, J. Hillis Miller, one of the prominent literary critics of the Yale School of deconstruction, explores the complexities of the repetitive motifs, scenes, characters, tropes, allegories and so forth, and posits that “any novel is a complex tissue of repetitions and of repetitions within repetitions, or of repetitions linked in chain fashion to other repetitions”. (Miller 2-3) Miller believes these repetitions can build up the structure of the novel itself, determine its multiple connections to the author’s mind, the social and cultural reality, the mythological traditions, as well as other works by the same author. His “deconstructive” reading in fact embraces and incorporates the methods of social and historical criticism, biographical study, archetypal criticism, close reading, and concerns of intertextuality and so forth, through which he suggests readers and critics to reread the works in question and proposes an alternative reading that encourages diversified interpretations and extrapolation.

Miller can be considered to have generalized the genre characteristics within the traditional topology and nomenclature of thematic study. The following two “schools” are never short of audacious coinages. It seems somehow a bravado to relate semiotics with psychoanalysis. Yet during their histories of development in the past centuries, they have been aware of common issues and have been coping with them, i.e. temporality, dynamics, and energetic model of discourse. In Beyond the Pleasure, Sigmund Freud, the founding father of psychoanalysis, proffers an unconventional yet grounded explanation of the origins and influencing parameters of human “pleasure”, and how they shape the dynamics of the narrative text. Whilst Algirdas Julien Greimas, who laid the cornerstones for the Paris School of Semiotics, elaborates the dynamics and the transvaluations of the “passion” for meaning and as meaning itself in a sophisticatedly operable way, in his latest work The semiotics of passion: From states of affairs to states of feeling co-written with his student Jacques Fontanille. Although they share the same concerns, Freud and Greimas rarely present common methodology in their studies, and each of them has developed the unique terminology and typology to reconceptualize the narrating and narrated subject(s).

For Freud, as Peter Brooks observes, “the narratable life of the organism should be seen as detour, a deviance from the quiescence of the inorganic which has been maintained through the dynamic interaction of Eros and the death instinct. Yet the repetitions, which have served to bind the various plots, both prolonging the detour and more effectively preparing the final discharge, have created that delay necessary to incorporate the past within the present and to let us understand end in relation
to beginning.” (Brooks 139) Freud, together with his innovative successors particularly Jacques Lacan and Julia Kristeva, exerts tremendous efforts to pinpoint and illustrate the interface between the verbal and the non-verbal, as well as the textual and the non-textual. He also draws an analogy of them with conscious / unconscious, and organic / inorganic. In Beyond the Pleasure Principle, Freud portrays an image of how the nonnarratable existence creates an at least minimal complication via repetition as return which speaks of the death instinct, before returning to the quiescence of the nonnarratable, the inorganic, and the nontextual.

Greimas however, spares no effort to analyze the enunciated and textualized being as meaning. Since Ferdinand de Saussure inaugurated the profound paradigm shift throughout the whole range of human sciences during the 20th century, which was advocated and updated by Roland Barthes, Émile Benveniste and many other successors, language is no longer considered as subordinate to our understanding of ourselves and the world, but as the predominant medium in which we human beings perceive the world and construct ourselves. As Peter Brooks also points out, language can “mean” something other than what it “says.”(Brooks 56) The distinction of Greimasian semiotics from traditional narratology in the veins of thematology and stylistics, is that it recognizes narratives as a particular semiosis, the mechanism of signification oriented by the narrator, and it aims at presenting the existential images of narrating and narrated roles of the subjects. We can only grasp objects rather than things, as he argues, which are signified through semiosis. The different positions the subject assigns to himself within his own passional imaginary sphere is addressed by Greimas and Fontanille as part of the existential simulacra. What we can observe is never the being, but the appearing of being, the successive positions which the subject projects on the trajectory of passional simulacra as his “being.”(Greimas; Fontanille 86) The syntactic structure of the modal mechanisms and passion simulacra configure the trajectory of the existential images.

Freud’s idea is developed by Brooks, who considers desire to be “a thematic instrumentality of plot and a basic motivation of its telling and its reading”, (Brooks 143) whilst Greimias and Fontanille distinguish the “pathemic” role versus the thematic role and propose that the pathemic role is a “sensitized segment of the thematic trajectory” (Greimas; Fontanille 111) by the approach of illustrating the syntactic formulations and lexicosemantic configurations of the passional lexemes. “Manifestation of the thematic role strictly obeys the dissemination of the theme in discourse, whereas the manifestation of the pathemic role obeys the logic of passional simulacra, an imaginary dissemination that is independent of the time”. (Greimas; Fontanille 112) The pathemic role is characterized by an aspectual element. Its interaction with thematic roles reconstructs the cognitive subject and the thematic role during the metonymic dynamics of passion. There is no plot of the narrative that can be accomplished at one move. The desire, to be more accurate, the junction between the subject and the object of value in terms of Greimasian semiotics, residing and remaining in the passional configurations conserves and accumulates as impetus, imagination and memory, although being repressed or inhibited from time to time in the surface semionarrative structure. In this regard, the repetition in the passional trajectory is undoubtedly essential for making preparations for the climax and the termination of the whole discourse. In the second and the third parts of the essay, the writer will argue that the energetic-dynamic model can be traced by the generation of signification itself through Greimasian approaches.

What is also interesting but not quite surprising is that both Freud and Greimas pay close attention to the body issue from separate horizons. Based on his distinctive physiological background, Freud proffers “organic” and “inorganic” among other pairs of polarization in his nomenclature to describe the dynamics of body. He believes the sexual instincts are the true life instincts which bring back earlier states of living substance and are in dynamic opposition to the death instincts, conferring a “vacillating rhythm” on the life of the organism: “One group of instincts rushes forward so as to reach the final aim of life as swiftly as possible; but when a particular stage in the advance has been reached, the other group jerks back to a certain point to make a fresh start and so prolong the journey”. (Freud 41) Yet Greimas speaks of body as a place of transformation and pathemization that “brings about an opening onto the modes of semiotic existence” (Greimas; Fontanille 218), in which the exterceptive being engenders interceptive effect through proprioception of the body. The consensus of the two masters lies in that sensitization comes into play at a more preliminary phase before perception, hence it is more inchoate and meanwhile more dominant when it comes to the generation of human desire and passion.

In this essay, the writer aims to explain why we need “repetition” in narratives by a semiotic investigation of the energetics of passion. Through close reading of two of the most well-known and pioneering novels at the initial stage of the Chinese vernacular language movement and the paradigm shift of modern narratives in the early 20th century, The Lone Swan (Duanhong lingyan ji, 1912) and Sinking (Chenlun, 1921), and incorporating the dimensions of semiotics, psychoanalysis, linguistics and axiology into the horizon, the writer will illustrate that the repetitions in the passional trajectory function as rehearsal and repercussion and generate the discursive energy towards the end, hence is undoubtedly an indispensable instrumentality for plotting the whole narrative program in modern Chinese narratives, the texts of which spare no effort to elaborate individual desire and passion at the eve of a new era.

II. PASSIONS TRANSFORMING IN THE REPEITION IN THE LONE SWAN—DISAPPOINTMENT—DEPRESSION—DESPAIR

The Lone Swan is the most famous and influential novel of Su Manshu and is a pseudo-autobiography of this passionate Buddhist Master. At the beginning of the story, Xuemei’s father denied the betrothal when Sanlang’s adoptive father lost power and influence. Disappointed and outraged, Sanlang became a monk and cut himself off from the secular world. As a matter of fact, the craving for romantic love was just buried temporarily and grew even more vehement deep inside Sanlang’s heart. In Japan, Sanlang met his soul mate Shizuko, who is not truly a Buddhist Master. At the beginning of the sto...
mutual affection with the permission of their parent and relative is a short circuit for the novel, which may be so perfect that it poses the threat of reaching the end too quickly. As Peter Brooks posits, the “temptation to the mistaken erotic object choice” (Brooks 109) is the most common and typical form of a potential annihilation.

The violation of the Buddhist’s codes haunted Sanlang and put him in a self-denying anguish. The repetition of the disappointment, or to be more accurate, the depression based on the painful recognition about his vulnerability to the worldly lure works as a process of binding that creates “a delay, a postponement in the discharge of energy, a turning back from immediate pleasure, to ensure that the ultimate pleasurable discharge will be more complete”. (Brooks 101) Having suppressed his fascination of the secular love, Sanlang returned to the monastery and carried on his life as monk. One day, a sudden news came that Xuemei died of apocarteresis to fight against her stepmother’s demand of a forced marriage. Sanlang’s obstinacy on abstinence collapsed, and he expressed immeasurable regret and despair when he spared no efforts to look for Xuemei’s tomb and finally found it. Here comes the right death, the eventual discharge of Sanlang’s passion, which can be traced back all the way to the hallucinary spell of his early life. The upgradation and the transformation of passions in The Lone Swan, highlighted as the passional lexemes disappointment—depression—despair, cannot be accomplished without the demonic, uncanny, and “same-but-different” repetitions, each of which indeed participates in the construction of the successive modalizations of the subject and his pastoral simulacra.

“Depression”, a reinforced passion of disappointment, endows the subject with the following modalizations which is the same type of modalizations of disappointment as well as despair:

A knowing-how-to-be (The nonconjoined subject knows that he is disjoined from his object of value for now but has the potential of being conjoined);

A wanting-to-be (The subject wants to be conjoined with his object);

A not-being-able-to-be (The subject’s endeavor fails).

The passional meaning effect of them can be generated in a linearized modal series: /Knowing-how-to-be. Wanting-to-be. Not-being-able-to-be/. In this regard, the subject undergoes a repetitive modalizations of his passional role. Then what are the differences between one another? As Greimas posits, “an utterance of conjunction is overdetermined by a modalization, followed by an aspectualization. Both are overdetermined by a judgment as to degree of intensity.” (Greimas; Fontanille 65) The passional meaning effect of disappointment at the early stage of the narrative trajectory is evoked by the confrontation between a knowing that is concerned with difficulty, and a paradoxically unwavering wanting on the other. The failure in front of the obstacle indeed gives rise to the craving (of romantic love), which is suspended but is memorized and conserved underground. This contradictory modal syntax of “wanting-to-do but not-being-able-to-do” is endowed with an aspectualization as discontinuously durative, rendering the passion of disappointment the passional effect in terms of a potential competence. This competence indicates a programming of the passional subject that is independent of the narrative programs themselves. “Passional competence is not dependent on performance. Quite the contrary, it is that very competence that regulates performance.” (Greimas; Fontanille 67) During the sojourn in Japan, the infatuation with Shizuko’s beauty, character and wisdom along with the irresolution of behaving according to the Monk’s rules defeated Sanlang’s self-confidence in retrieving the inner peace through his earlier renunciation to the secular world. The depiction of Shizuko’s beauty appears with extravagant frequency in the novel, whilst this instinctive infatuation is always condemned at once by Sanlang himself. Here is one perfect example of it:

[…] she was not only beautiful, but also deeply versed in learning. Even Wu-she, the goddess guardian of the celestial gates, could not surpass her…I had not completed my soliloquy when I heard the distant rumbling of thunder, which seemed to issue from beyond the hibiscus pond. For this reason, my uneasiness knew no end. Later I sighed again, saying: “Clouds, lightning, rain, and snow—all are surely of the same substance, except that they change their forms in passing through different temperatures. I offer many thanks to our heavenly Father, hoping that He will not allow me to be fettered by Love’s soft, silken thread.” (Su 61-62)

Sanlang thanked the heavenly Father for not allowing him to be fettered by love, which in fact exposes to the reader that this impassioned subject is overwhelmed by the modality “wanting-to-be-conjoined”. The denial of his deep desire only aggravates the agony of the depression, and meanwhile stresses his fiducia that he cannot be conjoined with the object of value. Not only is there a quantitative divergence between the meaning effect of disappointment and depression, but they also have differential modalized form of junction and the syntactic form of the object of the value. “The passional effect is not the result alone of the modalization that directly concerns the impassioned subject, but rather of their confrontation with each other”. (Greimas; Fontanille 82) The issue of fiducia indirectly resulting from the former stage of disappointment is so predominant that it helps to distinguish the stage of disappointment with the later stage of depression, in that disappointment originates from the frustration of the unapproachable object, yet depression is dominated by the frustration of the unapproachable syntactic form of junction characterized by a not-being-able-to-be-conjoined-with which is marked by an upgraded degree of intensity that is even more vehement than the desirability of the object itself. It can thus be inferred that the specificity of the “same-but-different” passions which regulate the whole narrative trajectory is not hinged on the semantic content of these near-synonym but rather on their syntactic attributes and functions in regard to their participation in the construction of existential similacra. As has been discussed in The Lone Swan, the passional meaning effects are particularly generated through the intermodal syntax with repetitive modal series but different modalized form of junctions.

When it seemed that he had suited himself well in the secluded life back to the Lingyin Temple, Sanlang happened to know the misfortune of Xuemei through a chance encounter with his old acquaintances. He made an arduous journey to
Xuemei’s hometown without thinking it over and visited her former residence. At the finale of the story which is also the climax of passion, Sanlang could not find Xuemei’s tomb and collapsed in unutterable despair.

“Think, gentle reader, how bitterly griefed I was at this time. Was there another tragedy in all the world, which could be compared to mine? My tears had ceased flowing. I perceived that my heart was as numb as wood or stone. I decided to return to visit my abbot in his monastery. Fa-jên and I put on our traveling garments and were on the road again.

Yet, I did not know when all my sorrows that filled all the wide heavens, would come to an end. I now put aside my brush, finding it unbearable to say any more.” (Su 137)

The extravagant expressions of feelings elaborate Sanlang’s maximized pain at seeing his object of desire and the numbed heart as “wood or stone.” Indeed, the secret yearning has been harbored and brewed ever since the very beginning. If we take a close examination at the passional configuration of despair, we will observe that the passional meaning effect of it can also be generated in the same modal series: /Knowing-how-to-be. Wanting-to-be. Not-being-able-to-be/. Hence the subject again undergoes a repetitive modalization of his passional role compared with his former roles in disappointment and depression. The modal organization of each of these three passions is contradictory in nature, insofar as wanting-to-be conserves on the one hand, and not-being-able-to-be situates on the other. Nevertheless, the regulating modality is interacted and affected by other modalities in the modal arrangement of disappointment and depression, yet despair is made up in a way of two independent and incompatible modal universes: “Failure and frustration on the one hand, confidence and expectation on the other. The break is a result of their independence and their incompatibility. Only the procedure of modal comparison can account for the passional meaning effect linked to this type of modal organization.” (Greimas; Fontanille 37) Wanting-to-be in disappointment and depression presuppose other modalizations, which is not the case in despair. Knowing-not-to-be, which is presupposed by the former modalizations, does not disturb or modify the subject’s desire, and vice versa. The internal contradiction of the disappointing subject is reconcilable for the moment by the substitution of his goal image, as Sanlang’s alter ego attempted to find solace through religious renunciation. And the intensified copy of this contradiction was controlled, as Sanlang forced himself to flee away from the worldly environment. Nevertheless, this recurring contradiction is beyond solution in despair, which brings about the breakup of the modal arrangements. This explains why the passional role of the despairing subject always shows up in the last scene of the whole narration.

Furthermore, these different positions of the passional subject turn out to reinforce one another. In the text of The Lone Swan, the contradictions in the former two stages accentuate the cohesive force of modalizations, which, undisturbed by a variety of thematic roles of the subject, preserves for him the same orientation and enables him to persevere in his existential trajectory. It is as though the presupposed modalizations create and maintain “the presupposing modalization” (Greimas; Fontanille 37). It can be also argued that the violent tension between the thematic role and the distinct passional role of the subject, which are generated and accentuated via the repetition in the passional simulacra, becomes one of the primary presuppositions of the further passional configuration. The former two (or even more) phases are indispensable for the final “breakup” of the entire modal arrangement, because only through them can the passional meaning effect proceed to function in terms of a potential competence in the passional simulacra and guide the subject to complete the right narrative trajectory.

III. THE ANALOGICAL CONSTRUCTION OF REPETITIONS IN SINKING

The author of the novel Sinking, Yu Dafu, is the most prominent member of the Creation Society, a society of literary creation that pronounced its sole devotion to art and the goal of pursuing literature of a truly unconventional style with “a widely publicized and strongly worded manifesto attacking all established icons of Chinese literature” (Wang 549), and played a crucial role in the literary revolution of the 1920s China. David Der-Wei Wang posits that romantic passion was first fully expressed in the works of Yu Dafu (Wang 476), who utterly claimed that the predominant theme of fictional practice is passion and carried out this motto himself. Yet the writer shall add that Su Manshu’s novels were popular and influential among the youth since 1910s, although the infatuation of sexuality remains evasive in Su Manshu’s fictional writing, but is overtly elaborated by Yu Dafu.

In one of Yu’s most famous and controversial short stories, “Sinking”, the main character “He” is a young Chinese student who studies in Japan. Yu Dafu did not give a name to this character. He was fond of nature and cherished illusions of romantic love and sex secretly in his heart. However, the aggravating paranoia, hypochondria and an inferiority complex due to his nationality and indeed much more to his personality, gradually sank him into an almost mental disorder that he believed people around him, even his elder brother, were turning against him, laughing at him and looking down upon him. As David Wang points out, “‘Sinking’ scandalized the readers of 1920s China with its unapologetic impulse toward confession and its explicit descriptions of erotic fantasy, masturbation, and prostitution.” (Wang 476) Yu Dafu creates a different kind of lunatic in terms of Freudian libidinous drive, if compared with another distinguished writer Lu Xun in the same era. Every time he felt insulted and frustrated, He intended to take revenge while he was reluctant to take actions, which turned out to refuel his anguish, and made him believe that he was the most pathetic person in the whole world.

For several times in the story, the idyllic nature where He lives, eased his nerve for the moment, helped him get accustomed to his new life and soothed him like an asylum, as is depicted as follows,

“He looked on a long time without moving and suddenly felt the scent of violets wafting to him
from behind and a rustle in the blades of grass by the roadside broke up his dreaming. He turned and saw the blade of grass still trembled and the breeze that carried the fragrance of violets blew gently into his face. In this clear and warm world of early autumn, in this pure and translucent air he felt languid as if drunk. As if his dream had led him to the source of peach blossoms. As if he were on the seaside of Southern Europe and had on his sweetheart’s knees desiringly slept his afternoon sleep.” (Doležalová 93)

These transient moments serve in fact as short-circuits which speak of the death instinct in terms of Freud, which may jeopardize the narration into a premature ending. What immediately follow these tranquil moments are thwarted yet recurrently harassing yearning, hypochondria and sexual desire. The more He wanted to fight them back, the more ferocious they become. The story elaborates as a process of repetition of His unmastered and muddled inner self. Eventually, the agony was accumulated to its maximum, and made all the protagonist’s desires dashed except determining to drown himself in the sea,

“How could have I ever been to that kind of place? I am now the most degraded man. If I’d known then what was going to happen, I wouldn’t have done as I did! I should better die here. The love I have been pursuing is probably never to be found. Isn’t the life without love the same as ashes? Oh, this insipid life, this insipid life! Everyone in the world loathes me, bullies me. Even my own blood brother squeezes me out. What should I live upon? And why should I live in this world of so much pain?”’ (Yu 74, translation mine)

Semiotically speaking, the contradictory modal arrangement of “wanting-to-do but not-being-able-to-do” is predominant through the text. There is also a notable modality of “knowing” regulated by social ethics when it comes to prostitution, which indeed causes the breakup of the intermodal syntax at the last phase of the narrative trajectory. The contradictory modal arrangement is endowed with an aspectualization as discontinuously durative, providing the passional effect from the repetitive passion of depression in terms of a potential competence. Just as what are displayed and performed in The Lone Swan, the repetition of the goal image allows the virtualized (nonconjoined) subject to anticipate a realization of his program and establish his passional competence through presupposition. It seems on the surface that the reasons of His traumas are multiple and the illness is so deeply rooted that it is beyond remedy, while semiotically speaking, the mutual-presupposed and interacted modalizations repetitively hold while boosting the contradictions in the surface narrative syntax and reinforcing the passional meaning effect of craving. In the last scene of the story, He satisfied his sexual lust but in a way he utterly despised. The modality of knowing-not-to-be took charge against wanting-to-be and being-able-to-be, smashed the fiducia that the subject was staggering to confirm from the very beginning, and terminated the narration by death.

**IV. Conclusion**

When it comes to the topic of repetition, there is a multiplicity of views on its definition and utilization. In this essay, the writer primarily applies the Greimasian semiotic approach in that it can offer a novel and creative perspective to examine the old poetic issue even though it has already been much discussed. It starts from the analysis of lexicosemantic configurations and syntactic modulations, and elaborates the dynamics and the transvaluations of the “passion” for meaning and as meaning itself in a sophisticatedly operable way. Moreover, it is an effective instrument of exploring the subterranean logic connection between the heterogeneous meanings and the imaginary splitting of the impassioned subjects and measuring their tension as well.

As have been discussed above, the junction between the subject and the object of value, residing and remaining in the existential simulacra preserves and accumulates as impetus, imagination and memory. The repetition of action, scene or emotion is actually the recurring modalizations and interrelated modal arrangements from a semiotic point of view. The passional competence they create can be independent of the narrative program, while regulating and evoking the performances of it. Without these repetitions, the passional simulacra cannot be generated and fulfilled, and the narrative trajectory can never be completed. Through Greimasian analysis, the writer argues that the repetition in the energetic-dynamic model can be traced by the generation of signification itself.

In both novels analyzed in this essay, the repetition in the passional trajectory is undoubtedly essential for making preparations for the climax and the termination of the whole narrative project, thereby is a key contrivance in the causal chain of the lifestory from being conflicting to being insoluble. In the history of modern Chinese literature, Su Manshu and Yu Dafu are without doubt the forerunners who had the self-consciousness to utilize it in their creative incorporation of “discourses” (Brooks 13) into the traditional “stories” as an indispensable instrument for the dynamics of narration. And they applied it successfully. In this regard, this contrivance of repetition bares particular significance for the transformation and development of the modern Chinese literature.

**REFERENCES**


Ke Tang is a Ph.D candidate of comparative literature and world literature in the department of Chinese language and literature at Fudan University, and is currently a visiting student research collaborator 2013-2014 in the department of comparative literature at Princeton University. She has two essays presented at the 1st and 2nd Annual International Conference on Language, Literature & Linguistics and included in the conference proceedings. She also has a few essays published in the CSSCI journals in China.

©The Author(s) 2014. This article is published with open access by the GSTF