

Translating Mourning: Voice, Repetition, and the Dead Body in Chinese Versions of Walt Whitman's "O Captain! My Captain!"

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Abstract: Walt Whitman's "O Captain! My Captain!" poses a distinctive challenge to translators because its grief is expressed not only through propositional meaning but also through apostrophe, repetition, syntactic fragmentation, bodily imagery, and the tension between public celebration and private mourning. This paper offers a close reading of the Chinese version reproduced in the supplied edition of Huiteman Shixuan (Selected Poems of Whitman), hereafter the target version, while comparing it with the verified translations of Chu Tunan, Tu An, Jiang Feng, and Zhao Luorui. The discussion focuses on three interrelated problems: the translation of Whitman's apostrophic "O" through Chinese particles; the treatment of repetition and fragmentary speech at moments when grief approaches linguistic breakdown; and the representation of the Captain's dead body through blood, touch, coldness, pulse, and the naming or avoidance of death. I argue that the target version creates an unusually audible, emotionally explicit Chinese voice. Its particles and syntactic expansions enhance oral immediacy and recitability, but sometimes reduce the restraint, fragmentation, and physical shock of Whitman's elegy. Comparison among the Chinese versions shows that translating mourning is therefore not merely a matter of lexical equivalence: it is a reconstruction of how another language calls, repeats, falls silent, touches the dead, and negotiates the finality of loss.

Keywords: Walt Whitman, O Captain! My Captain!, poetry translation, elegy, repetition, poetic voice, embodied grief.

1. Introduction

Walt Whitman's "O Captain! My Captain!" is at once one of his best-known poems and an unusual work within his poetic career. Written in the aftermath of Abraham Lincoln's assassination, it converts the end of the Civil War into an extended nautical allegory: a ship has completed a "fearful trip," reached the port, and won the "prize," while the Captain who guided it lies dead on the deck. Unlike the expansive free verse for which Whitman is generally known, "O Captain!" uses conspicuous rhyme, repeated addresses, recurring stanzaic patterns, and a refrain-like return to the Captain's death. Jerome Loving describes the poem as possessing a "sing-song" quality, and its formal regularity helps make private bereavement available as a public act of commemoration[2]. The poem is therefore built upon a productive contradiction: victory and catastrophe, collective exultation and personal devastation, occur at the same moment.

This contradiction is central to the poem's translation. A translator must convey the narrative facts, the dangerous voyage, the harbor, the bells, the crowds, the blood, and the dead Captain, but the deeper difficulty lies in how grief is voiced. Whitman often refuses explanatory psychological language at the moments of greatest distress. Instead of saying why he suffers, the speaker cries "O Captain! my Captain!" and then, at the decisive turn of the first stanza, "But O heart! heart! heart!" (Whitman, "O Captain!"). Grammar contracts into apostrophe and repetition. Later, "This arm beneath your head!" offers not a complete proposition but a fragment in which speech seems to collapse into physical gesture. Mourning in the poem is thus performed through the pressure placed on ordinary language: words repeat, sentences break, and the speaker continues to address someone who can no longer reply.

Peter Sacks's account of the English elegy is useful here because he treats repetition and refrain not as decorative redundancy but as part of the "work" of mourning. Repetition can create continuity against the rupture of death while also giving grief a ceremonial form[3]. In "O Captain! My Captain!," however, repetition works in more than one direction. The repeated "For you" of the second stanza accumulates public tribute, whereas "heart! heart! heart!" contracts toward a private, almost pre-propositional cry. The refrain "fallen cold and dead" repeatedly returns the speaker to the material fact that his imagination tries to resist. Translation must therefore reproduce not only repeated words but the different psychological and rhetorical functions that repetition performs.

Recent translation-focused scholarship provides a useful point of departure but leaves room for a different emphasis. Kaixiang Xia examines Chu Tunan's handling of adjectives and lexical strategy[9], while Didem Tuna's comparative study of the poem's French and Turkish translations demonstrates how reading several target texts together can expose shifts in both meaning and form[4]. The present essay adopts that comparative method but focuses specifically on voice, repetition, syntactic fracture, and the body.

One textual clarification is necessary. The two-page Chinese text supplied for this study bears the title "啊，船长！我的船长哟！" but its wording does not match the standard 1955 Chu Tunan version. For example, the supplied text reads "航船历经艰险，我们争取的锦标已经赢定，" whereas Chu's established version reads "我们的船渡过了每一个难关，我们追求的锦标已经得到". Because the scan does not provide enough bibliographical information to identify its translator securely, I refer to it below as the "target version" rather than attributing it to Chu. Chu's verified translation is used as one of the comparative versions. This distinction is important: an argument about translation choices should not

rest on an uncertain attribution.

This paper argues that the target version reconstructs Whitman's mourning by making it more overtly oral, lyrical, and explanatory in Chinese. Its repeated use of “哟,” its tendency to complete or clarify fragments, and its reformulation of bodily details give the poem a strong performative immediacy. These choices can be effective, yet they are not without cost. At crucial moments they may soften the original's syntactic rupture, change the rhythm of recognition and denial, or turn physical evidence into interpreted emotion. Comparison with Chu, Tu, Jiang, and Zhao suggests that the most significant issue is not which version is simply “correct,” but how each version redistributes voice, silence, repetition, and bodily presence in order to make grief possible in Chinese.

2. From “O” to “啊,” “哦,” and “哟”: Reconstructing the Voice of Lament

The most immediately striking feature of the target version is its use of Chinese sentence-final particles. Whitman opens with “O Captain! my Captain!” The target version renders this as “啊，船长！我的船长哟！” (“Ah, Captain! My Captain yo!”)[6]. The emotional marking of the English line is therefore redistributed. Whitman places the apostrophic “O” before the addressee; the target version places “啊” at the beginning and adds “哟” after “我的船长” The Captain is acoustically surrounded by emotion. This is more than lexical addition. It changes the prosodic design of the address: the voice launches outward with “啊” and then lingers at the end with “哟”.

The comparison with other Chinese versions makes this redistribution clearer. Tu An gives “啊，船长！我的船长！，”[7] Zhao Luorui likewise uses “啊，船长！我的船长！，”[8] and Jiang Feng writes “哦，船长，我的船长！”[1]. These versions broadly preserve the positional logic of Whitman's apostrophe: an interjection precedes “Captain,” while “my Captain” remains relatively unmarked at the end. Chu Tunan, however, famously also uses “啊，船长，我的船长哟！”. His “哟,” like that of the target version, turns “我的船长” itself into a renewed call. The similarity does not prove that the supplied text is Chu's translation, since the surrounding wording differs substantially, but it does show that “哟” belongs to an important tradition of performing Whitman's apostrophe in Chinese.

It would be too simple to dismiss “哟” as inherently cheerful. In Chinese it can participate in ordinary speech, song, calling, and lament; its effect depends on context. In “我的船长哟,” the particle prolongs the address and intensifies intimacy, making the possessive “my” more audible. The line thus gains an oral, plaintive quality that a more neutral correspondence might not achieve.

The difficulty emerges when this strategy becomes systematic. At the poem's emotional turning point, Whitman writes “But O heart! heart! heart!” The target version gives “可是啊，心哟！心哟！心哟！”[5]. By contrast, Tu An, Jiang Feng, and Zhao Luorui all use forms close to “心啊！心啊！心啊！” The distinction between “啊” and “哟” is subtle but consequential. “心啊” can fall as a heavy cry after the noun; “心哟” more readily invites vocal extension. The latter may create a plaintive, song-like contour. That musicality can be moving, but it also risks giving grief a continuous lyrical

fluency at precisely the moment when Whitman's syntax is breaking down.

The issue becomes even clearer in the third stanza. Whitman commands, “Exult, O shores, and ring, O bells!” The target version translates: “啊！海岸哟，欢呼吧；钟哟，长鸣吧！”[5]. Here “哟” is attached not to an intimate person but to “shores” and “bells.” The repeated particle produces an emphatic recitational pattern, almost turning the line into a call-and-response structure. Yet the English line is already forceful through imperatives and parallelism. Adding several particles can thicken the emotional surface and slow the direct movement of “Exult” and “ring.” The gain is performability; the possible loss is the commanding sharpness of Whitman's line.

At the same time, Whitman's poem depends upon contrast between sound and silence. Bells ring, crowds call, bugles sound, and the speaker repeatedly addresses the Captain; the Captain himself “does not answer.” The public affect is intensified by the dead man's inability to participate in it. If every address becomes equally full and melodic, the distance between collective proclamation and private speechlessness can narrow. The target version's “哟” is therefore neither a simple error nor an uncomplicated improvement: it creates a distinctly Chinese lamenting voice while changing the tonal economy of the elegy.

3. Repetition, Fragmentation, and the Limits of Speech

If the particles show how translation reconstructs voice, Whitman's repetitions reveal a second problem: grief often expresses itself through saying less, not more. The first stanza begins with relatively coherent narrative movement. The voyage is over; the prize has been won; the port is near; the bells can be heard; the people are exulting. Then “But” interrupts the public sequence: “But O heart! heart! heart!” The speaker does not explain what his heart feels. He cannot even produce a complete sentence. The grammatical frame collapses until only a repeated body word remains.

This is precisely why “heart! heart! heart!” should not be treated as an empty rhetorical flourish. Sacks argues that elegiac repetition can function both as a response to rupture and as an attempt to establish continuity in the face of loss[3]. Whitman's three “heart”s enact that tension. Repeating the same word does not advance the narrative, yet the repetition keeps speech going when ordinary syntax has failed. The line is simultaneously an utterance and a sign of the inability to utter enough.

The target version preserves the triple repetition, “心哟！心哟！心哟！”，and therefore retains an essential structural feature. Its effect nevertheless differs from “心啊！心啊！心啊！” in the other versions. Repetition is never purely visual. Each recurrence adds breath, duration, and pressure. “心啊” can sound blunt and falling; “心哟” may sound more prolonged and melodic. The target version thus preserves semantic repetition while altering its acoustic shape. The difference matters because Whitman's line sits on the threshold between voice and voicelessness.

This point also complicates the temptation to “improve” the line by making its emotion more explicit. A translator might expand it into something such as “可是这颗心啊！怎能承受！怎能承受！” (“But this heart-how can it bear this? How can it bear this?”). Such a rendering sounds strongly emotional

and makes the speaker's despair immediately intelligible. Yet it adds precisely what the English withholds: a complete interpretation of the feeling. "How can it bear this?" converts broken utterance into articulate commentary. Whitman's speaker, by contrast, has reached a point where grief is registered through verbal insufficiency. In this case, explicitation may increase semantic clarity while reducing dramatic truth.

Whitman uses repetition differently in the second stanza. "For you" returns again and again: "For you bouquets and ribbon'd wreaths-for you the shores a-crowding, / For you they call, the swaying mass, their eager faces turning" (Whitman, "O Captain!"). This anaphora is not a collapse of private language but an accumulation of public ceremony. Gifts, bodies, faces, and voices pile up around the absent leader. Tu An, Jiang Feng, Zhao Luorui, and Chu Tunan preserve the recurring "为你" or "为了你" to different degrees. The repetitions work like successive offerings. They enlarge the social field precisely when the speaker is moving toward the Captain's body.

The contrast between the two patterns is crucial. "For you" moves outward; "heart! heart! heart!" moves inward. One organizes collective tribute, while the other strips speech down to a private bodily cry. A translation that treats repetition merely as redundant wording may miss this difference. Smoothing the repeated "为你" into ordinary prose weakens the ceremonial accumulation, whereas explaining "heart! heart! heart!" too fully weakens the sense of linguistic breakdown. The translator must therefore preserve not simply repetition as a formal device but its direction and function.

The refrain "fallen cold and dead," which returns at the end of each stanza, creates yet another form of repetition. Its recurrence is predictable, but emotionally it is never neutral. Each stanza leads the speaker through a different stage of confrontation. In the first, he recognizes the body amid the celebration; in the second, he pleads with the Captain to rise and treats the scene as if it might be a dream; in the third, he permits the shores and bells to celebrate while he himself walks mournfully beside the corpse. Every time the mind moves, the refrain returns it to the same material fact. Sacks's observation that repetition may force the mourner to confront loss repeatedly until recognition becomes possible is especially relevant here[3].

Different Chinese versions alter the psychological rhythm of this return. Jiang Feng writes "他已倒下, 已死去, 已冷却," a sequence that directly names death[1]. Tu An repeatedly uses "已浑身冰凉, 停止了呼吸," while Zhao Luorui similarly writes "已完全停止了呼吸." Chu Tunan also uses "浑身冰凉, 停止了呼吸" (Whitman, trans. Tu; Whitman, trans. Zhao; Whitman, trans. Chu). The target version, by contrast, uses formulations such as "你已经死了, 浑身冰冷" and later "他死去了, 浑身冰冷"[5]. These are not interchangeable solutions. The order of death, coldness, and bodily observation changes the reader's route to recognition.

4. Translating the Dead Body: Naming, Touching, and Denying Death

The poem's grief is not only vocal but intensely bodily. Whitman repeatedly directs attention to the Captain's physical condition: "bleeding drops of red," the head, the

speaker's arm, pale lips, the absence of pulse, and the repeated "cold and dead." These details prevent the Captain from remaining only a political symbol for Lincoln. The poem insists on a material body lying on a deck. The speaker's tragedy is not simply that the nation has lost a leader; it is that he must remain physically close to the evidence of death while the crowd celebrates beyond the ship.

The target version's handling of "O the bleeding drops of red" illustrates how small expansions alter this physical immediacy. It gives "啊, 血在流淌, 血滴鲜红" ("Ah, blood is flowing, the drops are bright red")[5]. The Chinese line is clear and vivid, but it adds a predication, "血在流淌", and then restates the redness. Whitman's phrase is more compressed. It abruptly inserts the image of red drops into the triumphant scene, almost like a pointing gesture. The target version narrates the process of bleeding rather than merely presenting the visual shock. It gains descriptive explicitness but loses some of the source line's arresting compression.

An even more revealing example is "This arm beneath your head!" The English is a verbless fragment. It can be understood as an exclamation generated while the speaker physically supports the Captain, so that utterance and gesture almost become one. The target version reads "请把你的头枕在这只胳膊上!" ("Please rest your head on this arm!")[5]. A static bodily relation has become an imperative. This shift is not merely grammatical. An imperative presupposes, at least conventionally, a hearer capable of responding.

Yet the Captain is already dead. From the standpoint of literal action, the request is impossible. Tu An's "你的头颅枕着我的手臂" ("your head rests on my arm") and Jiang Feng's "你头颅下边是我的手臂!" ("beneath your head is my arm") keep the bodily relation as a present fact. Zhao Luorui, however, also uses an imperative, "请把你的头枕靠着这只手臂!" [1]. The contrast reveals two interpretive possibilities. A declarative version foregrounds physical reality: the mourner is already cradling the corpse. An imperative version foregrounds psychological denial: he speaks as if the dead man could still cooperate in the gesture. The latter can therefore be regarded not only as a syntactic departure but also as an intensification of the mourner's refusal to accept the end of communication.

The same problem appears in the translation of "dead." Jiang Feng's "死去" names death directly and finally. Tu An's and Chu Tunan's "停止了呼吸" ("stopped breathing") describe a bodily sign rather than the event by name. Zhao Luorui also prefers "停止了呼吸." The target version, meanwhile, does use "死了/死去了," but often pairs it with "浑身冰冷." These phrases establish different distances from death. "He has died" is categorical; "he has stopped breathing" remains observational. The latter can be heard as a euphemistic or phenomenological description: it tells the reader what the body no longer does without pronouncing the final verb of death.

This distinction matters because the poem dramatizes a struggle between knowledge and acceptance. The speaker knows what the blood, coldness, silence, and absent pulse mean, yet he repeatedly calls upon the Captain to rise. Describing a body as no longer breathing can preserve that unstable interval between sensory recognition and verbal acceptance. Directly saying "死去" closes the interval more decisively. Neither strategy is intrinsically superior. Jiang's bluntness may better reproduce the shock of "dead," while

Chu's bodily description can reinforce the mourner's attention to physical signs.

"Cold" further complicates the issue. Coldness is not merely information; it is tactile. It suggests proximity and perhaps touch. Chinese "冰凉" has a strong sensory immediacy, whereas "冷却" can sound more like a process of cooling. When Tu An or Chu uses "浑身冰凉," the translation intensifies the experience of a body felt as cold. A seemingly less literal formulation may therefore be more embodied. The comparison shows why accuracy in literary translation cannot be reduced to dictionary equivalence: the relevant question is how the target text distributes sensation, knowledge, and finality.

Later lines continue this bodily verification: "My Captain does not answer, his lips are pale and still, / My father does not feel my arm, he has no pulse nor will" (Whitman, "O Captain!"). Death is not announced only once; it is tested through a sequence of failed signs of life. No answer. No movement of the lips. No sensation. No pulse. The body becomes the place where hope is repeatedly disproved. The emotional force of the sequence depends on accumulation. Each physical detail removes another possible route back to life.

This bodily sequence also changes the scale of the poem. The first stanza is dominated by the gaze of the crowd; the second brings the mourner's arm into contact with the Captain's head; the later lines test lips and pulse. "Captain" also becomes "dear father." The poem therefore moves from national metaphor toward corporeal intimacy. A translation that over-explains the body may reduce its shock, while one that preserves concrete physical relations allows the reader to experience mourning as proximity to an unresponsive body.

5. Public Celebration and Private Mourning

The bodily movement just described belongs to a larger spatial and emotional contraction. At the beginning of the poem, the field is public and expansive: port, bells, shores, crowds, flags, bugles, bouquets, wreaths, and "eyes" following the ship. The nation seems to be watching. Yet the poem progressively narrows toward one mourner and one corpse. "Captain" becomes "dear father"; collective watching becomes touch; public sound is answered by the dead man's silence; and the final image is not the crowd but the speaker walking with "mournful tread" on the deck where the Captain lies.

The target version sometimes intensifies the public side of this opposition. "The people all exulting" becomes "人们欢声雷动," an idiom that evokes thunderous cheering. The phrase is forceful and idiomatic Chinese, but it heightens the mass sound beyond the relatively direct English predicate "exulting." Likewise, "the swaying mass" becomes "动荡的人群." In contemporary Chinese, "动荡" often suggests social or political turbulence rather than simply the physical swaying of a dense crowd. The translation can therefore introduce a semantic coloration not required by the immediate scene.

These choices matter because public celebration is not merely background. It constitutes the pressure against which private grief is measured. The louder and more rhetorically elevated the crowd becomes in translation, the more dramatic the contrast with the corpse can be; but if the public idiom

becomes too politically or ceremonially marked, it may also shift attention away from the speaker's perceptual experience. Tu An's "晃动的人群," Jiang Feng's "熙攘的群众," and Zhao Luorui's "汹涌的人群" each imagine the crowd differently-physical motion, social bustle, or surging force. Translation does not simply move a "mass" from English into Chinese; it chooses what kind of collectivity is present.

Seen from this perspective, the target version has a coherent tendency. It repeatedly favors audible emotion, idiomatic fullness, and explicit relation. "哟" makes the calls sonorous; "欢声雷动" amplifies the crowd; "血在流淌" turns a compressed image into a process; the imperative "请把" gives a complete interpersonal action to a fragment. These choices often make the poem vivid and immediately performable in Chinese. Yet they also make the language more continuously expressive than Whitman's. The original derives part of its force from discontinuity: a public spectacle is broken by blood; coherent description is broken by "heart! heart! heart!"; speech is broken by the silent body.

6. Conclusion

The comparison of the target Chinese version with the translations of Chu Tunan, Tu An, Jiang Feng, and Zhao Luorui shows that the central problem of translating "O Captain! My Captain!" cannot be reduced to isolated questions of vocabulary. Whitman's elegy constructs grief through an interaction of apostrophic voice, repetition, syntactic fracture, public ceremony, and bodily evidence. To translate the poem is therefore to decide what mourning will sound and feel like in another language.

The target version's most distinctive tendency is to make grief highly audible. Its "啊" and "哟" redistribute Whitman's apostrophe into a distinctly Chinese pattern of calling; its idiomatic expressions intensify the public soundscape; and its syntactic expansions often make emotional or physical relations immediately comprehensible. These are genuine gains. They help create a version that can be spoken, recited, and emotionally grasped without difficulty. The comparison with Chu is particularly revealing: both use "哟" as a resource of lyrical calling, even though the supplied text is not identical to Chu's established 1955 translation.

At the same time, the analysis has shown the cost of expressive completion. "Heart! heart! heart!" is powerful because grief has reduced the speaker's language to repetition. "O the bleeding drops of red" shocks partly because it is compressed. "This arm beneath your head!" fuses speech and bodily gesture through syntactic incompleteness. When such moments are explained, narrated, or converted into complete imperatives, the Chinese may become smoother while the original's fracture becomes less visible. Elegiac translation sometimes has to preserve difficulty rather than solve it.

The treatment of death makes the same point in another form. "死去," "停止了呼吸," "冰凉," and "冷却" are not merely alternative equivalents for "cold and dead." They organize different relations among physical sensation, knowledge, denial, and finality. A direct naming of death confronts the fact bluntly; a description of absent breathing can keep the speaker closer to the observational stage of mourning. The movement from public eyes to private touch, from "Captain" to "father," and from cheering crowds to an absent pulse further shows that Whitman's political elegy depends on the body as much as on national allegory.

For this reason, the target version should not be judged simply as a defective text to be corrected line by line. Nor should any established translation be treated as beyond criticism. Each version produces a different balance between ceremony and intimacy, lyric fluency and broken speech, semantic clarity and bodily immediacy. The value of comparison lies precisely in making those balances visible. Translating mourning is not only the transfer of what the mourner says. It is the reconstruction of what he can still say, what he can only repeat, what his body can touch, what the dead body can no longer do, and how language continues after response has become impossible.

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