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The Cyclops

Book Nine

Odysseus speaks at last. In the first of his own tales he carries the Phaeacians – and us – from the raid on the Cicones to the flowery oblivion of the Lotus-eaters, and into the cave of the one-eyed Cyclops, where cunning alone stands between his men and a monster's appetite. It is a triumph of wit that ends in a boast – and a curse that will follow him across every sea to come.

NAME

SET

Translation by E. V. Rieu, revised by D. C. H. Rieu.

BOOK NINE

The Cyclops

Odysseus finally speaks: the first of his own tales, told to the Phaeacians – the raid on the Cicones, the Lotus-eaters, and the blinding of the man-eating Cyclops Polyphemus.

WHAT HAPPENS

- Odysseus names himself at last and begins the story of his journey home from Troy.
- He sacks the Cicones but loses men; a storm drives him past Cape Malea into the world of marvels, and the Lotus-eaters nearly rob his men of all wish to go home.
- He reaches the lawless land of the Cyclopes and, with twelve men, is trapped in Polyphemus' cave, where the giant eats several of them.
- Odysseus gets the Cyclops drunk on Maron's wine, gives his name as 'Nobody', and blinds him with a sharpened stake.
- The men escape tied under the rams; but Odysseus boasts his true name, and Polyphemus prays to his father Poseidon to curse Odysseus' return.

WHO WE MEET

Odysseus

the narrator, whose cunning saves his men but whose boast earns a curse

Polyphemus

the man-eating Cyclops, son of Poseidon, who scorns the gods

Poseidon

the sea-god whose anger at his son's blinding now drives the poem

Maron

the priest whose potent wine undoes the giant

WHY IT MATTERS FOR ESSAYS

Book 9 opens Odysseus' own first-person narration (Books 9–12, his 'wanderings'). It is the great study of *xenia* and its opposite: the Cyclops is everything a civilised host is not. Watch Odysseus' *mētis* in the 'Nobody' trick, and the fatal boast that hands Polyphemus the means to curse him. **Prescribed:** examined in context – know it closely.

The Cyclops

— THE TALE BEGINS

In answer to the King, this is how Odysseus, the man of many resources, began his tale:

‘King Alcinous, most illustrious of all your people, it is indeed a lovely thing to hear a bard such as this, with a voice like the voice of the
5 gods. I myself feel that there is nothing more delightful than when the festive mood reigns in the hearts of all the people and the banqueters listen to a minstrel from their seats in the hall, while the tables before them are laden with bread and meat, and a steward carries round the wine he has drawn from the bowl and fills their
10 cups. This, to my way of thinking, is perfection.

‘However, your heart has prompted you to ask me about my troubles, and that intensified my grief. Well, where shall I begin, where end, my tale? For the list of woes which the gods in heaven have sent me is a long one. I shall start by giving you my name: I wish you all to
15 know it so that in times to come, if I escape the evil day, I may always be your friend, though my home is far from here.

— I AM ODYSSEUS

‘I am Odysseus, Laertes’ son. The whole world talks of my stratagems, and my fame has reached the heavens. My home is under the clear skies of Ithaca. Our landmark is **Mount Neriton** with its quivering
20 leaves. Other islands are clustered round it, Dulichium and Same and wooded Zacynthus. But Ithaca, the farthest out to sea, lies slanting to the west, whereas the others face the dawn and rising sun. It is a rough land, but nurtures fine men. And I, for one, know of no sweeter sight for a man’s eyes than his own country. The divine Calypso was
25 certainly for keeping me in her cavern home because she yearned for me to be her husband and with the same object **Circe, the Aeaeon witch**, detained me in her palace; but never for a moment did they win my heart. So true it is that a man’s fatherland and his parents are what he holds sweetest, even though he has settled far away from his
30 people in some rich home in foreign lands. However, let me tell you of the disastrous voyage Zeus inflicted on me when I started back from Troy.

— THE CICONES

‘The same wind that wafted me from Ilium brought me to Ismarus, **the city of the Cicones**. I sacked this place and destroyed its
35 menfolk. The women and the vast plunder that we took from the town we divided so that no one, as far as I could help it, should go short of his proper share. And then I said we must escape with all

LINE 19

Mount Neriton Ithaca is Odysseus’ home: a small, rugged island off the west coast of Greece. **Mount Neriton** is its landmark peak, and **Dulichium, Same** and **Zacynthus** are the neighbouring islands of the same group.

LINES 26–27

Circe, the Aeaeon witch Circe is a goddess–enchantress on the island of Aeaea – Odysseus tells her story in the next book. Like Calypso, she wanted to keep him with her.

LINE 34

the city of the Cicones The **Cicones** were a people of Thrace (the wild country north of Greece) who had fought as allies of Troy, so to Odysseus, raiding their town on the way home was fair game.

possible speed. But my fools of men refused. There was plenty of wine, plenty of livestock; and they kept on drinking and butchering
 40 sheep and shambling crooked-horned cattle by the shore. Meanwhile the Cicones went and raised a cry for help among other Cicones, their inland neighbours, who are both more numerous and better men, trained in fighting from the chariot and on foot as well, when the occasion requires.

45 'At dawn they were on us, thick as the leaves and flowers in spring, and disaster, sent by Zeus to make us suffer, overtook my doomed companions and me. They fought a pitched battle by the swift ships and exchanged volleys of bronze spears. Right through the early morning and while the blessed light of day grew stronger we held our
 50 ground and kept their greater force at bay; but when the sun began to drop, towards the time when the ploughman unyokes his ox, the Cicones gained the upper hand and broke the Achaean ranks. Six of my strong-greaved comrades from each ship were killed. The rest of us eluded our fate and got away alive.

55 'We sailed on from Ismarus with heavy hearts, grieving for the loss of our dear companions though rejoicing at our own escape; and I would not let the curved ships sail before each of our poor comrades who had fallen in action against the Cicones had been **three times saluted with a ritual call**. Zeus, who marshals the clouds, now sent
 60 my fleet a terrible gale from the north. He covered land and sea alike with a canopy of cloud; darkness swept down on us from the sky. Our ships pitched and plunged in the wind, and the force of the gusts tore their sails to shreds and tatters. With the fear of death upon us, we lowered them on to the decks, and rowed the bare ships to the
 65 land with all our might.

'We rested on land for two days and two nights on end, with exhaustion and anxiety gnawing at our hearts. But on the third morning, which bright-haired Dawn had ushered in, we stepped the masts, hauled up the white sails, and took our places in the ship. The
 70 wind and the helmsmen kept our vessels straight. In fact I should have reached my own land safe and sound, had not the swell, the current and the North Wind combined, as I was **rounding Malea**, to drive me off my course and send me drifting past Cythera.

— THE LOTUS-EATERS

'For nine days I was chased by those accursed winds across the
 75 teeming seas. But on the tenth we reached **the country of the Lotus-eaters**, a race that eat the flowery lotus fruit. We disembarked to draw water, and my crews quickly had a meal by the ships. When we had eaten and drunk, I sent some of my followers inland to find out what sort of human beings might be there, detailing two men for

LINES 58–59

three times saluted with a ritual call Before sailing on, Odysseus has each dead comrade's name called out three times – a ritual 'summons' that stood in for proper burial when the body couldn't be recovered, so the man's spirit wasn't left wholly unhonoured.

LINE 72

rounding Malea Cape Malea is the stormy southern tip of mainland Greece. Rounding it was notoriously dangerous, and being blown past it (and past the island of Cythera) is what carries Odysseus out of the everyday world and into the land of marvels.

LINES 75–76

the country of the Lotus-eaters The Lotus-eaters live on a magical fruit that makes anyone who tastes it forget home and lose all wish to leave. They're the first of the temptations that threaten to stop Odysseus ever reaching Ithaca.

80 the duty with a third as herald. Off they went, and it was not long before they came upon the Lotus-eaters. Now these natives had no intention of killing my comrades; what they did was to give them some lotus to taste. Those who ate the honeyed fruit of the plant lost any wish to come back and bring us news. All they now wanted was

85 to stay where they were with the Lotus-eaters, to browse on the lotus, and to forget all thoughts of return. I had to use force to bring them back to the hollow ships, and they wept on the way, but once on board I tied them up and dragged them under the benches. I then commanded the rest of my loyal band to embark with all speed on

90 their fast ships, for fear that others of them might eat the lotus and think no more of home. They came on board at once, took their places at their oars and all together struck the white surf with their blades.

— THE LAND OF THE CYCLOPES

‘So we left that country and sailed with heavy hearts. And we came to

95 **the land of the Cyclopes**, a fierce, lawless people who never lift a hand to plant or plough but just leave everything to the immortal gods. All the crops they require spring up unsown and untilled, wheat and barley and vines with generous clusters that swell with the rain from heaven to yield wine. The Cyclopes have no assemblies for the

100 making of laws, nor any established legal codes, but live in hollow caverns in the mountain heights, where each man is lawgiver to his own children and women, and nobody has the slightest interest in what his neighbours decide.

‘Not very far from the harbour of the Cyclopes’ country, and not so

105 near either, there lies a luxuriant island, covered with woods, which is the home of innumerable goats. The goats are wild, for the footsteps of man never disturb them, nor do hunters visit the island, forcing their way through forests and ranging the mountain tops. Used neither for grazing nor for ploughing, it lies for ever unsown

110 and unfilled; and this land where no man goes supports only bleating goats. The Cyclopes have nothing like our ships with their crimson prows; they have no shipwrights to build merchantmen that could give them the means of sailing across the sea to visit foreign towns and people, as other nations do. Such craftsmen would have turned

115 the island into a fine colony for the Cyclopes.

‘It is by no means a poor country, but capable of yielding any crop in due season. Along the shore of the grey sea there are lush water-meadows where the grapes would never fail; and there is land level enough for the plough, where they could count on cutting a tall-

120 standing crop at every harvest because the subsoil is exceedingly rich. Also it has a safe harbour, in which there is no need of moorings – no need to cast anchor or make fast with hawsers: all your crew

LINE 95

the land of the Cyclopes The **Cyclopes** (one Cyclops, several Cyclopes) are one-eyed giants. Homer makes them the opposite of civilised Greeks: they grow no crops on purpose, hold no assemblies, keep no laws and build no ships, and each lives apart caring nothing for his neighbours.

need do is beach their ship and wait till the spirit moves them and the right wind blows. Finally, at the head of the harbour there is a
 125 stream of fresh water, running out of a cave in a grove of poplar-trees.

‘This is where we came to land. Some god must have guided us through the murky night, for it was impossible to see ahead. The ships were in a thick fog, and overhead not a gleam of light came
 130 through from the moon, which was obscured by clouds. Not a man among us caught sight of the island, nor did we even see the long breakers rolling up to the coast, before our good ships ran aground. It was not till they were beached that we lowered sail. We then jumped out on to the shore, fell asleep where we were and so waited for the
 135 blessed light of day.

— EXPLORING THE ISLAND

‘As soon as Dawn appeared, fresh and rosy-fingered, we were delighted with what we saw of the island, and set out to explore it. Presently the Nymphs, those children of Zeus, set the mountain goats on the move to ensure my companions a meal. Directly we saw
 140 them we fetched our curved bows and our long spears from the ships, separated into three parties, and began shooting at the goats; and in a short time the god had sent us plenty of game. When it was shared out, nine goats were allotted to each of the twelve ships under my command, but to me alone they made an allotment of ten.

145 ‘So the whole day long till the sun set we sat down to rich supplies of meat and mellow wine, since the ships had not yet run dry of our red vintage. There was still some in the holds, for when we took the sacred citadel of the Cicones, every member of the company had drawn off a generous supply in jars. There we sat, and as we looked
 150 across at the neighbouring land of the Cyclopes, we could see the smoke from their fires and hear their voices and the bleating of their sheep and goats. The sun went down, night fell, and we lay down to sleep on the sea-shore.

— INTO THE CAVE

‘As soon as Dawn appeared, fresh and rosy-fingered, I assembled my
 155 company and spoke to them. “My good friends,” I said, “for the time being stay here, while I go in my ship with my crew to find out what kind of men are over there, and whether they are **aggressive savages with no sense of right** or wrong or hospitable and god-fearing people.”

160 ‘Then I climbed into my ship and told my men to follow me and loose the hawsers. They came on board at once, took their places at the oars and all together struck the white surf with the blades. It was no

LINES 157–158

aggressive savages with no sense of right

Odysseus asks this same question every time he lands somewhere new – are these people lawless brutes, or do they respect *xenia* (guest-friendship) and the gods? It’s exactly the test the whole Cyclops episode turns on.

great distance to the mainland. As we approached its nearest point, we made out a cave close to the sea, with a high entrance overhung
 165 by laurels. Here large flocks of sheep and goats were penned at night, and round the mouth a yard had been built with a great wall of quarried stones and tall pines and high-branched oaks. It was the den of a giant, who pastured his flocks alone, a long way away from anyone else, and had no truck with others of his kind but lived aloof
 170 in his own lawless way. And what a formidable monster he was! He was quite unlike any man who eats bread, more like some wooded peak in the high hills, standing out alone apart from the others.

'At this point, I told the rest of my loyal companions to stay there on guard by the ship, but I myself picked out the twelve best men in the
 175 company and advanced. I took with me in a goatskin some dark and mellow wine which had been given to me by **Maron son of Euanthes**, the priest of Apollo, the tutelary god of Ismarus, because we had protected him and his child and wife out of respect for his office. He lived in a wooded grove sacred to Phoebus Apollo. This man had
 180 given me some fine presents: seven talents of wrought gold, with a mixing-bowl of solid silver, and he drew off for me a dozen jars of mellow unmixed wine as well. It was a wonderful drink. It had been kept secret from all his serving-men and maids, in fact from everyone in the house but himself, his good wife and a housekeeper.
 185 To drink this red and honeyed vintage, he would pour one cupful of wine into twenty of water, and the bouquet that rose from the bowl was pure heaven – those were occasions when abstinence could have no charms.

'Well, I filled a big goatskin with this wine and also took some food in
 190 a bag with me; for I had an instant foreboding that we were going to find ourselves face to face with some barbarous being of colossal strength and ferocity, uncivilized and unprincipled. It took us very little time to reach the cave, but we did not find its owner at home: he was tending his fat sheep in the pastures. So we went inside and
 195 looked in amazement at everything. There were baskets laden with cheeses, and the folds were thronged with lambs and kids, each group – the spring ones, the summer ones, and the new-born ones – being separately penned. All his well-made vessels, the pails and bowls he used for milking, were swimming with whey.

200 'To start with my men begged me to let them take away some of the cheeses, then come back, drive the kids and lambs quickly out of the pens down to the good ship, and so set sail across the salt water. But though it would have been far better so, I was not to be persuaded. I wished to see the owner of the cave and had hopes of some friendly
 205 gifts from my host. But when he did appear, my men were not going to find him a very likeable character.

LINE 176

Maron son of Euanthes Maron, a priest of Apollo whom Odysseus had spared, gave him this wine as a guest-gift. It's extraordinarily strong – watered at one cup of wine to twenty of water – which is just what lets it knock out a giant later on.

‘We lit a fire, made an offering to the gods, helped ourselves to some of the cheeses, and when we had eaten, sat down in the cave to await his arrival. At last he came up, shepherding his flocks and carrying a huge bundle of dry wood to burn at supper-time. With a great crash he threw this down inside the cavern, giving us such a fright that we hastily retreated to an inner recess. Meanwhile he drove some of his fat flock into the wider part of the cave – all the ones he was milking – the rams and he-goats he left out of doors in the walled yard. He then picked up a huge stone, with which he closed the entrance. It was a mighty slab; twenty-two four-wheeled waggons could not shift such a massive stone from the entrance, such was the monstrous size of the rock with which he closed the cave. Next he sat down to milk his ewes and his bleating goats, which he did methodically, putting her young to each mother as he finished. He then curdled half the white milk, collected the whey, and stored it in wicker cheese-baskets; the remainder he left standing in pails, so that it would be handy at supper-time when he wanted a drink. When he had efficiently finished all his tasks, he re-lit the fire and spied us.

— THE CYCLOPS RETURNS

“‘Strangers!’ he cried. ‘And who are you? Where do you come from over the watery ways? Is yours a trading venture; or are you cruising the main on chance, like roving pirates, who risk their lives to ruin other people?’

‘Our hearts sank. The booming voice and the very sight of the monster filled us with panic. Still, I managed to find words to answer him. “We are Achaeans,” I said, “on our way back from Troy – driven astray by contrary winds across a vast expanse of sea – we’re making our way home but took the wrong way – the wrong route – as Zeus, I suppose, intended that we should. We are proud to say that we belong to the forces of Agamemnon, Atreus’ son, who by sacking the great city of Ilium and destroying all its armies has made himself the most famous man in the world today. We find ourselves here as suppliants at your knees, in the hope that you may give us hospitality, or even give us the kind of gifts that hosts customarily give their guests. Good sir, remember your duty to the gods; we are your suppliants, and Zeus is the champion of suppliants and guests. He is the god of guests: guests are sacred to him, and he goes alongside them.”

“That is what I said, and he answered me promptly out of his pitiless heart: “Stranger, you must be a fool, or must have come from very far afield, to order me to fear or reverence the gods. We Cyclopes care nothing for Zeus with his aegis, nor for the rest of the blessed gods, since we are much stronger than they are. I would never spare you or

LINE 228

like roving pirates In Homer’s world sea-raiding was a normal way for men to make a living and no great disgrace, so asking a stranger whether he’s a trader or a pirate is a perfectly ordinary question.

LINE 242

Zeus is the champion of suppliants and guests Zeus was believed to protect guests and suppliants (people who beg for help): to mistreat a guest was to offend Zeus himself. This is the code the Cyclops is about to trample all over.

250 your men for fear of incurring Zeus' enmity, unless I felt like it. But tell me where you moored your good ship when you came. Was it somewhere along the coast, or nearby? I'd like to know."

'His words were designed to get the better of me, but he could not outwit someone with my knowledge of the world. I answered with
255 plausible words: "As for my ship, it was wrecked by the Earthshaker Poseidon on the borders of your land. The wind had carried us on to a lee shore. He drove the ship up to a headland and hurled it on the rocks. But I and my friends here managed to escape with our lives."

— A GRISLY FEAST

'To this the cruel brute made no reply. Instead, he jumped up, and
260 reaching out towards my men, seized a couple and dashed their heads against the floor as though they had been puppies. Their brains ran out on the ground and soaked the earth. Limb by limb he tore them to pieces to make his meal, which he devoured like a mountain lion, leaving nothing, neither entrails nor flesh, marrow nor bones,
265 while we, weeping, lifted up our hands to Zeus in horror at the ghastly sight. We felt completely helpless. When the Cyclops had filled his great belly with this meal of human flesh, which he washed down with unwatered milk, he stretched himself out for sleep among his flocks inside the cave.

270 'On first thoughts I planned to summon my courage, draw my sharp sword from the scabbard at my side, creep up to him, feel for the right place with my hand and stab him in the breast where the liver is supported by the midriff. But on second thoughts I refrained, realizing that we would seal our own fate as well as his, because we
275 would have found it impossible with our unaided hands to push aside the huge rock with which he had closed the great mouth of the cave. So with sighs and groans we waited for the blessed light of day.

'As soon as Dawn appeared, fresh and rosy-fingered, the Cyclops relit the fire and milked his splendid ewes and goats, all in their proper
280 order, putting her young to each. Having efficiently completed all these tasks, he once more snatched up a couple of my men and prepared his meal. When he had eaten, he turned his plump flocks out of the cave, removing the great doorstone without an effort. But he replaced it once more, as though he were putting the lid on a
285 quiver. Then, with frequent whistles, he drove his plump flocks off towards the mountain, and I was left, with murder in my heart, scheming how to pay him out if only Athene would grant me my prayer. The best plan I could think of was this.

— THE PLAN

'Lying by the pen the Cyclops had a huge staff of green olive-wood,

290 which he had cut to carry in his hand when it was seasoned. To us it looked more like the mast of some black ship of twenty oars, a broad-bottomed merchantman such as makes long sea-voyages. That was the impression which its length and thickness made on us. Standing beside this piece of timber I cut off **a fathom's length**, which I
 295 handed over to my men and told them to smooth it down. When they had done this I stood and sharpened it to a point. Then I hardened it in the fire, and finally I carefully hid it under the dung, of which there were great heaps scattered throughout the cave. I then told my company to cast lots for the dangerous task of helping me to lift the
 300 pole and twist it in the Cyclops' eye when he was sound asleep. The lot fell on the very men that I myself would have chosen, four of them, so that counting myself we made a party of five.

— THE WINE

'Evening came, and with it the Cyclops, shepherding his plump flocks, every one of which he herded into the broad cave, leaving
 305 none out in the walled yard, either because he suspected something or because a god had ordered him to. He lifted the great doorstone, set it in its place, and then sat down to milk his ewes and bleating goats, which he did methodically, giving each mother its young one in due course. When he had efficiently completed all these tasks, he
 310 once more snatched two of us and prepared his supper. Then with an olive-wood bowl of my dark wine in my hands, I went up to him and said: "Here, Cyclops, have some wine to wash down that meal of human flesh, and find out for yourself what kind of vintage was stored away in our ship's hold. I brought it for you as an offering in
 315 the hope that you would take pity on me and help me on my homeward way. But your savagery is more than we can bear. Hard-hearted man, how can you expect ever to have a visitor again from the world of men? You have not behaved rightly."

'The Cyclops took the wine and drank it up. And the delicious drink
 320 gave him such exquisite pleasure that he asked me for another bowlful. "Give me more, please, and tell me your name, here and now – I would like to make you a gift that will please you. We Cyclopes have wine of our own made from the grapes that our rich soil and rains from Zeus produce. But this vintage of yours is a drop of the
 325 real nectar and ambrosia."

'So said the Cyclops, and I handed him another bowlful of the sparkling wine. Three times I filled it for him; and three times the fool drained the bowl to the dregs. At last, when the wine had fuddled his wits, I addressed him with soothing words.

— NOBODY

330 ' "Cyclops," I said, "you ask me my name. I'll tell it to you; and in

LINE 294

a fathom's length A *fathom* is the span of a man's outstretched arms, about six feet – so he cuts himself a good six-foot length of the giant's club.

return give me the gift you promised me. **My name is Nobody**. That is what I am called by my mother and father and by all my friends.”

“The Cyclops answered me from his cruel heart. “Of all his company I will eat Nobody last, and the rest before him. That shall be your gift.”

— THE BLINDING

335 ‘He had hardly spoken before he toppled over and fell face upwards on the floor, where he lay with his great neck twisted to one side, and all-compelling sleep overpowered him. In his drunken stupor he vomited, and a stream of wine mixed with morsels of men’s flesh poured from his throat. I went at once and thrust our pole deep under

340 the ashes of the fire to make it hot, and meanwhile gave a word of encouragement to all my men, to make sure that no one would hang back through fear. When the fierce glow from the olive stake warned me that it was about to catch alight in the flames, green as it was, I withdrew it from the fire and my men gathered round. A god now

345 inspired them with tremendous courage. Seizing the olive pole, they drove its sharpened end into the Cyclops’ eye, while I used my weight from above to twist it home, **like a man boring a ship’s** timber with a drill which his mates below him twirl with a strap they hold at either end, so that it spins continuously. In much the same way we

350 handled our pole with its red-hot point and twisted it in his eye till the blood boiled up round the burning wood. The scorching heat singed his lids and brow all round, while his eyeball blazed and the very roots crackled in the flame. The Cyclops’ eye hissed round the olive stake in the same way that an axe or adze hisses when a smith

355 plunges it into cold water to quench and strengthen the iron. He gave a dreadful shriek, which echoed round the rocky walls, and we backed away from him in terror, while he pulled the stake from his eye, streaming with blood. Then he hurled it away from him with frenzied hands and raised a great shout to the other Cyclopes who

360 lived in neighbouring caves along the windy heights. Hearing his screams they came up from every quarter, and gathering outside the cave asked him what the matter was.

— THE NEIGHBOURS FOOLED

‘ “What on earth is wrong with you, Polyphemus? Why must you disturb the peaceful night and spoil our sleep with all this shouting?

365 Is a robber driving off your sheep, or is somebody trying by treachery or violence to kill you?”

‘Out of the cave came mighty Polyphemus’ voice in reply: “O my friends, it’s Nobody’s treachery, not violence, that is doing me to death.”

370 ‘ “Well then,” came the immediate reply, “if you are alone and nobody

LINE 331

My name is Nobody This is the famous trick. The Greek for ‘Nobody’ is *Outis*, which also echoes *mētis*, the word for the cunning wits Odysseus is known for. When the blinded Cyclops later roars that ‘Nobody’ is hurting him, his neighbours take him at his word and leave.

LINE 347

like a man boring a ship The blinding is driven home by two vivid **similes** (extended ‘like...’ comparisons): the stake is turned like a shipwright’s drill boring a timber, and the eye hisses like a smith’s axe plunged red-hot into cold water. Homer loves reaching for these craft and workshop pictures.

is assaulting you, you must be sick and sickness comes from almighty Zeus and cannot be helped. All you can do is to pray to your father, the Lord Poseidon.”

‘And off they went, while I laughed to myself at the way in which my
375 cunning notion, of a false name had taken them in. The Cyclops, still moaning in agonies of pain, groped about with his hands and pushed the rock away from the mouth of the cave. Then he sat himself down in the doorway and stretched out both arms in the hope of catching us in the act of slipping out among the sheep. What a fool he must
380 have thought me! Meanwhile I was cudgelling my brains for the best possible course, trying to hit on some way of saving my friends as well as myself. I thought up plan after plan, scheme after scheme. It was a matter of life or death: we were in mortal peril.

— ESCAPE UNDER THE RAMS

‘This was the scheme that eventually seemed best. The rams of the
385 flock were of good stock, thick-fleeced, fine, big animals in their coats of black wool. These I quietly lashed together with the plaited willow twigs which the inhuman monster used for his bed. I took them in threes. The middle one was to carry one of my followers, with its fellows on either side to protect him. Each of my men thus
390 had three rams to bear him. But for myself I chose a full-grown ram who was the pick of the whole flock. Seizing him by the back, I curled myself up under his shaggy belly and lay there upside down, with a firm grip on his wonderful fleece and with patience in my heart. In this way, with sighs and groans, we waited for the blessed Dawn.

395 ‘As soon as she arrived, fresh and rosy-fingered, the he-goats and the rams began to scramble out and make for the pastures, but the females, un milked as they were and with udders full to bursting, stood bleating by the pens. Their master, though tortured and in terrible agony, passed his hands along the backs of all the animals as
400 they stopped in front of him; but the idiot never noticed that my men were tied under the chests of his own woolly rams. The last of the flock to come up to the doorway was the big ram, burdened by his own fleece and by me with my thoughts racing. As he felt him with his hands the great Polyphemus broke into speech:

405 ‘ “Sweet ram,” he said, “why are you the last of the flock to pass out of the cave like this? You have never before lagged behind the others, but always step so proudly out and are the first of them to crop the lush shoots of the grass, first to make your way to the flowing stream, and first to want to return to the fold when evening falls. Yet
410 today you are the last of all. You must be grieved for your master’s eye, blinded by a wicked man and his accursed friends, when he had robbed me of my wits with wine. Nobody was his name; and I swear

that he has not yet saved his skin! Ah, if only you could feel as I do and find a voice to tell me where he's hiding from my fury! I'd
 415 hammer him and splash his brains all over the floor of the cave, and my heart would find some relief from the suffering which that nothing, that Nobody, has caused me!"

'So he let the ram pass through the entrance and when we had put a little distance between ourselves and the courtyard of the cave, I
 420 first let go my ram and then untied my men. Then, quickly, though with many a backward look, we drove our long-striding sheep and goats – a rich, fat flock – right down to the ship. My dear companions were overjoyed when they caught sight of us survivors, but broke into loud lamentations for the others. With nods and frowns I
 425 indicated silently that they should stop their weeping and hurry to bundle the fleecy sheep and goats on board and put to sea. So they went on board at once, took their places at the oars, and all together struck the white water with the blades.

— THE TAUNT

'But before we were out of earshot, I shouted out derisive words at
 430 Polyphemus. "Cyclops! So he was not such a weakling after all, the man whose friends you meant to overpower and eat in your hollow cave! And your crimes were bound to catch up with you, you brute, who did not shrink from devouring your guests. Now Zeus and all the other gods have paid you out."

'My words so enraged the Cyclops that he tore the top off a great
 435 pinnacle of rock and hurled it at us. The rock fell just ahead of our blue-painted bows. As it plunged in, the water surged up and the backwash, like a swell from the open sea, swept us landward and nearly drove us on to the beach. Seizing a long pole, I pushed the ship
 440 off, at the same time commanding my crew with urgent nods to bend to their oars and save us from disaster. They leant forward and rowed with a will; but when they had taken us across the water to twice our previous distance I was about to shout something else to the Cyclops, but from all parts of the ship my men called out, trying
 445 to restrain and pacify me.

' "Why do you want to provoke the savage in this obstinate way? The rock he threw into the sea just now drove the ship back to the land, and we thought it was all up with us. Had he heard a cry, or so much as a word, from a single man, he'd have smashed in our heads and the
 450 ship's timbers with another jagged boulder from his hand. We're within easy range for him!"

'But my temper was up; their words did not dissuade me, and in my rage I shouted back at him once more: "Cyclops, if anyone ever asks you how you came by your blindness, tell him **your eye was put out**

LINES 454–455

your eye was put out by Odysseus By shouting out his real name, Odysseus lets the Cyclops know exactly who blinded him – which means Polyphemus can now name him in his curse to Poseidon. That one boast turns a lucky escape into years of persecution.

455 by **Odysseus**, sacker of cities, the son of Laertes, who lives in Ithaca.”

“The Cyclops gave a groan. “Alas!” he cried. “Those ancient prophecies have come back to me now! We had a prophet living with us once, a great and mighty man, Eurymus’ son Telemus, the best of soothsayers, who grew old as a seer among us Cyclopes. All that has
460 now happened he foretold, when he warned me that a man called Odysseus would rob me of my sight. But I always expected some big handsome man of tremendous strength to come along. And now, a puny, feeble good-for-nothing fuddles me with wine and then puts out my eye! But come here, Odysseus, so that I can give you some
465 friendly gifts and prevail on the great Earthshaker, Poseidon, to see you safely home. For I am his son, and he is proud to call himself my father. He is the one who will heal me if he’s willing – a thing no other blessed god nor any man on earth could do.”

“To which I shouted in reply: “I only wish I could make as sure of
470 robbing you of life and breath and sending you to Hell, as I am certain that not even the Earthshaker will ever heal your eye.”

— THE CURSE

‘At this the Cyclops lifted up his hands to the starry heavens and prayed to the Lord Poseidon: “Hear me, Poseidon, Sustainer of the Earth, god of the sable locks. If I am yours indeed and you claim me as
475 your son, grant that Odysseus, sacker of cities and son of Laertes, **may never reach his home in Ithaca**. But if he is destined to see his friends again, to come once more to his own house and reach his native land, let him come late, in wretched plight, having lost all his comrades, in a foreign ship, and let him find trouble in his home.”

LINE 476

may never reach his home in Ithaca

Polyphemus is **Poseidon's** son, so this curse has teeth. Almost every word of it comes true: Odysseus does reach home late, alone, having lost all his men, on someone else's ship, to find his house in chaos. Poseidon's anger here is the engine that drives the rest of the poem.

480 'So Polyphemus prayed; and the god of the sable locks heard his
prayer. Once again the Cyclops picked up a boulder – bigger, by far,
this time – and hurled it with a swing, putting such tremendous
force into his throw that the rock fell only just astern of our blue-
painted ship, narrowly missing the tip of the rudder. The water
485 heaved up as it plunged into the sea; but the wave that it raised
carried us on towards the further shore.

— AWAY AT LAST

'And so we reached our island, where the rest of our good ships were
all waiting for us, their crews sitting round disconsolate and keeping
a constant watch for our return. Once there, we beached our ship,
490 jumped out on the shore, and unloaded the Cyclops' flocks from the
hold. We then divided our spoil so that no one, as far as I could help it,
should go short of his proper share. But my comrades-in-arms did me
the special honour, when the sheep and goats were distributed, of
presenting me with the big ram in addition. Him I sacrificed on the
495 beach, burning slices from his thighs as an offering to Zeus of the
Black Clouds, the Son of Cronos, who is lord of us all. But Zeus took
no notice of my sacrifice; his mind must already have been full of
plans for the destruction of all my fine ships and of my loyal band.

'So the whole day long till sundown we sat and feasted on our rich
500 supply of meat and mellow wine. When the sun set and darkness fell,
we lay down to sleep on the sea-shore. As soon as Dawn appeared,
fresh and rosy-fingered, I roused my men and ordered them to go on
board and cast off. They climbed on board at once, took their places
at the oars and all together struck the white surf with the blades.
505 Thus we left the island and sailed on with heavy hearts, grieving for
the dear friends we had lost but glad at our own escape from death.'

