

## Part Two: The Wanderings of Odysseus

### Book 5: Calypso, the Sweet Nymph

*Again the story begins with the gods. Zeus, unable to resist the pleas of his favorite daughter, Athena, sends the messenger-god Hermes to Calypso's island to order Odysseus released. Notice the particularly beautiful epic simile—the extended comparison—that gives life to Hermes' swift voyage to Ogygia (lines 251–257), and notice the wonderful description of the nymph's lair. It is important to remember that although Calypso is not described as evil, her seductive charms—even her promises of immortality for Odysseus—threaten to lead the hero away from the straight and narrow path back to Penelope.*

No words were lost on Hermes the Wayfinder  
who bent to tie his beautiful sandals on,  
245 ambrosial,<sup>o</sup> golden, that carry him over water  
or over endless land in a swish of the wind,  
and took the wand with which he charms asleep—  
or when he wills, awake—the eyes of men.  
So wand in hand he paced into the air,  
250 shot from Pieria<sup>o</sup> down, down to sea level,  
and veered to skim the swell. A gull patrolling  
between the wave crests of the desolate sea  
will dip to catch a fish, and douse his wings;  
no higher above the whitecaps Hermes flew  
255 until the distant island lay ahead,  
then rising shoreward from the violet ocean  
he stepped up to the cave. Divine Calypso,  
the mistress of the isle, was now at home.  
Upon her hearthstone a great fire blazing  
260 scented the farthest shores with cedar smoke  
and smoke of thyme, and singing high and low  
in her sweet voice, before her loom a-weaving,  
she passed her golden shuttle to and fro.  
A deep wood grew outside, with summer leaves  
265 of alder and black poplar, pungent cypress.  
Ornate birds here rested their stretched wings—  
horned owls, falcons, cormorants—long-tongued  
beachcombing birds, and followers of the sea.  
Around the smoothwalled cave a crooking vine  
270 held purple clusters under ply of green;  
and four springs, bubbling up near one another  
shallow and clear, took channels here and there  
through beds of violets and tender parsley.  
Even a god who found this place

245. ambrosial: fit for the gods.

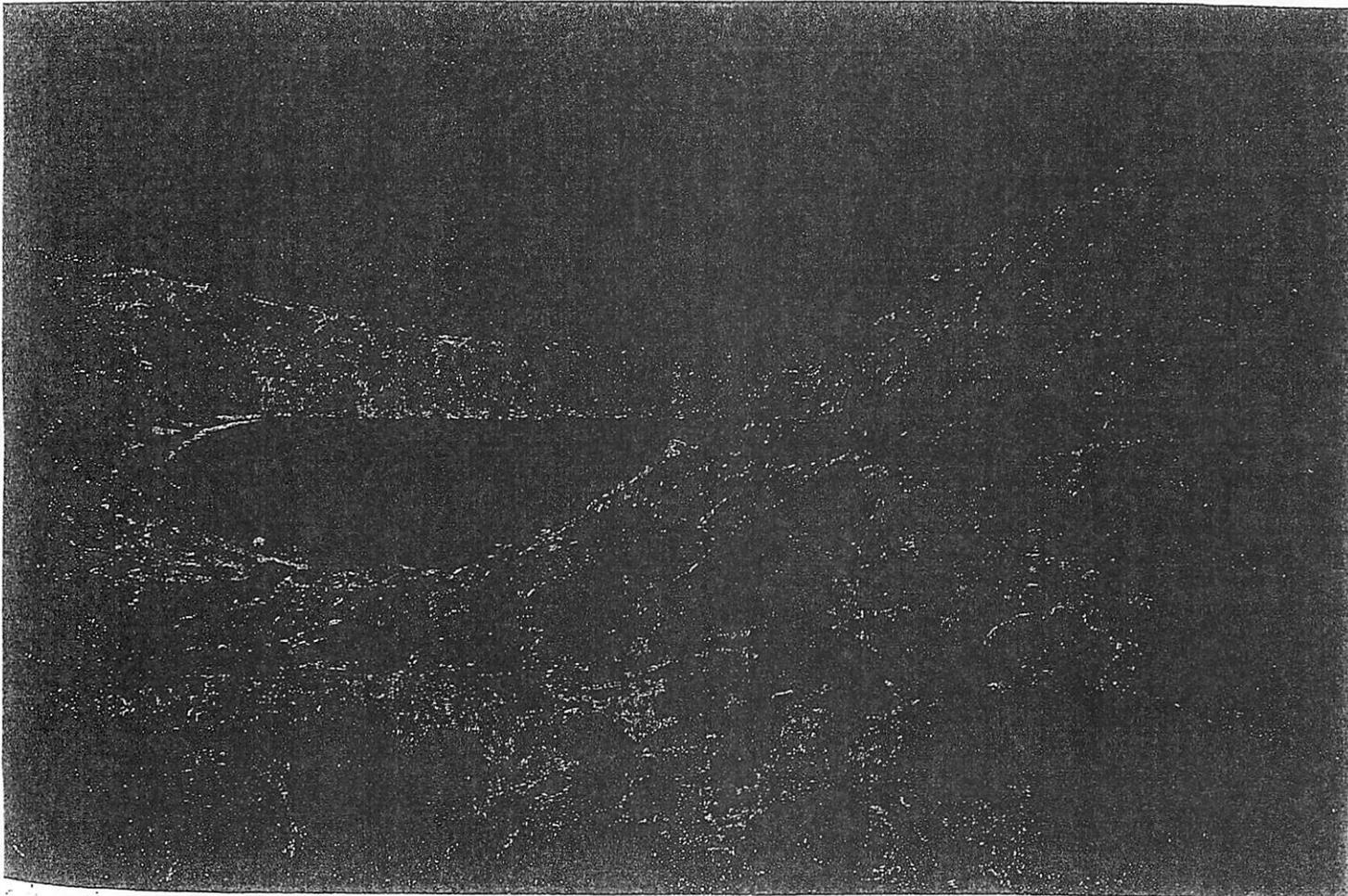
250. Pieria: a place in central Greece, a favorite spot of Hermes. It is not far from Olympus.

275 would gaze, and feel his heart beat with delight:  
so Hermes did; but when he had gazed his fill  
he entered the wide cave. Now face to face  
the magical Calypso recognized him,  
as all immortal gods know one another  
280 on sight—though seeming strangers, far from home.  
But he saw nothing of the great Odysseus,  
who sat apart, as a thousand times before,  
and racked his own heart groaning, with eyes wet  
scanning the bare horizon of the sea. . . .

*Hermes tells Calypso that she must give up Odysseus forever. And now, one quarter of the way through the epic, we are directly introduced to Odysseus. Notice what this great warrior is doing when we first meet him.*

285 The strong god glittering left her as he spoke,  
and now her ladyship, having given heed  
to Zeus's mandate, went to find Odysseus

*A view of the sea from one of the Greek islands.*



in his stone seat to seaward—tear on tear  
brimming his eyes. The sweet days of his lifetime  
290 were running out in anguish over his exile;  
for long ago the nymph had ceased to please.  
Though he fought shy of her and her desire,  
he lay with her each night, for she compelled him.  
But when day came he sat on the rocky shore  
295 and broke his own heart groaning, with eyes wet  
scanning the bare horizon of the sea.  
Now she stood near him in her beauty, saying:

“O forlorn man, be still.  
Here you need grieve no more; you need not feel  
300 your life consumed here; I have pondered it,  
and I shall help you go. . . .”

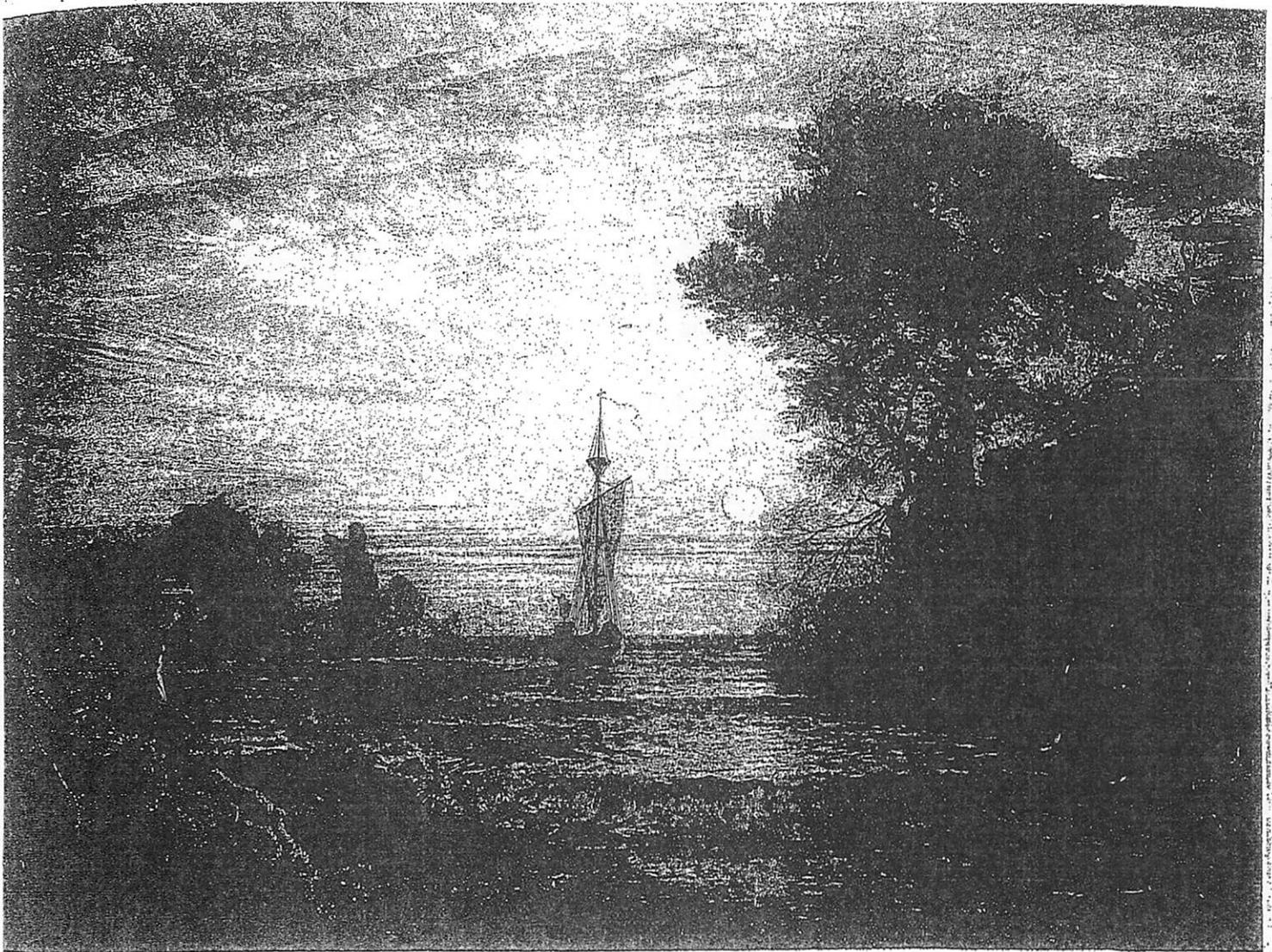
*Calypso promises Odysseus a raft and provisions, to help him  
homeward without harm—provided the gods wish it. Now Odys-  
seus and Calypso say goodbye.*

Swiftly she turned and led him to her cave,  
and they went in, the mortal and immortal.  
He took the chair left empty now by Hermes,  
305 where the divine Calypso placed before him  
victuals and drink of men; then she sat down  
facing Odysseus, while her serving maids  
brought nectar and ambrosia<sup>o</sup> to her side.  
Then each one's hands went out on each one's feast  
310 until they had had their pleasure; and she said:  
“Son of Laertes, versatile Odysseus,  
after these years with me, you still desire  
your old home? Even so, I wish you well.  
If you could see it all, before you go—  
315 all the adversity you face at sea—  
you would stay here, and guard this house; and be  
immortal—though you wanted her forever,  
that bride for whom you pine each day.  
Can I be less desirable than she is?  
320 Less interesting? Less beautiful? Can mortals  
compare with goddesses in grace and form?”

To this the strategist Odysseus answered:

“My lady goddess, there is no cause for anger.  
My quiet Penelope—how well I know—  
325 would seem a shade before your majesty,  
death and old age being unknown to you,  
while she must die. Yet, it is true, each day  
I long for home, long for the sight of home.

308. nectar and ambrosia: drink and food of the gods.



*So Odysseus builds the raft and sets sail. But the sea god Poseidon, still angry at Odysseus, is by no means ready to allow an easy passage over his watery domain. He raises a storm and destroys the raft. It is only with the help of Athena and a sea nymph that Odysseus arrives, broken and battered, on the island of Scheria, home of the Phaeacians. There he hides himself in a pile of leaves and falls into a deep sleep.*

330 A man in a distant field, no hearthfires near,  
will hide a fresh brand° in his bed of embers  
to keep a spark alive for the next day;  
so in the leaves Odysseus hid himself,  
while over him Athena showered sleep  
that his distress should end, and soon, soon.  
335 In quiet sleep she sealed his cherished eyes. /

*Farewell to Calypso* by Samuel Palmer (1848). Watercolor.

Whitworth Art Gallery, University of Manchester

330. brand: a burning stick.