

Extract from *The Wanderings of Odysseus*

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The Wanderings of Odysseus is a translation of most of the *Odyssey* from book 5 to book 13 line 92, commissioned by the J. Paul Getty Museum. It was given nine performances in September-October 1992 in a co-production between the Museum and the Mark Taper Forum of Los Angeles. The production used five actors, directed by Rush Rehm, and was mounted in the Inner Peristyle Garden of the Museum at Malibu, California.

It is important for the reader to be aware that this translation was made for performance, not primarily for silent reading. This explains, for instance, why some lines are compressed or omitted on grounds of performability rather than textual criticism; and, more importantly, it accounts for the metric, which is based on sound patterns and the musicality of spoken words.

The extract printed here is book 5, lines 388-494.

Narrator

Two days Odysseus was driven and two nights over the waves;
often and often he feared that his last hour was looming;
but when the curly locks of dawn unfurled the third day,
the wind dropped down and a calm came over. From the very top
of a swelling roller he caught a quick glimpse of land.
As welcome as would be the first signs of reviving life
to a family whose father has lain suffering from fever,
weeks wasting away, and loathed death has brushed by him,
yet one day – welcome – the gods free him from disease,
so welcome the woods and land seemed to Odysseus,
who swam with all his might to get his feet on dry ground.

When he was as far off as a loud shout would carry
 and could hear the swash as the sea smacked on the rocks –
 for a heavy wave-swell from the recent storm was still
 roaring on the shore, all cloaked in clouds of spray,
 where there were no havens or sheltered inlets,
 but sharp promontories, jagged rocks, ragged reefs –
 then Odysseus' strength and spirit collapsed, and he said
 grimly to himself:

Odysseus

'Here's an irony, when Zeus has shown
 land so near, beyond my dreams, after so long a swim,
 and now there's no way I can find out of the grey brine.
 At the edge are jagged rocks with the surf roughly
 breaking about them, then the shelf is sheer, and the sea deep,
 so there's no way to win a firm foothold out of trouble,
 or to avoid a wave catching me as I climb out
 and shattering me on shore – that would be a foolish landfall!

But if I make a circuit swimming round to try to find
 bays with beaches or coves safe from the surf,
 I'm afraid I shall find the off-shore winds sweeping me out
 in agony again over the fish-infested sea.
 Or some sea-monster will be let loose on me –
 I'm well aware how Poseidon has sided against me.'

Narrator

Even while his mind was turning these thoughts, a turbulent
 wave swelling to break was lifting him to the rough rocks,
 where his flesh would have been flayed, bones broken and crushed,
 had not bright-eyed Athena inspired the idea in his mind of
 desperately grasping a boulder with both his hands.
 He gripped it in pain while the crashing wave washed over.
 He'd no sooner survived that than the sucking backwash struck
 with irresistible pull and swept him way out to sea.

As clusters of stones stick tight on the tentacle-cups of an octopus that's been plucked out of its lair, so Odysseus' skin clung stuck to the rock, scraped from his strong grip. And the vast wave covered him.

Then wretched Odysseus might have gone under despite his destiny, had not bright-eyed Athena planted a plan in his mind: battling clear of the breakers that roared frothing towards land, he stroked along beyond, always searching the shore-line to find bays with beaches or coves safe from the surf. And as he swam he came to the mouth of a fresh-flowing stream, which seemed the most promising spot, free of threatening rocks and away from the wind. He prayed in his heart to the stream:

Odysseus

'Whatever your true title, listen to me, lord of the stream, I pray you for protection from pursuit on the sea by Poseidon. A helpless suppliant human can command some mercy even from a divinity, if he's a homeless fugitive, as I am; I've come after many struggles to your welcome stream. So pity me, mighty lord – I throw myself on your mercy.'

Narrator

At this the river restrained his flow and deflected the surf to make a smooth access and accept him into the stream-bed. Odysseus' muscular arms fell limp and his knees both buckled – his strength had been crushed by brine; his flesh was all swollen and salt-water spurted from mouth and nose as he spewed; with no breath left, voiceless, he fell half-conscious as an awful exhaustion came in waves over him. At last life revived and spirit was restored his breast, and wading out of the water he sank in the reeds and kissed the grain-generous ground. Then he grimly said to himself:

Odysseus

'Now what must I suffer? What's to happen in the end?'

If I wait by the water for the unkind night to fall,
 then I fear that my life, already strained by exhaustion,
 will be finished by the frost and the freezing drench of dew,
 when the chilling wind of dawn springs from the river.
 But if I clamber the slope to the dense woods and settle down
 in sheltering scrub, then, even if I climb clear of cold
 and the jaws of exhaustion, and sweet sleep overpowers me,
 my fear is to fall prey to the claws of wild beasts.'

Narrator

Yet this still seemed better, as he dwelt on his dilemma.
 So he went towards the woods and soon came upon a coppice
 by a clearing near the stream. There he scrambled beneath
 a double bush growing from a single root-stock,
 one of wild olive, the other cultivated olive.
 The strongest gusts of winter wet couldn't penetrate there,
 nor the brightest beam of sunlight filter in,
 nor could showers soak through, so closely interleaved
 they were together. Under here Odysseus hid.

With his hands he made a wide bed of dry leaves –
 they lay there in heaps, enough to cover two men, even three,
 through winter thunderstorms, however harsh the weather.
 Enduring Odysseus delighted to see this lair, and lay
 down in the middle, heaping leaves over himself.
 As a man on a remote farmstead with no neighbours near
 will bury a glowing log beneath a heap of black ash
 to conserve the seed of fire, and not have to fetch fresh flame
 from elsewhere, so Odysseus buried himself beneath the leaves.
 Then Athena poured sleep on his eyes to relieve him quickly
 from the toll of his toils. Sleep delicately closed his lids.