

Idyll 11
The Cyclops' Serenade

Nicias,* there is no remedy for love, no liniment,
As I believe, nor any balm, except the Muses.
Theirs is a gentle, painless drug, and in men's power
To use; but it is hard to find. You know this well,
I think; you are a doctor, and one whom the nine
Muses love above all. This at any rate was the way
My countryman* the Cyclops eased his pain,
Polyphemus long ago, when he loved Galatea,
When the down was fresh about his mouth and temples.
He loved, not with apples, roses, or curls of hair,* 10
But in an outright frenzy. For him, nothing else existed.
Often his flocks would come of their own accord
Back from green pastures to the fold, while he, alone
On the weed-strewn shore, would sing of Galatea from
Break of day, wasting away with love. Deep inside he bore
A cruel wound, which mighty Cypris' dart* had driven
Into his heart. But he found out the cure: he would sit
On some high rock, and gazing out to sea would sing:

'O my white Galatea, why do you spurn your lover?
Whiter to look at than cream cheese, softer than a lamb, 20
More playful than a calf, sleeker than the unripe grape.
Why do you only come just as sweet sleep claims me,
Why do you leave me just as sweet sleep lets me go,
Flying like a ewe at the sight of a grey wolf?
I fell in love with you, my sweet, when first you came
With my mother* to gather flowers of hyacinth
On the mountain, and I was your guide. From the day
I set eyes on you up to this moment, I've loved you
Without a break; but you care nothing, nothing at all.

I know, my beautiful girl, why you run from me: 30
 A shaggy brow spreads right across my face
 From ear to ear in one unbroken line. Below is a
 Single eye, and above my lip is set a broad flat nose.
 Such may be my looks, but I pasture a thousand beasts,
 And I drink the best of the milk I get from them.
 Cheese too I have in abundance, in summer and autumn,
 And even at winter's end; my racks are always laden.
 And I can pipe better than any Cyclops here,
 When I sing, my sweet pippin, deep in the night
 Of you and me. For you I'm rearing eleven fawns, 40
 All marked on their necks, and four bear cubs too.
 O please, come. You will see that life is just as good
 If you leave the grey-green sea behind to crash on the shore,
 And at night you will find more joy in this cave with me.
 Here there are bays, and here slender cypresses,
 Here is sombre ivy, and here the vine's sweet fruit;
 Here there is ice-cold water which dense-wooded Etna
 Sends from its white snows—a drink fit for the gods.
 Who could prefer waves and the sea to all this?
 But if you think I'm a touch too hairy for you, 50
 I have oak logs here, and under the ash unflagging fire.
 Burn away my life with fire—I could bear even that,
 And my single eye,* my one dearest possession of all.
 I wish my mother had given me gills when I was born,
 Then I could have dived down and kissed your hand,
 If you denied me your mouth, and brought you white
 Snowdrops or delicate poppies with their scarlet petals.
 One grows in summer and the other grows in winter,
 So you see I could not bring you both at once.
 It's not too late, my sweet, for me to learn to swim;* 60
 If only some mariner* would sail here in his ship,
 Then I could fathom why you nymphs love life in the deep.
 Come out, Galatea, come out and forget your home,
 Just as I sit here and forget to return to mine.
 Follow the shepherd's life with me—milking,
 And setting cheese with the rennet's pungent drops.
 It's my mother who does me wrong; it's her alone I blame.

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She's not once spoken a gentle word to you about me,
Although she sees me wasting away, day by day.
I'll see she knows how my head and feet throb with pain,
So that her torment will be equal to what I suffer.

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O Cyclops, Cyclops, where have your wits flown away?
Show some sense, go and weave some baskets, collect
Green shoots for your lambs. Milk the ewe
At hand;* why chase the one who runs away? Maybe
You'll find another Galatea, and a prettier one too.
I'm invited out for night-time play by lots of girls,
And they giggle together as soon as they see I've heard.
On land I too am clearly a man of some consequence.'

So by singing the Cyclops shepherded* his love,
And more relief it brought him than paying a large fee.*

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