

# 'Sacred Groves'

Myth Reading group

Thursday 15th April 2018

**Extract from *Aeneid* Book VI translated by Seamus Heaney (llns 171 – 203)**

He was praying like that and holding on to the altar  
When the Sibyl started to speak: 'Blood relation  
Of gods, Trojan, son of Anchises,  
It is easy to descend into Avernus.  
Death's dark door stands open day and night.  
But to retrace your steps and get back to upper air,  
That is the task, that is the undertaking.  
Only a few have prevailed, sons of gods  
Whom Jupiter favoured, or heroes exalted to glory  
By their own worth. At the centre it is all forest  
And a ring of dark waters, the river Cocytus, furls  
And flows round it. Still, if love so torments you,  
If your need to be ferried twice across the Styx  
And twice to explore that deep dark abyss  
Is so overwhelming, if you will and must go  
That far, understand what else you must do.  
Hid in the thick of a tree is a golden bough,  
Gold to the tip of its leaves and the base of its stem,  
Sacred (tradition declares) to the queen of that place.  
It is safe there, roofed in by forests, in the pathless  
Shadowy valleys. No one is ever allowed  
Down to earth's hidden places unless he has first  
Plucked this sprout of fledged gold from its tree  
And handed it over to fair Proserpina  
To whom it belongs, by decree, her own special gift.  
And when it is plucked, a second one grows every time  
In its place, golden again, emanating  
The same sheen and shimmer. Therefore look up  
And search deep, and as soon as you find it  
Take hold of it boldly and duly. If fate has called you,  
The bow will come away in your hand.  
Otherwise, no strength you muster will break it,  
Nor the hardest forged blade lop it off.

**Extract from *Omeros* – Derek Walcott**

(Chapter I Pgs: 3 – 5) *Omeros* by Derek Walcott, (London: Faber, 1990).

“This is how, one sunrise, we cut down them canoes.”  
Philoctete smiles for the tourists, who try taking  
his soul with their cameras. “Once wind bring the news

to the *laurier-cannelles*, their leaves start shaking  
the minute the axe of sunlight hit the cedars,  
because they could see the axes in our own eyes.

Wind lift the ferns. They sound like the sea that feed us  
fishermen all our life, and the ferns nodded ‘Yes,  
the trees have to die,’ So fists jam in our jacket,

cause the heights was cold and our breath making feathers  
like the mist, we pass the rum. When it came back, it  
give us the spirit to turn into murderers.

I lift up the axe and pray for strength in my hands  
to wound the first cedar. Dew was filling my eyes,  
but I fire one more white rum. Then we advance.”

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Although smoke forgets the earth from where it ascends  
and nettles guard the holes where the laurels were killed,  
an iguana hears the axes clouding each lens

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These were their pillars that fell, leaving a blue space  
For a single God where the old gods stood before  
The first god was a gommier. The generator

Began with a whine, and a shark, with a sidewise jaw,  
Sent the chips flying like mackerel over water  
Into trembling weeds. Now they cut off the saw,

still hot and shaking , to examine the wound it had made. They scraped off its gangrenous moss, then ripped the wound clear of the net of vines that still bound it

to this earth, and nodded. The generator whipped back to its work, and the chips flew much faster as the shark's teeth gnawed evenly. They covered their eyes

from the splintering nest. Now, over the pastures of bananas, the island lifted its horns. Sunrise trickled down its valleys, blood splashed on the cedars,

and the grove flooded with the light of sacrifice. A gommier was cracking. Its leaves an enormous tarpaulin with the ridgepole gone. The creaking sound

Made the fishermen leap back as the angling mast leant slowly towards the trough of ferns; then the ground shuddered under the feet in waves, then the waves passed.

## II

Achille looked up at the hole the laurel had left. He saw hole silently healing with the foam Of a cloud like a breaker. Then he saw the swift Crossing the cloud-surf, a small thing, far from its home, Confused by the waves of blue hills. A thorn vine gripped his heel. He tugged it free. Around him, other ships

were shaping from the saw. With his cutlass he made a swift sign of the cross, his thumb touching his lips while the height rang with axes. He swayed back the blade,

and hacked the limbs from the dead god, knot after knot, wrenching the severed veins from the trunk as he prayed: "Tree! You can be a canoe! Or else you cannot!"