Christopher Abram

*Evergreen Ash: Ecology and Catastrophe in Old Norse Myth and Literature*

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*Evergreen Ash* is an ecocritical reading of medieval Old Norse literature, arguing for the parallels between Ragnarök, the apocalypse of the Old Norse world, and the climatic disaster of the Anthropocene. By analysing the myths of pagan Iceland, Abram aims to discover how Icelanders imaginatively lived in a place so apparently inhospitable to human settlement. He opens his book by suggesting that we, living in our own age of crisis and our sense that the final days of human life on earth may be approaching, can learn something from the medieval imagining of the world: i.e., how Icelanders of the settlement period (ca. 840 to 965) thought about a nature which seemed to lurch from one crisis to another can help us to discover how we might better adapt to a state of permanent natural catastrophe. In the opening chapter, Abrams claims that Old Norse myth ‘may be a place to look for these “kinder and gentler ways” of thinking’ about the natural world. (The phase ‘kinder and gentler’ is from Shepard Krech’s article re-evaluating Lynn White’s thesis). The world as we know it is past saving, and Abram claims that new types of world-building are called for, and perhaps some of these ways might be found in, for example, how the Old Norse gods constructed the world out of the body of the fallen giant Ymir. That such ‘kinder and gentler ways’ existed at all in pre-Christian times, and, if they did, that Old Norse myth would be the place to look for them, is an assertion which one has to take on faith. The Æsir gods of these myths are more or less permanently engaged in a life and death struggle with the frost giants until their final confrontation, and these giants seem to represent natural forces in a fairly straightforward manner, just as Ymir’s body is the material for the creation of the human world. Thor’s hammer and Loki’s cunning are regularly being unleashed in these stories to beat the giants back and expel them from the human world, as Abram himself details in chapter six on the Æsir and the Anthropocene. Nevertheless, I was prepared to be convinced: in casting about for new ways of thinking about the world and our place in it, we should certainly not neglect any possible sources which could inspire us to live more peacefully on the planet, and, if these sources happen to be written in the complex and beautiful poetry of a dead language, so much the better.

On that note of promise, *Evergreen Ash* proceeds through chapters on the Old Norse creation of the world, exploring the relationship between trees and people in myth, the different Old Norse concepts for ‘world’ (*veröld*) and ‘earth’, (*jörd*) and ‘home’ (*heimr*), and the story of the discovery of Vinland as an earthly paradise. Abram’s main sources are the poems of the *Poetic Edda*, especially *Völsupa*, the poem which provides Óðinn the All-Father a vision of the coming demise of the world. He also includes the sagas, especially *Eirik the Red’s saga* (*Eiriks saga rauða*) and *The Saga of the Greenlanders* (*Grænlandinga saga*), which describe the Norse journey to Vinland/North America and their encounter with the indigenous people there. A major additional source is the *Gylfaginning* (‘Tricking of Gylfi’) section of the *Prose Edda*, in which a man named Gylfi disguises himself and queries the Æsir gods, also in disguise, about the nature of the world and the gods. Chapters two to seven nicely proceed from the creation of the world to its apocalyptic end, and satisfyingly take literary analysis of medieval literature in the new direction of considering ecology and views of nature.
These middle chapters of the book are well written and argued: Abram’s knowledge of the texts and the existing literature on them is thorough. Chapter four on the identification of humans with trees in the Old Norse corpus is convincing, and contributes to his overall thesis. Through an analysis of the poetry surrounding Yggdrasil, the tree which stretches from the world of the gods to the underworld, Abram argues that trees were not simply a resource in the Old Norse world, they were a species with feelings, and, in fact, ‘Norse poetic culture regarded people as a species of feeling tree.’ (p. 95). He moves then to an analysis of the skaldic poems of Egill Skallagrímsson, who represents himself and his family as trees, and laments in one poem both for the death of his own son and for the deforestation of Iceland. This understanding does indeed ring of ‘kinder, gentler’ worlds, but, as Abram notes in the close of this chapter, it did nothing to prevent medieval Icelanders from also considering the trees as a resource and devastating the island’s woodlands in the years after settlement.

The vision of this lost world from which we might find other ways of existing in nature is, as Abram admits in the final chapter, overly optimistic. He concludes that his faith, articulated in the introduction of the book, ‘in the fundamental Greenness of Norse mythology was largely misplaced’. This is a frustrating way to tell an interesting story: page 172 of a 179-page text is late to let us know that the claims of the introduction of the book are not going to be sustained. Furthermore, these claims were unnecessary in the first place: the project of an ecocritical analysis of medieval Norse myth is satisfying enough on its own terms, without burdening itself with the gestures towards crafting tools for the modern age. Even if it is a moment when scholars, no matter what their period of expertise, feel that they must address the Anthropocene somehow in their writing, *Evergreen Ash* could have simply focused on the medieval literature for its own sake, where the strongest points of its analysis are. What it also accomplishes is rather the opposite of the thesis Abrams originally wished to prove: it debunks one more time the myth of a pristine and harmonious pre-Industrial existence with nature. Icelanders were no more ecological by nature than the Indians were.

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*Reference*