English 340 Medieval Seminar:
Haunted Nature: Norse Sagas and Ecocriticism

A study of Norse myth and Icelandic saga, and modern reflections on them, in light of environmental philosophy.

*Empathy articulates ecology.*

A serious house on serious earth it is/ In whose blent air all our compulsions meet/ Are recognised, and robed as destinies./ And that much never can be obsolete/ A hunger in himself to be more serious/ And gravitating with it to this ground/ Which, he once heard, was proper to grow wise in/ If only that so many dead lie round.

—Philip Larkin

Phenomenology is the study of human experience and of the ways things present themselves to us in and through such experience….Phenomenology insists that identity and intelligibility are available in things, and that we ourselves are defined as the ones to whom such identities and intelligibilities are given....[involving] the explicit and sustained study of presence and absence.

—Robert Sokolowski

Course summary:

In this course we are examining *Beowulf* and primary Norse sagas, together with related medieval German and modern texts, in the light of current developments in neurophenomenology and the phenomenological movement of the last century, seeking to develop a new theoretical basis for environmental literary study. We will also consider how psychoanalytic theory can help us to translate premodern phenomenology into contemporary ecocritical re-readings. The seminar will address questions of how texts act as narrative-landscapes that mediate ontologically between physical ecology and human cognition, as well as current issues in the field of ecocriticism: How can literary study address the relation between human beings and the physical world in a way that is relevant to today’s environmental crises?

Readings

**Medieval texts (in translation)**

*Beowulf: A New Verse Translation*, trans. Seamus Heaney (W.W. Norton pbk)

*Snorri Sturluson, The Prose Edda: Norse Mythology* (Penguin pbk)

*Larrington, trans. The Poetic Edda* (Oxford World's Classics pbk)

*The Sagas of Icelanders* (Penguin pbk)
- ISBN 0-14-100003-1

*Erbyggja Saga*, trans. Palsson and Edwards (Penguin pbk)

*Njall's Saga*, trans. Robert Cook (Penguin pbk)

*Volsungsaga*, trans. Jesse Byock (Penguin pbk)

*Das Niebelungenlied*, trans. Burton Raffel (Yale U Press, hdbk)
Modern reflections on saga

Lonnrot and Bosley, Kalevala (Oxford World’s Classics pbk)
O.E. Rolvaag, Giants in the Earth (Harper Perennial pbk)
J.R.R. Tolkien, The Two Towers (Houghton Mifflin pbk)

Contemporary theory/philosophy

--Dermot Moran, Introduction to Phenomenology (Routledge pbk)
--Excerpt from Evan Thompson, Mind in Life (Oxford: Oxford U P, 2007)
--Excerpt from Julia Kristeva, “Dostoevsky, Suffering and Forgiveness” (handout)
--Excerpt from John Holmes, “Dustceawung”/Old English elegy
--Peretti, “Deleuze-Guattari, Jameson, and Schizophrenia” (handout)
--Handout packet of recent articles on issues in ecocriticism and ecofeminism.
--Handout on Kierkegaard and Dostoevsky

Writing assignments:

2-3 page responses (min. 650 words) to readings posted on the class Facebook group each week before the start of class, except for the two weeks when you are giving presentations. We’ll be meeting weekly for brief tutorials on weeks when you are doing a reading response, both to discuss the reading and also to talk about your final project. 20-25 page essay related to two formal presentations.
First third of semester: Formal presentation on an aspect of theoretical/philosophical readings related to selected topic; produce a 4-5 page prospectus for your final project, with additionally a critical bibliography.
Second third of semester: Produce a first draft of the final project for feedback, 15-20 pages.
Last third of semester: Formal presentation on your final project work. Final version of project due on exam date.


R 8/30 2. Introduction to Phenomenology/(Heidegger and Levinas, 192-247, 323-353; packet of ecocriticism articles; Peretti article


Presentations: Early Icelandic society, landscape and ecology of Iceland, Viking women, Vikings as settlers.


R 9/27 6. *Erbyeiga Saga*

First final project assignment due (prospectus and bibliography).

R 10/11 8. *Njalls Saga*.


Final presentations.  
Draft final project due.

Final presentations.

Final presentations.

Final presentations.

Exam Date: Final version of final project due.