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"Hunger and Lead": An Ecocritical Reading of Robert Schenkkan's *The Kentucky Cycle*

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There is value in any experience that reminds us of our distinctive national origins and evolution, i.e. that stimulates awareness of history. Such awareness is "nationalism" in its best sense.

Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac* (177)

Creating a true awareness of history, in the sense that Leopold mentions above, entails a far larger definition of history itself, one that would incorporate a history of environment together with human history. Although in his book Leopold was originally referring to experiences like boy-scouting, Robert Schenkkan's 1991 play *The Kentucky Cycle* also, albeit in quite an ironic manner, offers its audiences a similarly valuable historical awareness. This essay, in trying to prove the play's value as environmental literature, will analyze its place in the new, more human-centered trend appearing in ecocriticism through the help of Aldo Leopold's notion of the land ethic and through the newly emerging field of ecopsychology. Moreover, this paper will also try to establish that the play's status as a realistic Broadway piece gives it an additional advantage in the ecocritical discourse that other works of EcoTheater do not have since its purpose is to reach large audiences that are not already engaged with environmental issues.

Our first task, which is quite a difficult one, is to establish what exactly scholars or dramatists mean when they say "EcoTheater." Some prominent scholars, like Una Chaudhuri and Elinor Fuchs, have explored relationships between the stage and places beyond the stage but still ecologically oriented theater criticism is rarely found in prominent anthologies of ecocriticism. Lawrence Buell, in his 2005 book *The Future of Environmental Criticism*, draws attention to the fact that ecological drama criticism constitutes a significant gap in ecocritical studies. There are many regional performance groups that produce theater with environmental concerns and that have given their art names like Theater in the Wild, EcoTheater, EcoDrama, and Green Theater. In their productions, these groups mostly focus on regional or local environmental issues and try to

raise awareness through highly minimalistic, improvisational, and experimental performances. In their surveys of the activities of these groups, scholars like Lynn Jacobson and Downing Cless have noted that EcoTheater is a "theater of place"; localism is the key characteristic of ecological theater. Nevertheless, *The Kentucky Cycle*, not only with its regional productions in places like Los Angeles and Seattle, where theater communities are more open to environmental issues, but also with its Broadway productions and with its realistic and epic stance, shows us that theater does not have to be distinctively local or highly experimental to be valued as ecocritical. As Theresa J. May points out in her article "Frontiers: Environmental History, Ecocriticism and *The Kentucky Cycle*," the play is "the first mainstream American play to stage the complex interdependency between capitalism and the environmental crisis" (162). Most importantly, analyzing *The Kentucky Cycle* will remind us that theater in general and realistic theater in particular (both of which have been mostly neglected in green studies) can be viable means to propel the audiences to think ecologically.

Written after a visit by Schenkkan from southern California in 1981 to the Appalachian region of eastern Kentucky, the play is a cycle comprised of two parts and nine plays with a total running time of more than seven hours. What made Schenkkan interested in the region in the first place was the perplexing gulf he witnessed between the poor mine workers and the rich company owners. He described, in his "Author's Note" to the play, the social map of the region as "extremes of poverty and wealth existing very close to one another but without any acknowledged relationship, without any sense of community" (334).

Intrigued, Schenkkan did extensive research on the history of the region, a history which he discovered was fraught with violence and courage. In the play, Schenkkan uses one specific fictional family, the Rowens, as his way of representing the history of the region. In his note to the play, Schenkkan explains how the play kept writing itself and became a cycle rather than one play because the events he was creating constantly needed historical roots and gained significance from their relationship to the past actions of the people of the region. Thus, what Schenkkan sets out to write (a play about eastern Kentucky) turns out to be nothing less than a rewriting of the history of the region from a different perspective. This history, now, has an additional focus together with the human subject: the land. Schenkkan shows us that he is a Leopoldian nationalist; reevaluating the origins and evolution of a nation by incorporating the story of the land into the more general nationalist narrative of history.

Schenkkan's additional interest in the implication of the land in human history is obvious in the way he pays attention to the fact that the contradictions of the region were very visibly written on the land:

> What made this all so striking in eastern Kentucky was how closely the physical landscape of the area seemed to embody this social contradiction, this dichotomy of simultaneous abundance and need. It was, at one and the same time, some of the most beautiful mountain scenery in the country and some of the most devastated. There were lush mountain forests full of oak and pine, flowering dogwood and azalea; and then you'd turn the corner and the other side of the mountain would have been strip-mined completely away—all vegetation long since bulldozed off, the fertile topsoil buried under a slag heap of crushed rock and mine tailings so heavily sulfurous that heavy rainfall literally leached out a mild form of sulphuric acid. It looked like the moon. (334-35)

The play, as May also notes in her article, is nothing short of a revisionist environmental history and Schenkkan is essentially an environmental historian: "Environmental historians challenge the notion of history as a story of political, economic and military events; and instead posit a history told as the chronicle of the relatedness between humans and their ecological context" (May 161). However, this is not the only thing Schenkkan is offering to his audiences in *The Kentucky Cycle*. In addition to his land-based historiographic perspective, Schenkkan, in his intricate characterization and staging, also acts as an environmental psychologist and gives insights to human beings' attitudes toward the land.

Lawrence Buell, in his famous article "Representing the Environment," notes that in literature the nonhuman environment is usually used as "the setting": "deprecat[ing] what it denotes, implying that the physical environment serves for artistic purposes merely as backdrop, ancillary to the main event" (177). In *The Kentucky Cycle*, however, land is not important just because it is "the setting" of the play, but also because it is one of the play's major characters. This land is the life-shaping force of the people living on it; it gives them profit, it is the ground on which they have spilled one another's blood, it is the soil in which they have buried their enemies and kin, and it is a "thing" they have fought over and dreamed about, bought and sold and lost and regained.

Watching the play, the audiences witness generations after generations of the same family, from 1775 to 1975, struggle through life and difficult conditions in the region, without much of a feeling of responsibility toward their communities. The hero of the first play of the cycle, *Masters of Trade*, is

Michael Rowen, an over-ambitious and violent Irish immigrant who arrives in the mountains of Kentucky to make a place for himself in this new country called America, this land of opportunity. Michael has been killing people ever since he was seven, and, true to his past, he kills another immigrant, trades guns with Indians and gives them poxed blankets, kidnaps an Indian woman and rapes her to start his lineage in the New World, and kills his first-born daughter and buries her body in the mountains. Shocked by Michael's unabashed violence, a Native American asks him what kind of an animal he is, and Michael answers, "a necessary animal" (22).

Michael's actions, stated very briefly here, are actually premonitions of what is to come, as the descendants of Michael will stay true to the legacy of the Rowen name and commit unforgivable crimes against their fellow human beings and their environment. Over the next five hours the audience members will watch some of the most horrific crimes committed in the history of humanity. People kill their fathers, banish their mothers and sell their brothers into slavery. Bloody feuds take shape between families over the land in which families kill members of other families regardless of women and children. We see these people lose their land out of ignorance since they cannot decide on the actual value of the land they live on and sell it for very little amount of money. Later, as mining enters the region, we witness the degradation of these people and the land in the hands of big companies and unions.

In a sense, *The Kentucky Cycle* is much more than the history of one region: it is the history of a nation. As Schenkkan suggests, it is "a quintessentially American story" (335). The play is not just commenting on eastern Kentucky or Appalachia but on America; it is a chronicle of the crimes committed by a people all over the continent. This endless cycle of violence and loss actually questions and criticizes many different facets of American cultural and natural history. As David Mazel reminds us, the American wilderness has always been a big part of the National Symbolic: "Environmental discourse constitutes not only a specifically American *nature* but also a particular conception of an American *nation*, and ecocriticism can thus be aligned with the contemporary critique of the 'national narrative'" (xviii). In the play, the capitalist system that arrives with industrialization and urbanization brings about the banking system, the materialistic justice system, the speculators and sharecroppers, and the big companies, especially the mining companies which gain their main profit from exploiting their employees and the land. This history includes wars as well; wars to gain more territory, wars fought over economic institutions like slavery, and wars fought overseas to interfere in the businesses of other nations like

Korea. Moreover, the play also demonstrates how some of these people use and abuse the rhetoric of Christianity to further their cause in gaining more land and economic power. In fact, the scope of *The Kentucky Cycle* is too broad to be summarized here. In representing the tragic story of a nation, the play explores many American myths that have shaped the mindsets of capitalist society. Schenkkan reminds us that the play is ultimately about American myth-making: the Myth of the Frontier, the Myth of Abundance, and the Myth of Escape. The character Michael Rowen stands as a mouthpiece for these myths when he says:

> And now here, at last, I'm a man of property meself, on the kind of land ya only dream about. Dirt so rich I could eat it with a spoon. I've but to piss on the ground and somethin' grows. I've corn for whiskey and white oaks for barrels to put it in and a river to float it down and sell it. I've everythin' I've ever wanted: the land, and to be left alone on it. I'm richer than that snot-nosed boy ever dreamed he'd be. (35)

This illusion of unlimited abundance and riches and having the license to "go and grab it" has always been at the core of the identity of this new man called the American. Michael talks about this new American: "It's a grand land of opportunity, it is, with plenty of scratch to be made for those with an itch! All that, and enough room for a man to stretch out and lose himself entirely. Become somethin' new. Somethin' different. A new *man*. That's what we're makin' here in Kentucky, Mr. Tod. New men" (15). As this "new man" with his greedy, ambitious and capitalistic mindset has been the most powerful shaping force of the twentieth and the twenty-first centuries, the play also gains a universal significance for the spectators as a morality tale that questions the firm beliefs in abundance, individualism, and opportunity while showing the dangers of ignoring the need for a certain kind of morality and a feeling of responsibility. Theresa May also reminds us that this frontier ideology "gave 'Americans' permission to take from the land when ever, where ever and what ever their economic ambition required; to make 'nature' the 'servant' of mankind" (166).

Schenkkan's morality tale becomes highly relevant to the field of ecocriticism at this point. If we take the play as an environmental work, it shows us a new stance in environmental writing. What the play does is not to marginalize the human subject to the position of a mere observer and philosopher, like most nature-writing do, but to put the human subject center stage. It seems to show us that, to be able to think ecologically and biotically, first we will have to see

ourselves critically in a larger ecological context. I think, *The Kentucky Cycle* appears as a representative work of a new path in ecocriticism. It is one of those works that contribute to a different, and this time much more beneficial approach to anthropocentrism.

At the heart of this new approach to the human subject in environmental writing is the understanding that, as Kathleen Wallace and Karla Armbruster so aptly put it, "nature and culture are interwoven rather than separate sides of a dualistic construct" (4). Dominic Head probes deeper into this issue in his article "The (im)possibility of Ecocriticism" by coining a new model called "the utilitarian anthropocentrism." According to Head, seeing the evocations of the natural as divorced from the social world is a common tendency in green studies and is, ultimately, detrimental to its cause. Head's model of the ecological text, and ecocritical operation, different from the existing ecocritical practice, recentres the human subject. This new understanding of anthropocentrism is, according to Head, "not a free-floating conception of inherent value in nature" (29), but rather an examination of how human beings, throughout history, have evaluated and shaped the nature around them. Borrowing the ideas of Andrew Dobson on the two different types of anthropocentrism (a strong kind and a weak kind), Head favors the latter for the future of ecocriticism:

> Human self-realization is dependent upon an identification with the non-human world, not because of the benefits that can be gained, but because human activity of any kind has no meaning without such an identification. As Dobson puts it: "anthropocentrism in the weak sense is an unavoidable feature of the human condition." This rationale of value is a prerequisite of political activity. In contrast to the notion of inherent value in nature, weak anthropocentrism "reintroduces the human onto the agenda – a necessary condition for there to be such a thing as politics." (29)

Thus, if an environmental text such as *The Kentucky Cycle* wants to *change* the attitudes of the public and *move* them into action, it cannot do so by ignoring the role of the human subject in the degradation of nature. This new focus on the human subject in the ecocritical field gives us the opportunity to see how nature and culture (human beings) shape one another and how the two cannot be handled separately. Thus, the play fits into the widest definition of ecocriticism, as Garrard sees it: "the study of the relationship of the human and the non-human throughout human cultural history and entailing critical analysis of the term 'human' itself" (5).

As a morality tale, with the issues of ethics and responsibility at its core, the play ultimately reminds us of the hopes of Aldo Leopold. Leopold, when he wrote his famous "The Land Ethic," hoped to show people around the world a new way of considering what is right and what is wrong. He was among the many ecologist philosophers who tried to establish that environment and biotic communities, or as he collectively puts it, "the land," also have value outside the economic sense and deserve the respect human beings show one another. As he puts it, "A land ethic reflects the existence of an ecological conscience, and this in turn reflects a conviction of individual responsibility for the health of the land" (221). In *The Kentucky Cycle*, we see the land constantly being defined by its economic value, by its potential to benefit its owners. What's more, the land constantly loses its economic value in the market system. The judge who comes to claim the land of Rowen family in exchange of their debts puts it very eloquently: "Land is just dirt, Mr. Rowen. It's worth only what the market is willing to pay for it. No more, no less" (102).

In his representational and symbolic use of the stage, Schenkkan further emphasizes the view of land as dirt. The stage instruction to the play states that in the center of the oval stage is "a large, rectangular pit full of an earthlike substance" (ix). This small pit full of dirt both gives a universal symbolic meaning to "the land" and also denotes the human beings' attitudes towards it. It is a symbolic representation of Earth which these people regard as a handful of dirt. As the staging is the only element of the play in which Schenkkan moves away from conventional realism, the symbolic significance of the minimalist field of dirt becomes evident.

The debasement of the land, together with the exploitation of poor people reaches its peak when mining enters the region. One character paints the picture of a horrific future that becomes true in the subsequent plays of the cycle:

> First, they cut down *all* your trees. Then they cut into the land, deep—start huntin' those deep veins, digging'em out in their deep mines, dumpin' the crap they can't use in your streams, your wells, your fields, whatever! And when they're finished, after they've squeezed out every nickel, they just move on. Leaving your land colder and deader'n that moon up there. (202-03)

This shows the extreme objectification and exploitation of the land and of the biotic communities, a Leopoldian nightmare. Such behavior, John Mack tells us, is peculiarly Western; an attitude he calls "species arrogance":

> Actually we (by "we" I mean, by and large, citizens of Western and other industrialized nations) do have a *psychology*, or at least *a prevailing attitude*, conscious and unconscious, toward the Earth. We regard it as a thing, a big thing, an object to be owned, mined, fenced, guarded, stripped, built upon, dammed, plowed, burned, blasted, bulldozed and melted to serve the material needs and desires of the human species at the expense, if necessary, of all other species, which we feel at liberty to kill, paralyze, or domesticate for our own use. (282, emphases added)

What is more catastrophic from a Leopoldian sense is the fact that the people *The Kentucky Cycle* portrays do not even have any sense of responsibility or morality towards one another. Leopold's hope for humanity was to expand the sense of community among them to include the land. However, these characters show us that human beings are even incapable of treating one another responsibly within a frame of community. The violent exploitation and murder of the land is coupled with the violent exploitation and murder of people living on it. Thus, the play vividly evidences that the frame of ethics that Leopold was aiming to push forward is actually regressing towards a disastrous end.

This "species arrogance," this obsession with material things in people, this disrespect toward fellow living things around them cannot be seen just as a historical condition anymore. This condition has literally become a mindset, the psychology of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The violent images the play bombards us with makes us think that these people are not even *sane* anymore. The human condition portrayed in *The Kentucky Cycle* brings the play closer to another field of ecology that also puts the human agent center stage: ecopsychology. The premises of this relatively new branch of psychology give ecocritics a new starting point in handling the human subject in relation to nature. Ecopsychologists think that there is something wrong not only with the nature outside but also with the nature of human soul. Claiming that personal is planetary, these psychologists are trying to redefine sanity within an environmental context, suggesting that ignoring our relationship with the nature around us is, as Lester Brown puts it, "a form of self-destructive blindness" (xvi). Theirs is a plea for a growing appreciation of our dependence on nature, a plea for us to see that our health and well-being is inextricably bound to the health of the planet.

One of the leading ecopsychologists, Theodore Roszak claims that modern psychotherapy fails to reach beyond the family and the society in exploring the

idea of sanity. Roszak suggests that, at the most basic level, human beings are sympathetically bonded to the Earth that mothered them into existence:

> In fact, our wishful, willful imprint upon the natural environment may reveal our collective state of soul more tellingly than the dreams we wake from and shake off, knowing them to be unreal. For more consequential are the dreams that we take with us out into the world each day and maniacally set about making "real"—in steel and concrete, in flesh and blood, out of resources torn from the substance of the planet. Precisely because we have acquired the power to work our will upon the environment, the planet has become like that blank psychiatric screen on which the neurotic unconscious projects its fantasies. Toxic wastes, the depletion of resources, the annihilation of our fellow species; all these speak to us, if we would hear, of our deep self. (5)

In a similar vein, the natural environment in the play, as much as human beings change and shape it, also is a shaping force of individual and group psychology and identity. Through a subtle procession, the play shows us that the influence between the land and the people living on it is never one way: hurting the land eventually hurts the people. Theresa May, even though she thinks the play fails in totally deconstructing the frontier discourse, does note that it suggests a deep ecologist's notion of a bond between human beings and "nature." In the first plays of the cycle, while the environment was not still depleted to its core, certain characters were able to establish a more instinctual connection with the world around them. Patrick Rowen, son of Michael and a Native American woman named Morning Star, talks about hunting, but his notion of hunting is quite different from hunting for game or for economic profit:

> When I hunt, I don't "pretend" I'm a deer or nothin'. I just *am*. I'm out here in the woods and things just get real … still … or somethin' … It ain't magic or nothin'. It's just … When I reach that place, when I just am, there, with the forest, then it's like I can call the deer or somethin'. I call'em and they come. Like I was still waters and green pastures, 'stead of hunger and lead! (51)

This primal, primitive connection with nature that is being gradually lost is one of the main ecological standpoints of the play. As May suggests, "In *The*

Kentucky Cycle, a 'sense of place' *is* a sense of self. Landscape does not stop at the edge of our skins, but penetrates, reciprocates, resonates. The play posits that we are shot through with the terrain around us. What we call our 'identity' is a collaboration with the palpable world" (171). As the characters violently tear themselves apart from the nature surrounding them, they become alienated not just from the land but from one another, and eventually from themselves. Morning Star establishes this connection between the land and the psychology of its people very well in her warning to her son:

> *Star:* I never understand this. What you two have is never enough. You work from sunrise to sunset and you can't plow all what you have now, but you want more. More *land*! Why?
>
> *Patrick:* It's the only thing that lasts.
>
> *Star:* You live like that, Chuji, you live a lonely life. (60)

Living lonely lives is indeed what most characters in the cycle do; without any sense of community, people of *The Kentucky Cycle* waste their lives away in greed, alienation and depression. As the characters move further away from their association with the Earth, the cycle of this madness, of this irresponsibility perpetuates itself through generations. In the same vein, Schenkkan himself comments about "the disassociation" he sees in the people of his country:

> The poverty and the environmental abuse I witnessed there were not simply a failure of economics. It went much deeper than that; hence our continual failure to "social engineer" meaningful changes there. It was a poverty of spirit; a poverty of the soul. … [D]isassociation quite accurately describes the state of our lives *today*, not just in eastern Kentucky but *all* over the country. People feel "disassociated" from each other and from their environment. They feel out of touch and disconnected. They feel helpless. And that sense of helplessness breeds a terrible anger. (337-38)

This poverty of the spirit, hence, makes *The Kentucky Cycle* a suitable case study for ecopsychologists. After all, it was Roszak who said, "ecopsychology … commits itself to understanding people as actors on a planetary stage who shape and are shaped by the biospheric system" (15). Starting from such a theatrical analogy, Schenkkan presents us such actors on such a planetary stage and

redefines the very convention of psychological realism in theater; a realism that explores the psychologies of the characters from an ecological perspective and which reveals them not as victims of the conditions of their environment but as perpetrators of crimes against that environment.

Playwright G. Thomson Fraser has noted the need for theater to take up environmental concerns:

> Today, we humans have taken center stage in a worldwide drama to preserve the planet that only the gods of antiquity might find amusing. Theater is used to entertain and to inform, to draw us through dynamic conflicts and profound transformations. Theater has always held a mirror up to an audience and reflected back society and the individual as he/she struggles with self-inflicted or gratuitous obstacles. Theater is now challenged to take up environmental global concerns, to serve as a tool for our continued survival. (10)

The place of *The Kentucky Cycle* in environmental theater is a very important one. In addition to redefining the concept of psychological realism, the play also reminds us how useful big, realistic theater productions can be for the environmentalist movement. In their article "Performing the Wild: Rethinking Wilderness and Theater Spaces," Adam Sweeting and Thomas Crochuni establish an association between realistic theater spaces and protected wilderness zones that leads them to favor more improvisational and outside experiences as they regard realistic theater "artificial." Another reason of their criticism of realistic theater comes from the fact that it nourishes a kind of passivity in the audience and "makes theatrical audiences respond emotionally rather than intellectually to the spectacle of social problems" (329). Even though I highly agree with this Brechtian view of realistic theater, at this point I would like to suggest "emotional response" as a much-needed and viable tool to create environmental sentiment. It was, after all, Aldo Leopold who said, "It is inconceivable to me that an ethical relation to land can exist without love, respect, and admiration for land, and a high regard for its value" (223). If, as ecopsychologists claim, people are emotionally bonded to the Earth, then, emotional response, as much as intellectual response (if not more) should also be the goal of environmental theater.

Schenkkan offers us a realistic, universal representation of the human condition on Earth. A Leopoldian nightmare that is, unfortunately, not only

fictional but also extant in reality. He shows his audience that the land, the environment is not just "out there" but has a history; a history inseparably bonded with the history of people living on it. In this sense, *The Kentucky Cycle*, as a play that also reached Broadway and thus mass audiences, is a valuable story for all humanity, a moral lesson. Most theater pieces or groups that have been labeled as Ecotheater are community based events that seek to address the specific issues of those communities. Adhering to the notion that "ecology" comes from Greek "oikos" and "logos" and meaning the "logos of oikos" (the home), these theater experiences value what is local, regional and home-based. However, I would like to suggest here that there is another sense of "home" in all of us that is more universal, related to the Earth, our mother and *The Kentucky Cycle* speaks to such a sense of home. The critical value of the piece has been largely overlooked because people label it as a piece of mainstream realistic Broadway theater. What these people miss is that Schenkkan's play has a power beyond all other pieces labeled Ecotheater; it aims at giving a moral lesson to audiences who are least expecting to receive one. Scott Slovic, in his Foreword to *The Greening of Literary Scholarship*, quotes an e-mail he received from David Quammen in which Quammen talks about a similar issue in environmentalist discourse:

> Among the firmest of my professional convictions is that a writer who wants to influence how humans interact with landscape and nature should strive to reach as large an audience as possible and NOT preach to the converted. That means, for me, flavoring my work with entertainment-value, wrapping my convictions subversively within packages that might amuse and engage a large unconverted audience, and placing my work whenever possible in publications that reach the great unwashed. (viii)

Theresa May points out the fact that when the play actually reached Broadway it did not receive favorable criticism and concludes that since Broadway is not a "fertile soil" for ecodrama, this demonstrates the play's success as "a milestone of ecotheatre" (174). However, I believe that a play like *The Kentucky Cycle* is one of the stronger weapons that theater has in the struggle to reach "the great unwashed" and mainstream theater should not be discouraged by the negative criticism the play received on Broadway. Schenkkan's play shows us the significance of theater in the ongoing fight for the well-being of our community and many more such plays are needed to reach the mainstream theater audience

as well as the local communities. Theater has always been exploring the direct relationship between human agents and the land they live on. From *Oedipus, Rex* to *The Cherry Orchard*, from Lorca's Spain to Shepard's America, the land has always been a symbolic manifestation of the corrupt and stale mindsets of people living on it. What remains for playwrights and audiences is to recognize that this interrelationship is actually beyond symbolic.

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