

Thornton Wilder's Use of Time in

The Skin of Our Teeth

A Thesis

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Forward

Nine months ago when I was choosing a thesis topic, my acquaintance with Thornton Wilder was far from extensive. I had read The Bridge of San Luis Rey as a college freshman and had not raved; but Our Town, read in third year high, had been an impressive experience: a scenery-less play, moved along by a stage manager, and Emily's poignant words about family life in the third act: "We don't have time to look at one another." Yet, there was still an earlier Wilder influence, vague but strong, from seeing part of the television production of The Skin of Our Teeth in the sixth or seventh grade. I remember my parents' confused reaction to the play and my mother's telling me how Mary Martin, who played Sabina, came before the camera declaring that she could hardly wait until the show was over because it was the craziest play she had ever been in. Hardly good promotion, I thought; and the play had been on my mind, now and again, ever since as something I must look into. A bachelor's thesis, the perfect opportunity; the decision for Wilder was made precipitately.

With the intervening months of reading, research, and discussion I have concluded that I am one of Wilder's few prophets in the Midwest. My own enthusiasm for his works is great; but few others in my generation seem to know of him, much less recognize him as an important American writer. The following pages are my contribution to a Thornton Wilder Revival.

Outline

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Chapter I
Introduction to
Time in The Skin of Our Teeth

In preparation for the discussion of the use of time in Thornton Wilder's The Skin of Our Teeth, it is valuable to note two general characteristics of this author. Thornton Wilder is a universalist, and this is apparent in both his novels and plays. Secondly, he is in his plays a theatricalist. The beginnings of this theatricalism are seen in his early one-act plays, and it reaches its fullest form in Our Town and The Skin of Our Teeth.

Wilder the universalist, though he writes about specific, defined individuals, is never wholly and finally concerned with individual persons, groups, or situations.¹ He, rather, moves to man in general, the common situations, and asks the universal questions: What is life; how does man live; what does he do first?² His answers lie in what can be generally called religious humanism.³

Life for Thornton Wilder is a marvelous experience. He loves life, even the very daily components of life; and he loves his fellow humans. His praise of life is not Pollyannish either. He sees life for what it is: a curious blend of human greatness and weakness, hope and despair, love and insensitivity, convictions and mysteries.⁴ He views the whole history of mankind as a dynamic, but still rather constant, situation. Man today is much the same as he was in the beginning; he has the same virtues and weaknesses, the same questions and problems; and he will, no doubt, continue to

live as much the same person for ages to come.⁵

Wilder is no "cockeyed" optimist about the constant progress of man; yet, life is still pricelessly important because his love of sheer living has broadened and deepened into a religious faith in the destiny of man beyond death.⁶ Thus, Thornton Wilder through his writings strongly urges that all men be able to participate in life fully and freely. Man should remember that he is an animal and develop his passions, but Wilder is no gross sensualist. Man must develop his ethical conscience too.⁷ Then, finally, Wilder sees that each man's individual, daily life--no matter how trivial and insignificant it appears--has great significance because of its relationship to the All, the Everywhere, and the Always.^{8, 9} Wilder in no way belittles or denies the individual person. He, rather, exalts the individual because of his much greater reference beyond himself.

What matters ultimately for Wilder is that each man live as best he can, not only to himself, but with all other men. And man lives best when he loves. Love is man's destiny, and it is thus the basis of his life. Insensitivity to self, to others, and to life itself--failure to love--is for Wilder the greatest tragedy of life.¹⁰ It is a failure to realize life. Wilder's humanism, therefore, carries with it great moral responsibility too. He is realistic enough to know that evil cannot be eliminated; it is part of life; but men who are sensitive and intelligent have the great duty to confront evil with wisdom and courage and thus mitigate its power. They must show the way with understanding and sympathy to those who are brutal and insensitive.¹¹

Thornton Wilder's answer to what life is, and how it is to be lived, is love. The only other answer is nihilism, but Wilder has that great

gift of faith which lets him see so wisely that despite the fact that evil and suffering are always present, despite the fact that much of life remains a question, a mystery, despite the fact that good and evil themselves are often blurred in man's actions and in his own understanding, there is a priceless significance to men and their lives.¹²

Since a work of literature is first of all meant to please, a writer who begins with universal themes, heard so frequently by the majority of men that they are banal, has on his hands serious problems of dynamic presentation. Thornton Wilder began writing with this fact in mind. His very purpose was to bring fresh meaning to the terms of the spiritual life.¹³ He believed that the great ideas are in all men, and that literature was the key which opened these inner, often dormant, treasures and made them vital. He once said that "Literature is the orchestration of platitudes."¹⁴ Wilder was determined to be a decent orchestrator.

In Wilder's work as a playwright he has orchestrated his universal themes in a style of dramaturgy which has been termed "theatricalism"; for it frankly admits that what is seen and heard on the stage is a play and not real life, but, rather, the interpretation of life.¹⁵ Theatricalism is plainly anti-realistic. Wilder has said that all the arts depend on pretenses, but the drama most of all.¹⁶ It seems absurd to him, then, that some dramatists and directors have tried to pretend that what happens on stage is the representation of actual life. Such plays which try so hard to be real become for Wilder very unreal and unbelievable.¹⁷

Characteristics of this dramaturgy in Wilder's two main theatricalist plays, Our Town and The Skin of Our Teeth, are non-"realistic" action, the relative absence of scenery, and a direct relationship between audience and

actors. The actors achieve this by directing comments, questions, and explanations, which are all part of the play, to the members of the audience.

This use of theatricalism enables Wilder to show the individual and the specific, and, by refusing to show them in all their details, in a pseudo-reality, enables him to elevate them to the general and true reality.

Universalism and theatricalism combine beautifully in Wilder's use of time in The Skin of Our Teeth. This three-act comedy is a study of the time of man, his whole chaotic history from the beginning, until now, and looking into the future. It is the history of man's crises: man against nature, man against the moral order, and man against himself.¹⁸ Wilder works bravely, and theatrically, with the totality of time to express his universal theme of Mankind the Same: yesterday, today, and tomorrow. Four of the following chapters present the objective evidence of present, past, future, and stage time in the play. The final chapter is a discussion of the synthesis in this play of all these times in the fulfillment of the author's message.

Chapter II Present Time

The temporal setting of The Skin of Our Teeth is, at first glance, present time, that is, near-contemporary America. The three acts show the life of one American family, the Antrobuses: father (George), mother (Maggie), son (Henry), daughter (Gladys), and maid (Sabina). They live in the suburban community of Excelsior, New Jersey; and Mr. Antrobus works in an office across the Hudson River. The family has a comfortable seven-room home at 216 Cedar Street, near a public school, a Methodist church, a firehouse, and an A. and P. Mr. Antrobus is a veteran of foreign wars, and his wife is the president of the Excelsior Mother's Club.¹ Henry is in high school,² and Gladys in the primary grades. She has recently learned and recited in class "The Star" by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow.³ The play opens in the middle of August.

Sabina, early in the first act, mentions scraping through the depression just "a few years ago."⁴ In the second act at Atlantic City where the family is attending a convention and vacationing, Sabina wins a beauty contest [judged by Mr. Antrobus] as Miss Atlantic City 1942.⁵ Other indications of near present time as the setting of the play are numerous. A number of eastern-seaboard cities are mentioned: Boston, Brooklyn, Hartford, Murray Hill, University Heights, Staten Island, Plainfield, New Jersey.⁶ Telegrams, including singing ones, are in existence.⁷ Sabina gives her two-weeks' notice in true Union fashion.⁸ Mr. Antrobus has an interview with a reporter from the Atlantic City Herald⁹ and a radio broadcast in the

Convention City.¹⁰ That same city boasts a bingo parlor, a fortune teller, and typical conveners on the Boardwalk.¹¹ There are references to the movies, bridge parties with the neighbors, toothpaste,¹² and shoepolish.¹³ Finally, several standard American classics are sung: "I've Been Workin' on the Railroad,"¹⁴ "Jingle Bells," and "Tenting Tonight."¹⁵

Chapter III Past Time

A time identity with the present is easily established in this play. It is, however, confused and enigmatic from the beginning; for dialogue, action, and physical objects all hint broadly at important connections the Antrobuses have with time long past, as far back, in fact, as Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel.

"He[Mr. Antrobus] comes of very old stock and has made his way up from next to nothing.

"It is reported that he was once a gardener, but left that situation under circumstances that have been variously reported."¹

The above statements, of course, are references to Genesis 2:15.

"Henry, when he has a stone in his hand, has a perfect aim; he can hit anything from a bird to an older brother--Oh! I didn't mean to say that!--but it certainly was an unfortunate accident, and it was very hard getting the police out of the house."²

"Henry! HENRY. Put down that stone. You know what happened last time." Shriek. "HENRY! Put down that stone."³

"Why--why can't you remember to keep your hair down over your forehead? You must keep that scar covered up."⁴

"Mama, today at school two teachers forgot and called me by my old name. . . . Right out in class they called me Cain."⁵

Mrs. Antrobus, in answer to a question about a dead son of hers, wails:

"Abel, Abel, my son, my son, Abel, my son, Abel, Abel, my son."⁶

Further comment on Henry is found in two passages reminiscent of Genesis 4:12 and 4:15.

"He's not fit to live among respectable folks and that's a fact."⁷

"Mr. Antrobus, Henry has thrown a stone again and if he hasn't killed the boy that lives next door, I'm very much mistaken. He finished his supper and went out to play; and I heard such a fight, and then I saw it. I saw it with my own eyes. And it looked to me like stark murder." Mrs. Antrobus appears at the kitchen door, shielding Henry who follows her. When she steps aside, we see on Henry's forehead a large ochre and scarlet scar in the shape of a C.⁸

After realizing that the Antrobuses are also Adam, Eve, and family, a reader is more prepared for unusual personal references in this play. He ought to be; for, at the end of Act II at Atlantic City, a great storm blows up, in fact a deluge. Yes, Mr. Antrobus is also Noah. He herds his family into a boat off the pier at the end of the Boardwalk, along with a pair of all the animals who had been in that city, as guest delegates from the other orders, attending the six hundred thousandth annual convention of the Ancient and Honorable Order of Mammals, Subdivision Humans.^{9, 10}

Mrs. Antrobus, who is disturbed by the laxness creeping into the lives of her husband and children in the Convention City, says:

"Mark my words, a rainy day is coming. There's a rainy day ahead of us. I feel it in my bones."¹¹

"Oh . . . it's all one to me. I don't care what happens. I don't care if the biggest storm in the whole world comes. Let it come."¹²

A broadcast official says soon after: "A storm's coming up, a hurricane. A deluge!"¹³ The winds begin to blow wildly; and the Fortune Teller, whom the loose-living conveeners prophetically call Mrs. Jeremiah, commands Mr. Antrobus:

"Antrobus, there's not a minute to be lost. Don't you see the four disks on the weather signal? The four disks signify a deluge. Take your family into that boat at the end of the pier."¹⁴

"Take these animals into the boat with you. All of them,-- two of each kind."¹⁵

"There's no time to lose. Go. Push the animals along before you. Start a new world. Begin again."¹⁶

Finally, the prophetess says to the jeering conveyers:

"Go back and climb on your roofs. Put rags in the cracks under your doors.--Nothing will keep out the flood. You've had your chance. You've had your day. You've failed. You've lost."¹⁷

The Antrobuses are not only two ancient, individual families headed by Adam and Noah; they are also primitive man in general and all mankind since. Antrobus has as its basis the Latin word antrum which means cave. Mr. Antrobus is the discoverer of the alphabet and the multiplication table,¹⁸ and the inventor of the lever and wheel. He is credited, too, with the brewing of beer.¹⁹ Nor is Mrs. Antrobus a laggard. She invented the apron,²⁰ the hem, the gore, the gusset, and the novelty of the year as announced at Atlantic City, frying in oil.²¹ Mrs. Antrobus declares in her speech, as the president's wife, to the Mammal Convention that the tomato has finally been proven to be edible, that a delegate from across the sea has found that a cloth can be made from the thread woven by the silkworm, and that debate continues on the pros and cons of keeping windows open in a bedroom.²² Lily-Sabina is not only a flighty, timid, twentieth-century maid either. Mr. Antrobus "raped her home from her Sabine Hills" some time ago; and she has alternately been in and out of his favor, that is, either in his bedroom or in the kitchen.²³

The Antrobuses are at their most primitive in Act I during which they are beset by the crisis of the Ice Age. Sabina bemoans the anxiety of wondering every night whether Mr. Antrobus will get home safely and whether he will have any food with him.²⁴ Wood fires are used, and there is much fuss made over the importance of keeping them lighted. Sabina at one point has

to go next door to borrow some fire from the neighbors.²⁵ A wall of ice is reported to be moving down from the North.

"We can't get Boston by telegraph and they're burning pianos in Hartford.

" . . . It moves everything in front of it, churches and post offices and city halls."²⁶

The domestic pets in the Antrobus household are a dinosaur and a mammoth; but near the end of Act I, by which time the glacier has reached Excelsior, the Antrobuses take in refugees from the freezing weather: a judge named Moses, a blind man with a guitar called Homer, and three music teachers from town: Miss E. Muse, Miss T. Muse, and Miss M. Muse. The house is so filled with guests that Mrs. Antrobus demands that the pets must go. They are turned out into the freezing cold, an act which marks the extinction of prehistoric animal life.²⁷

Greatly discouraged by the Ice Age crisis and problems with Henry, Mr. Antrobus wants to give up trying and let the fires go out for good. His wife urges him on, though, with remembrances of past difficulties they had encountered.

"George, remember all the other times. When the volcanoes came right up in the front yard.

"And the time grasshoppers ate every single leaf and blade of grass, and all the grain and spinach you'd grown with your own hands. And the summer there were earthquakes every night."

.

"Then remember all the times you were pleased with him and when you were proud of yourself."²⁸

Mr. Antrobus' spirits are roused. He decides to go on trying. The act ends with hopeful signs that the family will survive the Ice Age.

By now it is clearly evident that past time is a significant part of The Skin of Our Teeth. What is especially fascinating about this past time

is its inextricable connection with the present time of the play. Past time is involved in the play not merely by flashbacks and remembrances of things past. The past actually happens right along with the present. The Ice Age comes to Excelsior, New Jersey in 1942 and crushes modern buildings in its path; the Deluge begins in a wicked Atlantic City, not in a degraded Mesopotamia; the wheel and the multiplication table are invented in an office building across the Hudson. Time in The Skin of Our Teeth, however, is not yet exhausted.

Chapter IV Future Time

In 1942 when The Skin of Our Teeth was first produced at the Plymouth Theatre in New York, the United States was embroiled in probably the worst human crisis of the century, World War II. Air raid alerts, rationing, worries about overseas' relatives were all part of the daily lives of a tense, wondering nation. Act III of this play opens with Sabina back at 216 Cedar Street calling and looking for Mrs. Antrobus and Gladys to tell them that the war is finally over after seven years, that Mr. Antrobus will get home in the afternoon, and that they ought to start putting things to rights again.¹ The war mentioned could be any war or all war; but for the 1942 audiences, wondering whether the World War would ever end and whether they would live through it, it was especially that war. For them the third act became a hopeful sign for the future, an affirmation that the war would end and that they would live to see it.

Act III is a look at future time in a second and more general way too. Acts I and II end in the middle of crises, the Ice Age and the Deluge, though there are signs that the Antrobuses will be saved. Act III looks beyond, into the future, and shows the family safe, though wearied by their nearly total disaster. It shows the Antrobuses, too, as they begin to pick themselves up, dust themselves off, and start all over again.

When Sabina has found Mrs. Antrobus, Gladys, and the latter's first baby, she tells Mrs. Antrobus what her husband had told her about his plans for peacetime; and she adds her own comments on the situation.

"Mr. Antrobus is still thinking up new things.--He told me to give you his love. He's got all sorts of ideas for peacetime, he says. And oh, yes! Where are his books? What? Well, pass them up. The first thing he wants to see are his books. He says if you've burnt those books, or if the rats have eaten them, he says it isn't worthwhile starting over again. Everybody's going to be beautiful, he says, and diligent, and very intelligent. . . . And he's got such plans for you, Mrs. Antrobus. You're going to study history and algebra--and so are Gladys and I--and philosophy. . . . To hear him talk, seems like he expects you to be a combination, Mrs. Antrobus, of a saint and a college professor and a dancehall hostess, if you know what I mean. . . . Yes, peace will be here before we know it. In a week or two we'll be asking the Perkinses in for a quiet evening of bridge. We'll turn on the radio and hear how to be big successes with a new toothpaste. We'll trot down to the movies and see how girls with wax faces live--all that will begin again."²

Mr. Antrobus is decidedly enthusiastic about the future; but before he arrives home, his son Henry does first. Sabina had already given instructions on Henry from Mr. Antrobus and told Mrs. Antrobus the awful truth about her son.

"Listen! Henry's never to put foot in this house again. He'll kill Henry on sight, if he sees him.
" . . . --I don't know how to say it, but the enemy is Henry; Henry is the enemy. Everybody knows that."³

Henry has his own ideas, however.

"I'll kill him so fast. I've spent seven years trying to find him; the others I killed were just substitutes."⁴

When his father finally does get home, Henry yells at him:

"You don't have to think I'm any relation of yours. I haven't got any father or mother, or brothers or sisters. And I don't want any. And what's more I haven't got anybody over me; and I never will have. I'm alone, and that's all I want to be: alone. So you can shoot me."⁵

Mr. Antrobus is shocked and disheartened by his son's presence and answers him:

"You're the last person I wanted to see. The sight of you dries up all my plans and hopes. I wish I were back at war

still, because it's easier to fight you than to live with you. War's a pleasure--do you hear me?--War's a pleasure compared to what faces us now: trying to build up a peacetime with you in the middle of it."⁶

The hard-nosed reality of the continuing presence of a troublesome child forces Antrobus to reappraise his situation. He tells his wife:

"Maggie! I've lost it. I've lost it."

.....
"The most important thing of all: The desire to begin again, to start building."

.....
"I've lost it. This minute I feel like all those people dancing around the bonfire--just relief. Just the desire to settle down; to slip into the old grooves and keep the neighbors from walking over my lawn. --Hm. But during the war,--in the middle of all that blood and dirt and hot and cold--every day and night, I'd have moments, Maggie, when I saw the things that we could do when it was over. When you're at war you think about a better life; when you're at peace you think about a more comfortable one. I've lost it. I feel sick and tired."⁷

Mrs. Antrobus, though, will not stand for giving up; and she encourages her husband in pleading tones.

"George, while Gladys and I were living here--like moles, like rats, and when we were at our wits' end to save the baby's life--the only thought we clung to was that you were going to bring something good out of this suffering. In the night, in the dark, we'd whisper about it, starving and sick.--Oh, George, you'll have to get it back again. Think! What else kept us alive all these years? Even now, it's not comfort we want. We can suffer whatever's necessary; only give us back that promise."⁸

Sabina enters to ask permission to go to the movies. There is no coin admission price, just anything one can give. Sabina says she picked up some beef cubes the day before, and she would use those. When Mrs. Antrobus reprimands her quietly for this, since by law they should have been turned into the relief center downtown, Sabina goes into an irrational tirade about dog-eat-dog being the only law and how she hates the wretched world.

Sabina's nervous tensions are quickly spent, however; and she tells her master sincerely:

"Mr. Antrobus, don't mind what I say. I'm just an ordinary girl, you know what I mean, I'm just an ordinary girl. But you're a bright man, you're a very bright man, and of course you invented the alphabet and the wheel, and my God, a lot of things . . . and if you've got any other plans, my God, don't let me upset them. Only every now and then I've got to go to the movies. I mean my nerves can't stand it. But if you have any ideas about improving the crazy old world, I'm really with you. I really am. Because it's . . . it's . . . Good night." She goes out. ANTROBUS starts laughing softly with exhilaration.⁹

Mrs. Antrobus and Sabina have reached the deepest feelings and convictions of Mr. Antrobus. He has already made the decision to go on leading his family, as evidenced by his renewed sense of laughter.

"Now I remember what three things always went together when I was able to see things most clearly: three things: The voice of the people in their confusion and their need. And the thought of you and the children and this house . . . and . . . Maggie! I didn't dare ask you: my books! They haven't been lost, have they?"

"No. There are some of them right here. Kind of tattered."

"Yes.--Remember, Maggie, we almost lost them once before? And when we finally did collect a few torn copies out of old cellars they ran in everyone's head like a fever. They as good as rebuilt the world." Pauses, book in hand, and looks up. "Oh, I've never forgotten for long at a time that living is struggle. I know that every good and excellent thing in the world stands moment by moment on the razor-edge of danger and must be fought for--whether it's a field, or a home, or a country. All I ask is the chance to build new worlds and God has always given us that. And has given us" opening the book "voices to guide us; and the memory of our mistakes to warn us. Maggie, you and I will remember in peacetime all the resolves that were so clear to us in the days of war. We've come a long ways. We've learned. We're learning. And the steps of our journey are marked for us here." He stands by the table turning the leaves of a book.¹⁰

There follow four readings from Spinoza, Plato, Aristotle, and, finally, this one from Genesis, after which there is a sudden blackout, and with it

the first ending to The Skin of Our Teeth.

"In the beginning God created the Heavens and the Earth;
and the Earth was waste and void; and the darkness was upon
the face of the deep. And the Lord said let there be light
and there was light."11

Chapter V Stage Time

Past, present, and future time blend so curiously in The Skin of Our Teeth that the normal clockwatcher must feel himself dangerously disoriented. More bewilderment is in store than this, though; for there is another kind of time in this play which works together with the previous three to attain the final dramatic effect. It is, what this writer has termed, stage time. Stage time has two elements, dramatic and real time, which comprise together the total duration of the play on stage. Dramatic time is that during which the expected plot of the play unfolds itself or continues its action: the Antrobuses decide what to do about the freezing weather and the approaching glacier; they prepare for the flood; the family begins to recover after the war. Admittedly, these would be strange plot and action lines for any play; yet, the audience readily understands that they are the previously determined developments for the play. The audience members are quite sure that this is what the playwright meant to take place on the platform.

Without warning, however, the most absurd proceedings can interrupt this dramatic time, proceedings which the audience believes, at least temporarily, are not part of the play. These events consist in the actors and actresses dropping their character parts in the play and acting, supposedly, as themselves, that is, as they are in real life.

The first of these interruptions of dramatic time by real time takes place early in the first act. Sabina must repeat a cue line because someone has apparently failed to come on stage. She gets a bit flustered but then

reopens the act, summarizing in a few of the script lines all she had already said. When she gets to the cue line again (at least the audience thinks it is a cue line) and no one appears, a voice offstage tells her to make up or invent something. Sabina begins ad-libbing miserably, then suddenly becomes indignant, walks downstage, and says to the audience:

"I can't invent any words for this play, and I'm glad I can't. I hate this play and every word in it.

"As for me, I don't understand a single word of it, anyway,--all about the troubles the human race has gone through, there's a subject for you.

"Besides, the author hasn't made up his silly mind as to whether we're all living back in caves or in New Jersey today, and that's the way it is all the way through."¹

This actress, whose "real" name in the script is Miss Somerset, continues her anti-Skin tirade for a number of lines until an offstage voice calls to her. She responds: "Oh! Anyway!--nothing matters! It'll all be the same in a hundred years."² She then repeats the cue line loudly. This time Mrs. Antrobus enters, and the dramatic time of the play continues.

Later in Act I Sabina looks out the front window and screams: "Mr. Antrobus, what's that??--that big white thing? Mr. Antrobus, it's ICE. It's ICE!!"³ Then follows this interruption by real time.

Suddenly she drops the play, and says in her own person as MISS SOMERSET, with surprise. "Oh, I see what this part of the play means now! This means refugees." She starts to cross to the proscenium. "Oh, I don't like it. I don't like it." She leans against the proscenium and bursts into tears.

ANTROBUS: "Miss Somerset!"

Voice of the STAGE MANAGER: "Miss Somerset!"

SABINA, energetically to the audience: "Ladies and gentlemen! Don't take this play serious. The world's not coming to an end. You know it's not. People exaggerate! Most people really have enough to eat and a roof over their heads. Nobody actually starves--you can always eat grass or something. That

ice-business--, why, it was a long, long time ago. Besides they were only savages. Savages don't love their families-- not like we do."

ANTROBUS and STAGE MANAGER: "Miss Somerset!!"

SABINA: "All right. I'll say the lines, but I won't think about the play." Enter Mrs. Antrobus.

SABINA, parting thrust at the audience: "And I advise you not to think about the play, either."⁴

Act II shows the Antrobuses in a moral crisis which climaxes in Miss Lily-Sabina-Fairweather's attempt to seduce Mr. Antrobus and drag him away from his wife. At one point in their dialogue Sabina suddenly breaks in with: "Just a moment. I have something I wish to say to the audience."⁵ Then follows this real-time scene (here in abbreviated form).

SABINA: "--Ladies and gentlemen. I'm not going to play this particular scene tonight. It's just a short scene and we're going to skip it. But I'll tell you what takes place and then we can continue the play from there on. Now in this scene--"

ANTROBUS, between his teeth: "But, Miss Somerset!"

SABINA: "I'm sorry. I'm sorry. But I have to skip it. In this scene, I talk to Mr. Antrobus, and at the end of it he decides to leave his wife, get a divorce at Reno and marry me. That's all."

MR. FITZPATRICK and ANTROBUS: "Why can't you play it . . . what's the matter with the scene?"

SABINA: "Well, if you must know, I have a personal guest in the audience tonight. Her life hasn't been exactly a happy one. I wouldn't have my friend hear some of these lines for the whole world. I don't suppose it occurred to the author that some other women might have gone through the experience of losing their husbands like this."

MR. FITZPATRICK: "Miss Somerset! Go to your dressing room. I'll read your lines."

SABINA: "Now everybody's nerves are on edge."

MR. ANTROBUS: "Skip the scene."

SABINA: "Thank you. I knew you'd understand. We'll do just what I said. So Mr. Antrobus is going to divorce his wife and marry me. Mr. Antrobus, you say: 'It won't be easy to lay all this before my wife.'"6

The two get back into their characters, and the show goes on.

The different members of the audience may believe a number of things about all this confusion by now. Some may be mumbling about that insane actress on the stage who keeps causing so much trouble and breaking the mood of the play. Others may believe that all these interruptions are perfectly real and be sympathizing with the actors and actresses involved. Still others, perhaps the majority, may realize that all this is part of the play and will be approving or belittling the playwright's theatrics. Some may still be confusedly wondering whether or not what is happening is real. They may continue to wonder, too; for Act III has more of these confusing, "real" episodes.

Just moments after Sabina opens the act, Mr. Fitzpatrick comes on stage followed by the whole cast and interrupts the action. (abbreviated).

MR. FITZPATRICK: "Miss Somerset! We have to stop a moment."

SABINA: "What's the matter?"

MR. FITZPATRICK: "There's an explanation we have to make to the audience.--Lights, please." To the actor who plays MR. ANTROBUS, "Will you explain the matter to the audience?"

ANTROBUS: "Ladies and gentlemen, an unfortunate accident has taken place back stage. Perhaps I should say another unfortunate accident."

SABINA: "I'm sorry. I'm sorry."

ANTROBUS: "The management feels, in fact, we all feel that you are due an apology. And now we have to ask your indulgence for the most serious mishap of all. Seven of our actors have . . . have taken ill. Apparently, it was something they ate."

ANTROBUS: "Whatever it was, they're in no condition to take part in this performance. Naturally, we haven't enough understudies to fill all those roles; but we do have a number of splendid volunteers who have kindly consented to help us out. These friends have watched our rehearsals, and they assure me that they know the lines and the business very well. . . . Now this scene takes place near the end of the act. And I'm sorry to say we'll need a short rehearsal, just a short run-through. And as some of it takes place in the auditorium, we'll have to keep the curtain up. Those of you who wish can go out in the lobby and smoke some more. The rest of you can listen to us, or . . . or just talk quietly among yourselves, as you choose. Thank you."⁷

There follows now a short rehearsal of the second last scene of the play, in which these "volunteers" walk across the stage on an elevated platform while reciting lines from the famous philosophers. Mr. Fitzpatrick directs the run-through while explaining the action of the scene to the audience. When he is satisfied with the preparation, he calls for the curtain to be closed and announces the third act of The Skin of Our Teeth.

One last significant interruption of dramatic time occurs in this last act when Henry and Mr. Antrobus are facing each other after both their returns from the war. Henry has a line concerning his determination to be free of everyone, no matter what. He starts toward his father in an attempt to kill him, but Sabina suddenly jumps between them and calls out:

SABINA: "Stop! Stop! Don't play this scene. You know what happened last night. Stop the play." The men fall back, panting. HENRY covers his face with his hands. "Last night you almost strangled him. You became a regular savage. Stop it."

HENRY: "It's true. I'm sorry. I don't know what comes over me. I have nothing against him personally. I respect him very much. . . . I . . . I admire him. But something comes over me. It's like I became fifteen years old again. I . . . I . . . listen: my father used to whip me and lock me up every Saturday night. I never had enough to eat. He never let me have enough money to buy decent clothes. I was ashamed to go downtown. I never could go to the dances. My father and my uncle put rules in the way of everything

I wanted to do. They tried to prevent my living at all.
--I'm sorry. I'm sorry."

ANTROBUS, in his own person, with self condemnation, but cold and proud: "Wait a minute. I have something to say, too. It's not wholly his fault that he wants to strangle me in this scene. It's my fault, too. He wouldn't feel that way unless there were something in me that reminded him of all that. He talks about emptiness. Well, there's an emptiness in me, too. Yes,--work, work, work,--that's all I do. I've ceased to live. No wonder he feels that anger coming over him."

MRS. ANTROBUS: "There! At least you've said it."

SABINA: "We're all just as wicked as we can be, and that's the God's truth."

MRS. ANTROBUS, nods a moment, then comes forward; quietly: "Come. Come and put your head under some cold water."

SABINA, in a whisper: "I'll go with him. I've known him a long while. You have to go on with the play. Come with me." HENRY starts out with SABINA, but turns at the exit and says to ANTROBUS:

HENRY: "Thanks. Thanks for what you said. I'll be all right tomorrow. I won't lose control in that place. I promise."⁸

Mr. and Mrs. Antrobus continue the scene and bring the act safely to a close.

Chapter VI A Synthesis of Time

The objective evidence of time in The Skin of Our Teeth has been presented. What it all means and achieves for the theme of the play is the remaining discussion.

Thornton Wilder in this play has told the whole history of mankind in summary form; and his thesis has been that mankind is basically the same through all the ages. It is probable that this history could be told, bearing this thesis in mind, in a scholarly tome which would study all known human civilizations past and present, graphing all apparent patterns of human conduct and achievement, and all the phenomena accompanying them. Such a work, however, would be voluminously boring and repetitive, as well as impersonal. Wilder, instead, has told the story and presented his thesis in a work of literature which freed him from the restraints of advancing time and allowed him, rather, to use eternity as his basis.¹ Perhaps, too, Wilder's "thesis" is actually one of those truths which lie dormant in all people, one of those platitudes which great literature orchestrates and makes fresh and meaningful.

Mr. Wilder has ignored chronology and mixed all time together indiscriminately in order to propose that there is no real advancing time (except perhaps in mathematics), and that, though there is individuality, the only true temporal reality is an eternal present. Wilder speaks of this in the introduction to his Three Plays and in an article from Time.

Every action which has ever taken place--every thought, every

emotion--has taken place only once, at one moment in time and place. "I love you," "I rejoice," "I suffer," have been said and felt many billions of times, and never twice the same. Every person who has ever lived has lived an unbroken succession of unique occasions. Yet the more one is aware of this individuality in experience (innumerable! innumerable!) the more one becomes attentive to what these disparate moments have in common, to repetitive patterns.²

"Every human being who has existed can be felt by us to be existing now. All time is present for a single time. Every American has this sense, for the American is the first planetary mind."³

Edmund Fuller has termed Wilder's concept of time as the "simultaneity of time."⁴ With this simultaneity as his basis, Wilder has been able to tell the whole history of man through one ever-present family, the Antrobuses. All of the family members become allegorical characters who together represent mankind throughout the ages: experiencing the same types of problems, crises, weaknesses, hopes, joys, and fulfillment.

The characters are all allegorical figures on three levels: as Americans, as biblical figures, and as universal human types. Antrobus--the middle-class American, Adam, and the "father pilot" of the human race--has the general weaknesses and virtues of humanity in general of all times. The basic fact about him is that he does not change much from year to year or from one period of history to another; and his problems are also much the same in every age. He is always on the brink of a disaster caused either by natural forces outside him or by inner conflicts, but he manages to survive by the "skin of his teeth." His wife is at once the American mother, Eve, and the eternal mother. While Antrobus is at his best rational and needs reasons for survival, she acts from instinct and guards her family "like a tigress." She is anti-intellectual and narrow . . . ; but in spite of humiliation by her philandering husband and the eternal wicked woman (Sabina) and of serious disaster she remains constant in her determination to save her family. . . .

The two Antrobus children, Gladys and Henry, represent, respectively, Antrobus' hope for human perfection and proof that his hope can never be fully realized. Henry, who bears the red ochre emblem of Cain and is constantly at odds with the rest of the family, including Sabina, is the allegorical figure of evil. . . . Lily Sabina . . . is also evil, but

in a less fixed and absolute sense; for her sins are generally household or venial sins. She is the faint-hearted maid on the American-family level of the play; but she also becomes, variously, the Semitic mythological figure of Lilith (the evil, wifely spirit), Miss Fairweather, to whom Antrobus turns when no disaster threatens and he doesn't need help and guidance; Sabina, the "robber of the Sabinerennen"--as told by Livy Lily . . . has all the weaknesses of her kind: lack of conviction; lack of courage before adversity; vanity; ignorance of everything above the level of appetite; prudishness; and self-righteousness.⁵

Though the characters are allegorical, they do not fail to be credible. They never become single allegorical types: perfect good or total evil. All of them have the virtues and weaknesses of the others in varying degrees, including Cain who, while symbolic of evil, still wants to belong to humanity and needs other people, though he tries to deny it.

SABINA: "There's that old whine again. All you people think you're not loved enough, nobody loves you. Well, you start being lovable and we'll love you."

HENRY, outraged: "I don't want anybody to love me."

SABINA: "Then stop talking about it all the time."

HENRY: "I never talk about it. The last thing I want is anybody to pay any attention to me."

SABINA: "I can hear it behind every word you say."

HENRY: "I want everybody to hate me."

SABINA: "Yes, you've decided that's second best, but it's still the same thing."⁶

Mr. Antrobus as the father pilot of humanity is the central character in the play and in the history of man. He is the leadership among mankind, though not always a constant leader himself. He is the symbol of a continually falling and rising world and is the ultimate referent, on the human level, for the needs and hopes of the rest of following mankind. Antrobus

realizes that all the needs are compelling and that the hopes are fragile. He speaks of everything good as balancing on the "razor edge of danger." Disaster has come time and again to all the hopes, but the final mood of the play and the playwright is one of realistic optimism. In the second-last scene of the play, Cain comes on stage and stands in brooding silence. He is present though unreconciled.⁷ Antrobus knows how many times he has failed on his own part and how often nature has opposed him; but he finally realizes again--at least perhaps for a short while--that what is most important is that he does begin again, that he does start again to build a new world with his mistakes in mind and following the advice of the great wise men of the ages.

But Antrobus is not the hopeless prey of endless cycles of disaster; he says: "We've come a long ways. We've learned. We're learning." He can do nothing about natural disasters, and evil (Cain) is so much a part of him that he knows he can't escape it; but he can and does keep evil under control; and, with courage and acceptance of moral responsibility, he can eliminate disasters which are of his own making. With faith in his better self--as defined in the great works of his cultural heritage--and in God, he will continue to survive and even to triumph although other creatures perish.⁸

No member of an audience seeing The Skin of Our Teeth could reach the end of the play without realizing that it was the story of man's history. It is plainly evident in all that has gone before. Wilder, however, goes a step further in meaning by his use of real time. Theatricalist that he is, Wilder demands that action on the stage be an interpretation of life, not life itself. In having the cast drop their parts as the Antrobuses and pick up new characters as actors and actresses, Mr. Wilder helps his audience realize that the Antrobus family action is unreal, is a play. He compels the audience's attention with these jolting switches between dramatic and

real time and then tells it that the Antrobus play does interpret real life. The "real-life" characters are much the same as their counterparts in the Antrobus play. Miss Somerset is complaining, panicky, flighty, and superficial, but good at heart as is Sabina. The actor playing Henry feels rejected and in his frustration wants to hurt others as does Henry-Cain. The actress playing Mrs. Antrobus shows motherly concern for the alienated young actor as she does for Henry-Cain as Mrs. Antrobus. The male lead says he has not ever really lived, has not fulfilled himself, just as Mr. Antrobus so often in his history has lived comfortably rather than significantly. Wilder could be saying: "See, the Antrobuses are not real people; but real people are interpreting life by playing the Antrobus family."

These movements from dramatic to real time also force the audience to participate in the play, not only to watch it. Wilder believes strongly that the theatre is addressed to the group mind and that it is for this reason a kind of festival in which the audience has an indispensable participation.⁹ In this play the audience often wonders about the action on stage, whether or not it is real. Whatever the case, it seems real; it is believable. The people in the audience are able to react to it with their minds and their emotions. Wilder has achieved an inner reality, not a pseudo-reality based entirely on external materiality.

The Skin of Our Teeth is full of time yet timeless; for in it all times become one: past, present, future, dramatic, and real times become man's eternal present. The final amazing scene of the play illustrates this perfectly. The lights go up suddenly; and Sabina, with her feather duster, is at the window of the Antrobus home as she was at the beginning of the play. She says the first few lines with which she began Act I.

"Oh, oh, oh. Six o'clock and the master not home yet. Pray God nothing serious has happened to him crossing the Hudson River. But I wouldn't be surprised. The whole world's at sixes and sevens, and why the house hasn't fallen down about our ears long ago is a miracle to me."¹⁰

Sabina then walks down to the footlights and says to the audience:

"This is where you came in. We have to go on for ages and ages yet.

"You go home.

"The end of the play isn't written yet.

"Mr. and Mrs. Antrobus! Their heads are full of plans and they're as confident as the day they began,--and they told me to tell you: good night."¹¹

Here they are again, the Antrobuses, back where they began; and here they are to be for ages and ages yet. Past and future are the present. Dramatic and real time blend perfectly here. It is both Sabina and Miss Somerset talking about the present and about the audience's part in it. She says: "We have to go on for ages and ages yet"; and this we can hardly refer to anyone less than herself and all the people in the audience. The members of the audience are strikingly told that they are themselves the Antrobuses. It is they who must "go on for ages and ages yet," they who must have their heads "full of plans" and be as "confident as the day they began." It is the members of the audience who, in the present time of their own lives, must help to write the end of the play.

Notes

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6. Fuller, op. cit., p. 217.
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5. Ibid., Act II, p. 98.
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26. Ibid., pp. 76-7.
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28. Ibid., p. 91.

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