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Thornton Wilder's "The Skin of Our Teeth"

An Everyman Play for the New Millennium

When writing *The Skin of Our Teeth* Thornton Wilder called it "the most ambitious project I have ever approached". But when it was first performed on Broadway in November 1942, shortly after the United States had entered the war, many audience members were confused and even offended when they saw Dinosaurs and Mammoths appearing on the stage along with Homer and Moses, and in the theatre large numbers of seats used to be empty after the interval (and taxi drivers quickly realized that there would be plenty of early fares to earn).

At first sight *The Skin of Our Teeth* appears strangely bewildering, indeed:

The curtain rises on the home of the Antrobus family in Excelsior, New Jersey, with their children Henry and Gladys, their maid Sabina and a Dinosaur and Mammoth living in the house. A telegraph boy arrives with striking messages, eg that Antrobus has invented the wheel and that a wall of ice is moving from the north. On his arrival Antrobus asks his wife to let some refugees share the house who he argues are the finest representatives of mankind. On hearing that Henry has thrown a stone again he becomes discouraged, but in the end his faith is restored, chairs are passed up the stage to build up the fire for the human race to survive. In Act II Mr and Mrs Antrobus chair the Convention of the Ancient and Honourable Order of Mammals, Subdivision Humans. Sabina in her new role as Lily Sabina Fairweather and Miss Atlantic City tries to seduce Antrobus. But with the deluge approaching he returns to the family, and on the advice of the Fortune Teller the Antrobuses board a boat together with Henry/Cain and the animal delegates to survive from another catastrophe and to "start a new world" (153).

In Act III we find Sabina and members of the family as survivors from a war among the ruins of their house. The action is interrupted by the stage manager for a rehearsal on stage and once more when the dispute between Antrobus and Henry threatens to become violent. Antrobus draws confidence again from hearing that his book: have survived and the women put the house back into shape. The play ends with the actors who represent the hours of the night quoting passages from Aristotle, Plato, Spinoza and the Bible, and with Sabina dusting as at the beginning of the play, repeating her opening lines and telling the audience "we have to go on and on for ages and ages yet" (178).

In his preface Wilder writes about the play: "It was written on the eve of our entrance into the war and under strong emotion and I think it mostly comes alive under conditions of crisis" (13). This statement is specially true for the stage history of *The Skin of Our Teeth* in post-war Germany when huge numbers of refugees crowded the streets and bombed-out and starving people came out of the cellars and tried to begin a new life among the ruins. The play was enthusiastically received by German audiences because people had just escaped from one of the worst catastrophes in history and could naturally identify with the characters' renewed optimism in the face of crisis. In 1957 Wilder was awarded the Friedenspreis des deutschen Buchhandels which was dedicated to the "großen Dichter und Dramatiker, der in wirrer Zeit den Glauben an die geistigen Kräfte und die Bindung an höhere Mächte aufrechterhalten half". Yet critical responses to the play have been divided between being strongly rejected as "a bookish fantasia about history" (Preface, 13) and highly praised

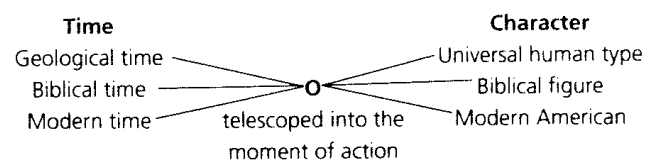
as “the best thoroughly theatricalist work of the American theatre” (Burbank 1962,111) and “ein Kompendium aller für die moderne Dramatik typischen formalen Elemente” (Schimpf 1964,30). Because of his optimistic and affirmative view of life which is deeply rooted in the Christian and humanist tradition Wilder holds a unique position in modern American drama and *The Skin of Our Teeth* has been the most typical, innovative and challenging example of his dramatic art, which because of its topical relevance in the face of recent “crises” such as September 11 or the tsunami catastrophe certainly qualifies as a play for the new millenium as well. In this paper I will highlight some aspects that are essential for understanding the play and might also serve as a framework for a discussion with advanced-level EFL students.

Wilder's conception of the theater and the opening of *The Skin of Our Teeth*

In his preface Wilder criticizes the conventional realistic theatre: audiences “fashioned a theatre which could not disturb them ... increasingly shut the play up into a museum showcase ... loaded the stage with specific objects ... (and) devitalized the theatre” (9ff.). This theatre he rejects as “childish attempts to be ‘real’ “. What he claims for the theatre is to remove the ‘fourth wall’ of the box-set stage, to establish a challenging dialogue between the audience and the stage and “to capture not verisimilitude, but reality” (11). This new view of reality is closely linked with his effort to find “new ways” to destroy the illusion of a unique moment in time and place and to present the universal idea behind the individual action on the stage.

In Wilder's own words “*The Skin of Our Teeth* begins by making fun of old-fashioned playwriting”(Preface,13). The traditional exposition is replaced by an announcer who in his role as ‘producer’ of the play introduces place, time and characters by presenting a series of slides showing the theatre in which the audience are watching the play and

a wedding ring inscribed “To Eva from Adam” was found, a glacier and the New Jersey suburban home of the typical American Antrobus family with their two children and their maid Lily Sabina. The announcer describes Antrobus as “the inventor of the wheel and the lever” – “once a gardener” and “a veteran of foreign wars”. In order “to raise the exhibited individual action into the realm of idea and type and universal”(Preface,11) Wilder deliberately dismisses the classical Aristotelian unities by simultaneously presenting different periods of time and by turning the characters into allegorical figures existing as modern Americans, biblical figures and universal human types:



Thus from the very beginning of the play Wilder tries to provoke the audience, to rouse their critical awareness and to confront them with situations which “are depicted against the vast dimensions of time and place”(Preface,13).

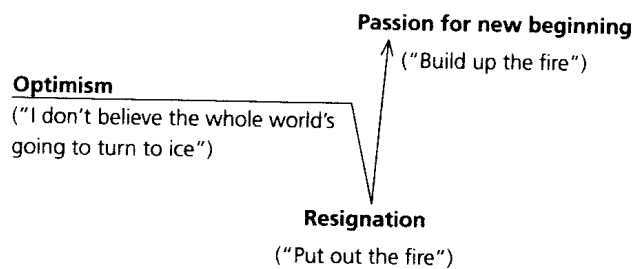
The leading characters and their conflicting attitudes

In her opening speech (101f.) Lily Sabina expresses her anxiety about the family's situation: “Every night ... this same anxiety ... In the midst of life we are in the midst of death”. Her words highlight a key idea of the play: the general insecurity of the human existence, which Wilder effectively demonstrates by letting parts of the scenery collapse and disappear in the lofts. Three times Sabina repeats the title of the play (“we came through the depression by the skin of our teeth”) as a leitmotif and as a cue-line until she indignantly addresses the audience out of character blaming the author that he “hasn't made up his silly mind as to whether we're all living back in caves

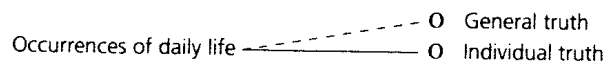
or in New Jersey today". As a multi-layered character Sabina acts simultaneously as the faint-hearted American maid, as one of the Sabine women whom Antrobus (!) once raped from the Sabine hills, and as Liliith, the evil spirit from Jewish folklore. In that she personifies all the stereotypical faults of her kind she is diametrically opposed to Mrs. Antrobus whose main concern is to keep the fire as a vital element of life going. When the Telegraph Boy delivers the messages from Antrobus (106ff.), the fundamental contrast between the two main characters is apparent: whereas Mrs Antrobus as guardian of the fire and the family personifies the principle of life, Antrobus by defending the values of culture and civilization (eg Shakespeare, the alphabet and the wheel) represents the principle of reason. Antrobus's wedding returns to Eva and the family scene with Henry/Cain and Gladys (110f.) show the existential ambivalence of harmony and crisis in the family. When Antrobus first enters in fur cap and blanket, carrying a stone wheel and a railroad man's lantern (113), he appears as a Keystone Comedy Cop roaring with energy and joy, until Sabina frantically points at the coming ice before she drops the play to reassure the audience: "Don't take this play serious. The world's not coming to an end"(117). Again Wilder's unique brand of "theatricalism" causes confusion. By his blending different periods of time and depicting the characters on several levels the audience are repeatedly confronted with anachronisms (eg dinosaur and mammoth living in the Ice Age and communicating with the family, Antrobus sending a telegram from his office in the city to Eva, the ice moving churches and post offices) and thus provoked to critically participate in the action.

The meaning and function of the refugees The contrasting attitudes of Antrobus and Mrs Antrobus are even more evident in their encounter with the refugees who ask them for shelter in their home. Although the refugees

appear as "elderly out-of-works from the streets of New York today" (119), Antrobus anachronistically introduces them as Judge Moses, Homer and three of the nine Muses. Whereas Mrs Antrobus initially strictly rejects them ("not another soul comes in here over my dead body", 118), for Antrobus the far more existential consideration is: "And if the ice melts? ... and if we pull through?" (118). For him the refugees represent the cultural and religious values which help man survive all kinds of catastrophes. Their endurance ("These people never give up", 119) is the basis of his existential optimism. But as soon as he hears of Henry's act of destruction he wants to give up ("Put out the fire", 123) and is discouraged by a feeling of guilt. Significantly it is Gladys' remark ("I was perfect", 125) that re-encourages his will to live ("Build up the fire", 125):



Antrobus's individual vacillation between hope, resignation and the desire for a new beginning reveals a more general pattern of human behaviour in the face of existential crises. Wilder's theatre aims at presenting the "common occurrences of daily life" and telling both truths: the individual truth of the particular event and the general truth it relates to:



The Flood and the survival of the family The second act is a variation on the play's general topic. This time the

announcer presents slides showing the convention of the "Ancient and Honorable Order of Mammals, Subdivision Humans" set in the turbulent American seaside resort of Atlantic City with drugstores, fortune tellers and bingo halls, with Mr George Antrobus of Excelsior, New Jersey as president and Mrs Antrobus, "that gracious and charming mammal" (129) making the surprising announcement that "this Spring Mr Antrobus and I will be celebrating our five thousandst wedding anniversary" (131). Here Wilder again ironically plays with time by blending and juxtaposing completely divergent periods of time and levels of action:

Prehistoric time: the convention of mammals
 Biblical time: the world of the Flood
 Modern time: a modern convention
 of American businessmen

The two main characters come out with distinctly contrasting watchwords for their fellow-mammals: Mr Antrobus: ENJOY YOURSELVES – Mrs Antrobus: SAVE THE FAMILY. This time the family has to cope with two critical situations, the natural catastrophe of the Flood and Sabina's attempt to seduce Antrobus. As Beauty Queen and hostess of the Boardwalk Bingo Parlour she wears a red bathing suit, and her family name suggests that she is a popular playmate in periods of fair weather, whereas in times of crisis she fails and finds herself eventually sent "back to the kitchen" (155), a direct reference to Mrs Antrobus's verdict in Act I: "you sank to the kitchen ... but I keep the home going" (105) and Sabina's revealing question in Act III: "Why is it that ... I always find myself back in the kitchen?"(168). Just before the beginning of the seduction scene Sabina suddenly refuses to play her role as hostess and in her own person as an actress begins to argue with the stage manager, because she is worried that the feelings of a personal friend in the audience might be offended by the scene on stage. Due to this unconventional

device of bridging the gap between audience and stage the audience can catch an unexpected glimpse of everyday problems and misfortunes and thus reflect on the "common occurrences of daily life".

At the moment of crisis, when Antrobus is about to leave the family and the hurricane signal has gone up, Mrs Antrobus reminds him of "the promise that made the marriage" (150), and points at Gladys' red stockings as a symbol of temptation and moral decline, which makes him feel guilty and return to the family to help them survive yet another existential crisis. As the scene turns into an apocalyptic setting with the deluge coming up Mrs Antrobus as guardian of the family misses Henry and refuses to embark the boat (the actors descend into the theatre aisle!) without him, although Henry/Cain, the personification of evil, again hit a man with a stone. Since he is a member of the family and an existential part of human nature he will survive, just as the biblical snakes are the last animals to be rescued into the "new world to make" (155) – the drama of human existence will continue and evil will be part of it.

The new situation after the war and the conflict between Antrobus and Henry

The opening scene of the third act shows the family having survived yet another catastrophe. Sabina, newly dressed as a Napoleonic camp follower, appears among the ruined walls of Antrobus's house announcing that the war is over and that Antrobus wants everybody "to settle down and be perfect" (156), when the stage manager interrupts the play to arrange a rehearsal of the final scene of the play with volunteer members of the company who take over the parts of several sick actors:

Setting	—	Action	—————	interrupted	Action continued
Ruins		Sabina after the war			Sabina starts again
Burning fire				Rehearsal	
				Stage manager with company	

By using the dramatic device of the rehearsal as an alienation effect Wilder once more appeals to the critical awareness of the spectators.

When the act reopens Gladys emerges from the cellar with a baby, a metaphor of survival and new life. Whereas Mrs Antrobus's first concern is for the family ("I'll have a good hot plate of soup for you", 161), Antrobus appears determined to think up new things and to resist new temptations ("No more laziness and idiocy", 163). Thus in spite of the new catastrophe the two characters have not essentially changed and try to begin again.

But there is Henry, appearing as a "blackened and sullen" figure on the stage, who rose to the top in war (165) and whose passion is killing and destruction: "Henry is the enemy" (165) – "The terror of the world" (169): He refuses all sympathy and affection: "I want everybody to hate me ... I don't belong to anybody" (166) and strictly rejects his father: "I haven't got any father or mother ... I haven't got anybody over me ... I'm alone" (169). For Antrobus, therefore, "to build-up a peace-time with you in the middle of it" (169) is a far more challenging task than the physical survival of war. They vitally disagree on the issue of freedom. To Henry freedom means "to do what he wants to do in his own right" (170), whereas Antrobus believes that the concept of freedom must be based on both responsibility and self-determination. Antrobus and Henry represent two fundamentally conflicting attitudes:

Henry	←→	Antrobus
Rigorous individualism	Idea of Freedom	Order and responsibility
Will to destroy and kill	Intention	Will to build up new worlds
Complete isolation, no home	Situation	Father of the family

When their dispute threatens to become violent, Sabina stops the play and both actors try to explain their behaviour with a feeling of emptiness. Antrobus recognizes that life must have a deeper sense than merely striving for physical

survival and material perfection: "Well, there's an emptiness in me, too. Yes – work, work, work – that's all I do" (172).

Voices to guide us The last part of the play opens with Mrs Antrobus's surprising remark: "George, do I see you limping?" (173), a reference to the biblical story of Jacob fighting with God (Genesis 32,25) which again depicts an everyday event (limping) "against the vast dimensions of time and place": as Jacob prevailed in his fight with his enemies and even with God, so Antrobus/Jacob will survive the war and start again. When Antrobus finds himself threatened by an existential crisis ("I've lost ... the desire to begin again, to start building ... I feel sick and tired" (173f.), it is the crying of the baby that signals a turning point. And both his wife reminding him again of "that promise" (174) which the family's optimism is based on, and Sabina's naïve optimism amidst the ruins of the post-war world ("I'd like to go to the bonfire ... they've opened the Gem Movie Theatre", 174) help him recover his confidence.

Eventually Antrobus recognizes "that every good and excellent thing in the world stands moment by moment on the razor-edge of danger and must be fought for" (176), and that it needs three things for man to survive in moments of crisis and find the strength and courage to start again:

- "the chance to build new worlds"
- "the memory of our mistakes to warn us"
- "voices to guide us".

These voices – Shakespeare, Moses, Homer, the Muses and the words of the philosophers – give meaning to man's existence in a world that is constantly threatened by disasters. At the end the voices of the philosophers (Spinoza, Plato, Aristotle) are allegorically presented as the hours of the night, i.e. the hours of contemplation that enable us to survey the cosmos, the twelfth hour representing words

from the bible. In Wilder's view God is the ultimate source of the cosmic as well as the human world which is reflected in the following address of a letter from *Our Town*: "Jane Crofut; The Crofut Farm; Grover's Corner; Sutton County; New Hampshire; United States of America; Continent of North America; Western Hemisphere; the Earth; the Solar System; the Universe; the Mind of God" (48). When Antrobus as a result of his nearly violent confrontation with Henry admits: "I've ceased to *live*" (in italics!), Wilder implicitly raises the question of the meaning and purpose of life. Whereas everyday life and reality is characterized by work, folly, laziness, ignorance and blindness, there is a higher level of recognition represented by the "voices to guide us", which are essential for man's survival and for his efforts to "realize life" (cf. *Our Town*, 89), i.e. "to find a value above all price in the smallest events of our daily life" (Preface, 12). And both levels of reality and recognition are part of a universal cosmic order:

	God	---	ETERNITY
Voices to guide us		-----	REALIZED REALITY
<u>Ignorance and blindness</u>		-----	SURFACE REALITY

The last "voice" is a quotation from Genesis ("And God said, Let there be light and there was light"), when ironically the lights in the theatre go out and the midnight bell strikes – yet another of Wilder's dramaturgical gimmicks – before Sabina starts again by repeating her opening line from Act I and finally reminds the audience that Antrobus and Mrs Antrobus are "as confident as the first day they began" (178), although Henry as "a representative of unreconciled evil" (169) remains their companion everywhere and at all times. The cyclic structure, symbolized by the wheel as a key metaphor, directly corresponds with the content and meaning of the play: time and again the Antrobus family are afflicted by recurring catastrophes, but also have a chance "to build new worlds" provided they listen to the

"voices to guide us" and are prepared to "learn". Wilder's eschatological view and his optimistic belief in the basically unchanging human nature have been strongly criticised as inadequate in the face of the rapidly changing social, economical and scientific conditions of the modern world. Wilder's personal answer, however, might have been: "I have known the worst that the world can do to me ... nevertheless I praise the world and all living" (The Woman of Andros). In Sabina's words, however, "the end of this play isn't written yet" (178) and therefore *The Skin of Our Teeth* and Wilder's message should remain a challenge for audiences and readers in the new millenium as well.

Anmerkung

Der Text basiert auf einem Beitrag des Autors zu Weiland, Hermann, ed., *Insight IV. Analyses of Modern British and American Drama*. Frankfurt/M. 1975.

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