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Lethbridge Undergraduate Research Journal
ISSN 1718-8482

Nothing Harder: Telling the Past in *The Skin of Our Teeth*

Joanna Friedman
Princeton University
Princeton NJ USA

Citation:

Joanna Friedman: Nothing Harder:Telling the Past in The Skin of Our Teeth .
Lethbridge Undergraduate Research Journal. 2007. Volume 2 Number 1.

Table of Contents

[Part I: Henry Antrobus](#)
[Part II: Gladys Antrobus](#)
[Part III: Prehistory](#)
[Part IV: The Metatheatrical](#)
[Part V: Conclusion](#)
[References](#)

Many who have seen or read Thornton Wilder's non-naturalistic and borderline surrealist tragi-comedy *The Skin of Our Teeth* (1942) have no doubt puzzled over what exactly the play means. It is a play that relishes in staging the seemingly absurd and impossible, leaving audience members to simply shrug their shoulders and go along for a ride that explores the adventures of an outwardly normal New Jersey suburban family. However, as soon becomes apparent, the world of the Antrobus family is anything but normal. The lives of Mr. and Mrs. Antrobus are, in fact, an allegory for Adam and Eve and the so-called modern day New Jersey is actually a chaotic world beset by ice ages, floods, wars, and other threats of biblical proportion. In an aside to the audience, Miss Somerset, the actress playing the family's maid Sabina, suggests that we "don't take this play serious" (I.152). And, after becoming exasperated by the plot's preposterous twists and turns, she resolves not to concern herself with the irrationality of the tale and she tells the audience: "I advise *you* not to think about the play, either" (I.153). Of course, the irony is that we *are* meant to think about *The Skin of Our Teeth*. With so many peculiar

moments one cannot help but ponder over the wacky course of events to make sense of what is happening.

In Act II, Wilder recreates a New Jersey shore boardwalk but, unsurprisingly, given that Wilder makes virtually everything in the play a metaphor for (or allusion to) something else, this is no ordinary boardwalk. The boardwalk's landscape is marked by a bingo hall and a fortune teller's booth to represent the role of chance and fate, respectively. While the bingo hall announcer remains mostly in the background as the act unfolds, the fortune teller becomes the central figure and driving force in Act II through her bizarre and occasionally ludicrously comical premonitions. She “barks” inane fortunes at passersby informing them of how they will die, e.g. “death by regret, –type Y” (II.180). The fortune teller's overarching presence is undeniably felt and, contrary to Miss Somerset, she actively encourages us to “think it over” (II.242). Indeed, her numerous lines provide a sort of running commentary and insight into the world at hand. But while she may arguably be a major focus of Act II, her enigmatic utterances are likely to leave audience members wondering what on earth she means by her visions. One of the most perplexing examples is an account on the nature of time – specifically with respect to our pasts and futures:

I tell the future ... Nothing easier.
 Everybody's future is in their face. Nothing
 easier. But who can tell your past,—eh?
 Nobody! Your youth, —where did it go? It
 slipped away while you weren't looking.
 While you were asleep. While you were
 drunk? Puh! You're like our friends, Mr. and
 Mrs. Antrobus; you lie awake nights trying to
 know your past. What did it mean? What was
 it trying to say to you? Think! Think! Split
 your heads. *I can't tell the past and neither
 can you.* If anyone tries to tell you the past,
 take my word for it, they're charlatans! ... But
 I can tell the future [emphasis added]. (II.179)

With potent and extended monologues such as these, Wilder clearly intends for the fortune teller to voice some of the principal thematic concerns of the play. But what does the fortune teller mean by these bizarre and esoteric utterances? The standard reading has often been that one cannot know the past because history becomes muddled by personal biases and forgetfulness through the years. In other words, individuals have an inability to see the past objectively as our memories become clouded. Yet, the fortune teller's remarks seem counterintuitive – if not outright contradictory – to our sensibilities. After all, this is the past we are talking about. Maybe we cannot know it perfectly, but we can still know about past occurrences in a way that would be impossible of the future, which she claims *is* predictable.

The answer to what the fortune teller's message signifies may be more obvious than we think. In fact, we might want to follow Miss Somerset's advice by not thinking too hard about what is before our eyes and thereby risk missing the obvious – in this case, the verb “tell”, which literally means to communicate, express, and make known. When the fortune teller says the “future is in our faces”, this is precisely the case given the “marks” that appear most notably on the Antrobus' children's faces. Their son Henry's “mark of Cain” notifies the world that Henry will become “the enemy” (III.228) and the rouge that their daughter Gladys wears is taken as a sure sign of a promiscuous and licentious future. Given such literal demonstrations of the fortune teller's words, I argue that when she says “no one can tell the past” – she likewise means it, *literally*.

This paper proposes a new reading of the fortune teller's attitude toward time, namely that the problem of coming to terms with the past hinges on the unspeakable nature of bygone events. Repeatedly throughout the play, we observe a pattern marked by an unwillingness to articulate what has come before. The *dramatis personae* operate under the mantra that the past must be muted and they frequently shun the prospect of verbalizing or even allowing for the expression of history. Indeed, the inarticulacy of the past is a ubiquitous theme present on multiple levels of the play. It affects the treatment of both children's lives and their reaction to the impending doomsday scenario but, it is a theme that also seeps into the alleged “real” world concerning the subplot of the actors playing the fictitious characters.

That history figures prominently in *The Skin of Our Teeth* is no surprise. Wilder makes it no secret that the play is concerned with the often cyclical nature of time insofar as history has a tendency to repeat itself. No doubt Mr. Antrobus, who insists that they can “burn everything except Shakespeare” (I.136) for purposes of keeping the family warm, would have appreciated Cassius' line about the now infamous actions of the conspirators: “How many ages hence / shall this our lofty scene be acted over / in states unborn and accents yet unknown!” (III.i.112-114). Similarly, in Wilder's play, epics from thousands of years in the past are thrust into a modern day setting and played on the stage. The argument on inarticulacy is also, at least in part, meant to shed light on this form of epic reenactment. The play is not simply a matter of x to y and back again to x. Rather, cyclical aspects of human existence can be understood partly as an expression of a *modus operandi* that perpetuates a system where people shield themselves from that which they do not wish to confront. This behavior is oftentimes an inescapable part of human nature – one that parallels the recurrent cataclysms, which, as the play proposes, are also an inescapable part of mankind's existence.

Part I: Henry Antrobus

Early in the play, we are made privy to the central and persistent hardships the characters face. Aside from the impending ice age and related threat to species extinction, the most significant problem the characters grapple with is

how to control Henry who, as we find out within the first few pages (despite efforts to keep this information under wraps), committed a heinous act against his brother. Our first clue comes from Sabina who notes that “every muscle goes tight every time [Mr. Antrobus] passes a policeman; but what I think is that there are certain charges that ought not to be made, and I think I may add, ought not to be allowed to be made” (I.125). Given the context involving the authorities, “charges” immediately registers as an accusation of wrongdoing. Thus, Sabina's prescription reads as a censure against making claims that call attention to illicit deeds. Broadly speaking, the sentiment she puts forth is that there are certain utterances with certain implications that should not be verbalized. And yet, she herself articulates the previous transgression. According to Sabina, a few lines later in the quasi-exposition of the play, “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” (I.125).

Regardless of whether or not Sabina actually intended to say what she did (the structure of her dialogue follows a pattern of ostensible flattery followed by an immediate “knifing” through low-blows), the situation with Henry is now lucid for the reader who immediately associates her remark to the earlier comment in reference to the police. Thus, the “charges” are those against Henry for killing his brother. As Sabina makes exceedingly clear through her reaction of panic/horror, a grave secret of the past has been unearthed – one that Sabina recognizes (or at least feigns to realize) she should not have told the audience. Interestingly enough, and this becomes a recurring pattern in the dialogue, the lines or em dashes (—) that appear in the text almost always occur when dealing with the past. Wilder continuously employs the rhetorical device known as aposiopesis, which literally means “becoming silent”, by incorporating dashes that are meant to represent concrete manifestations of a “blank space” where the past should be verbalized, but the characters have stopped short of recounting it.

Like many of the characters and events depicted in the play, Henry's unspeakable offense is an allusion to one of the earliest and most infamous crimes in the history of humankind: the murder of Abel. As Henry anxiously tells his mother one day: “Mama, today at school two teachers forgot and called me by my old name. They forgot, mama. You'd better write another letter to the principal, so that he'll tell them I've changed my name. Right out in class they called me: Cain.” (I.142) Mrs. Antrobus reacts in an understandable manner but one that is entirely emblematic of the philosophy under which the characters operate, i.e. the suppression of the past, at almost all costs. Upon hearing the mere mention of Henry's former name, Mrs. Antrobus “put[s] her hand on his mouth” albeit “too late” because the word has escaped and then she “hoarsely” instructs him “don't say it” (I.142). As is evident from Mrs. Antrobus' response and Wilder's stage directions, she simply cannot allow Henry to speak the past. That she physically covers his mouth, verbally commands him not to put it into

words, and the quality of her voice becomes hushed, presents a triple effect, as though Wilder wishes to drill the notion that the past cannot be expressed into our minds. Additionally, Henry's suggestion that she "write" to the principal indicates that he too has an awareness that they ought to mitigate the apparent necessity to broach the delicate topic. It would be too much for Mrs. Antrobus to meet face to face with the principal and verbally recount Henry's history.

The significance of this incident goes well beyond the realization that the past can be disturbing – that much is obvious to anyone who has confronted adversity at one time or another. The more significant message from this exchange is the ongoing problem of finding appropriate ways to cope with the past. The problem is that Henry's teachers exceeded the bounds of appropriate social conduct when they referred to him as Cain. Hence, when Henry says that "they forgot", this could have an additional level of meaning, which roughly translates to forgetting the proper method of dealing with sensitive situations, i.e. to refrain from calling attention to them. If this is the case, then the issue is not so much about "forgetting" per se, as the accuracy of the recollection is largely irrelevant. Instead, the issue is one of forgetting decorum and sustaining a façade. Put another way, independent of how "good" one's memory is, there is protocol that people should follow. Thus, when the fortune teller says "no one can tell your past", the statement is more akin to a social code by which to live. One that the characters, especially Mrs. Antrobus, are at pains not to see violated. This interpretation is not to undermine the various latent meanings of the fortune teller's narration; no one would argue that it can prove difficult to see the past for what it was. Rather, the literal notion of inarticulacy adds to such readings and complicates them by illustrating another means through which the past is obscured and presents a seemingly paradoxical model of forgetting how to "forget."

The issue of the inarticulacy of Henry's past is not only expressed through speech. To "tell" the past is, after all, to communicate it and there are various means of communication. A recurring motif is the image of Mrs. Antrobus trying to remove physically the mark of Cain that stains Henry's forehead. As the stage direction indicates, she "polish[es] feverishly" (l.142) to try and remove it and she implores Henry not to expose the blot:

Why—can't you remember to keep your hair
down over your forehead? You must keep
that scar covered up. Don't you know that
when your father sees it he loses all control
over himself? He goes crazy. He wants to
die. [*After a moment's despair she collects
herself decisively, wets the hem of her apron
in her mouth and starts polishing his
forehead vigorously.*] (141)

Mrs. Antrobus has little success in this endeavor, as she herself observes:

“blessed me, sometimes I think that it's going away—and then there it is: just as red as ever (I.142). It does not take a rocket scientist to realize that she is trying to literally erase a sign of the past. Indeed, the mark functions almost metonymically as a symbol for yore.

The trouble, of course, is that the mark, like the past, cannot always be brushed aside, try as individuals may to delete or obfuscate it. Still, it is human nature to attempt this frequently futile venture for a variety of reasons. The story of Cain and Abel appositely illustrates one such motivating force – the desire to avoid the consequences of past actions. Historically, the Church taught that Cain was to be banished from the land of his parents because of his crime. Thus, in terms of the play, so long as Mr. and Mrs. Antrobus refuse to recognize what transpired, they can persist in their delusion that they can evade the consequences. This is especially important to Mrs. Antrobus who is constantly afraid of losing her children. Mr. Antrobus' personality demonstrates another reason why man might be motivated not to tell the past. In his mind, a certain type of optimism prevails; he generally believes that mankind can improve the world and triumph. In what is clearly a blatant pun on the playwright's part, Mr. Antrobus asks his son, “Nothing rash today, I hope. Nothing rash?” (I.146). Meanwhile, his wife is constantly worried that the children's actions will crush their father while simultaneously being vexed by Mr. Antrobus' preoccupation with improving society.

Unfortunately for society, however, Henry, who later becomes general of the enemy army during the war, does do something quite “rash” that same day:

Sabina: Mr. Antrobus—that son of yours, that boy Henry Antrobus—I don't stay in this house another moment!—He's not fit to live among respectable folks and that's a fact.

Mrs. Antrobus: Don't say another word, Sabina. I'll be right back.

[Without waiting for an answer she goes past her into the kitchen.]

Sabina: 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 star 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.] (161)

In this traumatic moment we witness a medley of concerns related to the past. The standard and most obvious anxiety is that it shall be vocalized, hence why Mrs. Antrobus commands Sabina not to “say another word.” Sabina, who frequently does give voice to the past, articulates what has transpired. In a moment that parallels Miss Somerset's articulation at the end of the play of another misfortune (the food poisoning of the actors), she says that she “saw what happened with her own eyes.” To put the proverbial genie back into the bottle now that Sabina has exposed the past, Mrs. Antrobus shields Henry and hides his mark as if to keep all would-be watchers from the truth.

What happens at this stage in Act I serves as foreshadowing for a pivotal moment in Act II when Gladys lets her father know exactly what Henry has done in spite of the efforts of others to stifle her. Both Sabina and Mrs. Antrobus have their reasons for making sure she does not tell him what just occurred. The former wants Mr. Antrobus to forget about his family and elope with her, and the latter embodies a personal desire not to face the truth and a desire to keep the past from hurting her husband. Sabina urges Mr. Antrobus not to “give [such goings-on] a minute's thought” (II.206) but the term “goings-on” refers not only to Gladys' antics. “Goings-on” implies something happening in the present, and something that may continue to persist (or “go on”). The word evokes the more serious “goings-on” with regard to Henry. Everyone can plainly see an ongoing pattern of behavior by which it is painfully easy to surmise what the future holds. He has killed before and he shall kill again. As the mark suggests, the future is staring everyone in the face. Thus, it comes as no surprise and there are patent echoes of the earlier incidents when Gladys finally informs her father:

Before I go, I've got something to tell you, —
it's about Henry ... Anyway, I think you ought
to know that Henry hit a man with a stone.
He hit one of those colored men that push
the chairs and the man's very sick. Henry ran
away and hid and some policemen are
looking for him very hard. And I don't care a
bit if you don't want to have anything to do
with mama and me, because I'll never like
you again and I hope nobody every likes you
again, —so there! (II.205, 207)

Although childish in her tone, especially toward the end of her tirade, Gladys is correct in her assessment. At long last someone has explicitly told Mr. Antrobus what needed to be said about Henry, thereby shaking him out of his dream world where he was content to sweep the past under the carpet. At this

moment, Mr. Antrobus had just finished informing his wife that he was going to leave her and was fully prepared to ignore reality in all its forms, e.g. the past (5000 years of marriage with his wife), present (familial problems), and future (impending warnings of the flood). By illustrating the immediate past, Gladys in effect gives voice to an entire past that they have tried so hard to keep silent. And her threat and curse, childish though they may appear, show that she understands how powerful and hurtful the information is – that it will affect her father in a way that nothing else can. At the same time, however, the fact that her indictment is so strong because it “tells the past” substantiates why the characters would rather operate under the principle of not unleashing prior occurrences. Telling the past is incredibly damaging and the only weak response Sabina can muster is that “these things will be forgotten in a hundred years” (II.207). Not exactly a stellar effort to put the cat back into the bag.

Part II: Gladys Antrobus

Having examined the effects that Gladys precipitates at the end of Act II, let us now analyze the Antrobuses' daughter in her own right, as opposed to in relation to Henry's past. Like many modern-day television shows with storylines driven by the trials and tribulations that stem from dysfunctional family dynamics, *The Skin of Our Teeth* also draws energy largely from typical and timeless conflicts that parents encounter when raising children. The concern with Gladys – which hits particularly close to home in an age where the belief that young girls are growing up too fast by dressing in provocative outfits prevails – is that she is spiraling out of control and behaving in ways that suggest harlot tendencies. Naturally, her parents are determined to prevent her from going down this path. Upon seeing her daughter wearing makeup, Mrs. Antrobus yells, “Gladys Antrobus!! What's that red stuff you have on your face?” and slaps her (I.142). She tells Sabina to “take this girl out into the kitchen and wash her face with the scrubbing brush” (I.143).

Whereas Henry's predicament mostly serves to symbolize one component of the fortune teller's message, i.e. that “no one can tell your past”, Gladys' situation represents the counterpart – that anyone can tell the future – in fact, “nothing's easier” when the implications are staring one in the face, as in the case of the lipstick. Significantly, the concern with Gladys is not about her past, as she has not done anything immoral yet. But Mr. and Mrs. Antrobus are worried about her future because they foresee what can happen. No one ever explicitly states that “Gladys will become a loose woman and get pregnant” because it is entirely unnecessary. The implications of their actions, which are oftentimes louder than words, are clear.

The past/future dichotomy the fortune teller describes relates specifically to the question of how we grapple with events along a continuum. The action of, and indeed fixation on, scrubbing Gladys' face reveals an awareness of what the future entails. Obviously, if they did not have an understanding of the dangers that lie ahead for Gladys, the forethought or desire to wash her face

would not exist. The washing of her face encourages the obvious comparison to Henry's mark, which Mrs. Antrobus perpetually tries to hide. Thus, we are presented with two acts that are ostensibly analogous – washing red dyes from the faces of the two children. However, one action concerns covering up the past and the other preempting the future, and thus should be differentiated accordingly.

Wiping Henry's face is an act fundamentally concerned with drawing attention *away* by eliminating a record of the past. However, in Gladys' case, inherent to the act is drawing attention *to* what the future has in store and a desire to publicize her behavior. For instance, unlike with Henry's visible mark, Mrs. Antrobus decides that the preferable course of action is to let Mr. Antrobus see Gladys' red stockings. "With a sweep of the hand she removes the raincoat from Gladys' stockings" (II.205) and puts them in plain view. The sight of her stockings infuriates Mr. Antrobus who orders her to "go back to the hotel and take those horrible things off" (II.205).

The differing behaviors reveal attitudes that govern what is or is not appropriate behavior with respect to coping with past and future events. Before anything bad happens to Gladys, it is perfectly acceptable to draw attention to their anxieties. But when she becomes pregnant, the sharp change in comportment illustrates how once something enters into the category of "past", it can no longer be told. With respect to Henry, it is not that people have forgotten the event or are incognizant of the danger he poses. The issue is that they cannot talk about it. Similarly, when it is revealed in Act III that Gladys has a baby, Sabina asks, "Where on earth did you get it? Oh, I won't ask.—Lord, I've lived all these seven years around camp and I've forgotten how to behave—" (III.225).

Like the time the teachers erred by calling Henry "Cain", this moment reveals the guiding concern that people, in momentary lapses, will forget the proper way of handling the past and forfeit discretion. Sabina ostensibly slips by asking an inappropriate question that would force Gladys and/or Mrs. Antrobus to vocalize the fact that she got pregnant and slept with a man out of wedlock (which was their fear all along). Before Gladys gives birth to a child that is the product of her promiscuity, they have no problem acting in ways that draw attention to Gladys' suspect actions. It is worth noting that after she has the baby, they never make a fuss about this fact – there is not a single instance where they criticize Gladys or make a reference to how it happened. However, this is not indicative that her actions were not of considerable concern in the first place. In effect, part of the reason that Mr. Antrobus decides to stay with his wife is because he sees the red stockings, which he believes Sabina gave to Gladys, and this shakes him out of his fantasy world. Ultimately, the course that the children's lives take shows how time "keeps on slipping" and how once a fear moves into the column of "events that have occurred", the characters' behavior undergoes an almost formulaic transformation. The characters shift into another mode where they continuously struggle with the unavoidable

propensity for the past to resurface and the conflict this presents to their desire of keeping it concealed.

Part III: Prehistory

The most pressing problem in the play, which affects everyone indiscriminately, is humanity's endangerment on account of rapidly decreasing global temperatures and the "walls of ice" moving southward. People react with apprehension but it soon becomes evident that no one is quite sure how to deal with the threat. When Mrs. Antrobus asks the telegram boy what "people [are] saying about this cold weather?", he simply "makes a doubtful shrug with his shoulders" (I.134). From the play's onset, there is a desire to be explicitly told the status of the situation, but this wish is stymied by others' refusal to communicate. In the encounter with the messenger boy, Mrs. Antrobus does not ask for a remedy; she simply wants to know what people are "saying", a fairly undemanding request. However, the response to such straightforward inquiries is always reticence – perhaps because a refusal to talk about the cold is a way to ignore the gravity of the situation.

In a play about the cyclical nature of existence, one should not view the glacial epoch as something unique to the era in which the play is set. Mrs. Antrobus asks the dinosaur and mammoth if they "remember hearing anyone tell of any cold like this?" and the animals "shake their heads" in negation (I.140). Almost in disbelief, she prods further by asking if they have heard "from their grandmothers or anyone" (I.140) about similar episodes. Still, Mrs. Antrobus gets no response. Aside from the oddness of seeing humans interacting, let alone speaking, with extinct creatures, this is a curious moment because presumably if anyone in this world would know about glacial periods and extinctions, it would be the dinosaurs and mammoths. Certainly, the laws of time as we know them do not apply as the play compresses time to a staggering degree. We are told that the Antrobuses have been married for thousands of years, so why then, could a dinosaur roaming around not have been alive for millions? It is not beyond the realm of possibility, but even if the living creatures had no prior experience with the strange climactic changes, certainly their ancestors did. We have no reason to assume geologic time did not occur in the fictional world the way we know that it did in our own. If anything, for a play that stresses the redundancy of historical events (and, more broadly, time), it seems natural that there must have been mass extinctions in the Cretaceous, Permian, etc. and that knowledge of these events would have been passed down through the ages by creatures that survived. And yet, when specifically asked to draw on their knowledge of past of ice ages, which occur with a 40,000 to 100,000 year frequency (probably not very many generations have elapsed for the animals), the mammoth and dinosaur are silent – the geologic past cannot be put to words (Siegert et al.). At best, the animals can talk about the present through their succinct response of "it's cold" (I.149). The humans are not much better. Mrs. Antrobus asks her husband "what the cold weather means" and "shouldn't we do something about it?", but with each

question he emphatically yells “not before the children!!!” (l.147). Once again, the choice of action is to keep everything hush-hush. Mrs. Antrobus endeavors to hide the true nature of the children from their father, just as the father attempts to conceal “nature” from the kids. Moreover, according to Mr. Antrobus, “the best thing about the animals” – those creatures that might stand a chance of narrating the past – “is that they don't talk much.” The instant one of them does mention the cold, he reacts by saying, “eh, eh, eh! Watch that!—” (l.149).

A poignant moment comes when Mr. Antrobus, who is virtually choked up, cries to his wife, “what you and I have seen—!!!” and then “he puts fingers on his throat and imitates diphtheria” (l.154). Obviously, he cannot bring himself to express in words the illnesses that plagued their past – the best he can accomplish is a sort of pantomime of the disease. Additionally, the fingers over his throat may metaphorically represent the closing of the larynx, thereby preventing speech and serving as a metonymy for the unspeakableness of the past. Further corroboration is that once again we encounter the em dash at the crucial moment when the past should be articulated. Though we may not understand her at the time, Sabina sums up the quandary when she says at the beginning, “we've rattled along, hot and cold, for some time now – and my advice to you is not to inquire into why or whither” (l.126). The audience soon discerns that “hot and cold” have particular significance given the climate and that characters like Mrs. Antrobus do try to inquire why, but to no avail.

In *The Skin of Our Teeth*, Act I, Wilder includes two quotations, one written in the Greek alphabet by Homer and another from Moses in Hebraic script (l.157, 158). The speech by Moses comes from the famous opening verses of the Book of Genesis that recount how God created the heaven and earth. The speech by Homer in Greek is the first three lines of *The Iliad* and goes something like this: “Sing, goddess, the wrath of Achilles Peleus' son, the ruinous wrath that brought on the Achaians woes innumerable, and hurled down into Hades many strong souls of heroes” (*Iliad* Book I). These two “speeches” are ostensibly spoken by the characters of Moses and Homer who are sitting in the Antrobus' living room. The hitch, however, is that the speeches end up being “non-speeches” because the words are reduced to, what are for most people reading the play, strange characters on the page with no discernable sound or meaning. The block passages appear more like an artistic gesture or an oddity. Readers no doubt must skip over the speeches unless they can read ancient Greek or Hebrew. In fact, many productions omit the speeches altogether (Konkle). The only way to know what they mean is to translate them, and the act of translation is a form of verbalizing. Curiously enough, these two speeches are about the past. Moses' “speech” consists of the most famous words ever uttered about the past and Homer's comes from what is arguably the most famous classical historical narrative. It is particularly interesting that Wilder chooses a section from *The Iliad* that speaks of “woes innumerable” as if to emphasize the inability to recount or articulate prior tribulations.

I propose that there is a missed irony of the foreign language texts, which can be understood in relation to something Miss Somerset says at the beginning of the play. The actress, fed up with her part, complains about the dialogue and asks “why can't we have plays like we used to have ... good entertainment with a message you can take home with you? (I.127). The passages, then, are like an inside joke because if an individual has a copy of the play, he actually possesses literal messages that he can take home and decipher. But to find out what these references about the past say, one must first translate symbols/characters into a reality that can be expressed and understood. Similarly, the play often presents situations where the characters are forced to interpret the marks that appear on others, e.g. lipstick on Mr. Antrobus' face, makeup on Gladys, and the mark of Cain on Henry. Finally, deciphering the fortune teller's enigmatic remarks is itself an act of translation – one that brings the decoder full circle (or back to square one) as her cryptic remarks are about the past, both that it cannot be told and that history inevitably repeats itself. With respect to the former, translating the passages yields the amusing discovery of Wilder's prank: the reader has now told the past, e.g. “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth...” (Gen. 1:1). As for the latter, the fortune teller pointedly reminds the reader that “you know as well as I what's coming. Rain. Rain. Rain in floods ... Again there'll be the narrow escape” (II.180). When dealing with such a well defined cyclical pattern, it is no wonder that the fortune teller believes the future is foreseeable and that anyone can see it as visibly as she can, if they try.

Part IV: The Metatheatrical

Finally, I want to turn to one of the well-known peculiarities about *The Skin of Our Teeth* – Wilder's depiction of the play within a play and the movement of the plot as it shifts back and forth between the “fictional” world being dramatized by the actors and the lives of the actors themselves. There are three significant moments within the meta-theatrical plot that highlight the unspeakable nature of the past. The first is when the actress playing Sabina breaks character and absolutely refuses to deliver her lines. The stage manager asks “and why can't you play it?” and her response is “because there are some lines in that scene that would hurt some people's feelings and I don't think the theatre is a place where people's feelings ought to be hurt” (II.196). To put it more concisely, some things are better left unsaid. Much like Mrs. Antrobus who is nervous that the kids will do something to distress their father, Miss Somerset's remark conveys the idea that we should observe proper decorum by keeping a lid on that which might cause offense. She further defends her position by maintaining that: “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” (II.197). The problem, thus, is one of reliving experience and replaying the past. These purported unscripted lines combine the central focus of the play, i.e. recurring epics, with the unspeakableness of the past. Miss Somerset believes that if she verbally expresses the lines, her friend will relive

painful experiences. Moreover, her concern can apply to virtually any woman. Mrs. Antrobus herself has struggled for thousands of years with this very problem.

Another example that suggests the inarticulacy of the past in the “real world”, occurs in the following scene when the stage manager is forced to explain a mishap to the audience:

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 been taken ill. Apparently, it was something they ate. I'm not exactly clear what happened.

[All the actors start to talk at once. Antrobus raises his hand.]

Now, now—not all at once. Fitz, do you know what it was?

Mr. Fitzpatrick: Why, it's perfectly clear. These seven actors had dinner together, and they ate something that disagreed with them.

Sabina: Disagreed with them!!! They have ptomaine poisoning. They're in Bellevue Hospital this very minute in agony. They're having their stomachs pumped out this very minute, in perfect agony.

Antrobus: Fortunately, we've just heard they'll all recover.

Sabina: It'll be a miracle if they do, a downright miracle. It was the lemon meringue pie.

Actors: It was the fish...it was the canned tomatoes...it was the fish. (III.217)

In these lines, some characters claim that the past is clear while others maintain the opposite. Sabina's account strikingly conflicts with the explanation being given. If her account is legitimate, then it implicates the others as being unwilling to tell the audience what *really* happened because it would disturb them too much. Miss Somerset insists that her account is true because she

saw the mold on the crust, and thus she has empirical evidence, much like when Sabina insisted that she saw Henry strike the other boy with her own eyes. Because there are numerous examples in the play when seeing forces individuals to confront reality, it would appear that Sabina's account might be our best bet in terms of which version to believe.

Close to the end of the play, the actor who plays Henry has a breakdown on stage, followed by an epiphany where he finally admits the past and faces his demons. He talks about how his father used to abuse him and did not give him sufficient alimts. He claims that his uncle and father “tried to prevent my living at all” (III.238). It is in these closing moments of the play, where the woman playing Mrs. Antrobus (clearly the character most concerned with suppressing the past) urges her fictional son to “go on” and “finish what you were saying. Say it all” (III.238). At long last, there is a possibility for individuals to realize that coming to terms with the past can be cathartic.

However, the resolution does not tie up all loose ends. As soon, as “Henry” disentralls those aspects of the past that have shackled his mind, Miss Somerset rebukes him by claiming “that’s not true. I knew your father and your uncle and your mother. You imagined all that. Why, they did everything they could for you. How can you say things like that? They didn’t lock you up” (III.238). The most obvious message one could take away from their exchange is that the past cannot be viewed objectively – an undeniably important component of the fortune teller’s words. But Miss Somerset’s disbelief and outrage at the fact that he can “say things like that” suggests something else. She clearly questions the appropriateness for him to say something so derogatory on several levels. His words could be total prevarication, or it could be that it simply is not proper to make such damning accusations (of course, the two are not mutually exclusive). Like the beginning of the play, the belief that “some charges ought not to be made” is hard to escape. It could be that by saying “they didn’t lock you up” and countering his claim, Miss Somerset is intent on trying to lock up the released past by placing it back in a figurative safe. Regardless of her motivation, Miss Somerset’s desire is ultimately tantamount to wishing that the actor had not vocalized his interpretation of the past.

Part V: Conclusion

Though not usually described as a “problem play” in terms of its formal structure, the resolution of *The Skin of Our Teeth*, like the conclusion in many problem plays, can neither be classified as a tragedy or as a happy ending. By the last act, it becomes apparent that although characters operate under a doctrine that precludes discussing prior events, the standard of inarticulacy is applied differently in their lives. For instance, Mrs. Antrobus is willing to broach the topic of the geologic past, but others are not. Sabina and Gladys are, to some degree, willing to talk about Henry, but his parents are firmly resolved to avoid the subject. They each resolutely cling to certain beliefs about what must

remain unvoiced in an effort to remain safe from confronting reality. In this sense, the individuals in Wilder's play are reminiscent of Eugene O'Neill's characters in *The Iceman Cometh* that doggedly insist on holding on to their respective "pipe dreams."

By the end of the play, the characters exhibit a new way of talking. Their manner of speaking is straightforward, suggesting a rejection of the standard "skirting around thorny issues" technique. When Gladys asks, "how soon after peacetime begins does the milkman start coming to the door?", Sabina proffers one of the most straightforward replies of all time: "As soon as he catches a cow. Give him time to catch a cow, dear" (III.226). It is the simplicity inherent in her response that makes it an accurate (or at least impossible to prove wrong) prediction. The answers to what the future holds are obvious and readily discernible when phrased properly. It is a widely held supposition that the most obvious solution is generally the correct one. One such conspicuous explanation that is finally articulated in plain and simple terms is the answer to whom or what Henry represents. After the war is over, Sabina declares "I don't know how to say it, but the enemy is Henry; Henry is the enemy. Everybody knows that" (III.228). The irony is that she does know how to say it. Sabina enunciates this straightforward fact better than anyone because she does not beat around the bush or attempt to hide the truth.

The transposed grammatical structure of the statement "the enemy is Henry; Henry is the enemy" is a classic example of antimetabole (x-y, y-x). This rhetorical device emphasizes that regardless of how one looks at the situation – forwards or backwards – Henry remains the embodiment of evil. Additionally, in writing that has heretofore relied so heavily on aposiopesis, the semicolon that separates the two inverted clauses stands as a marked deviation from most of the dialogue concerning the distressing aspects of life. The semicolon is a sure sign that this time the speaker will complete his or her thought by attaching the corresponding independent clause. Previously, the excessive use of dashes produced noticeable breaks in the speech, giving the dialogue, at best, a telegraphic quality unable to render thoughts explicit the way Sabina has now done.

Not everything is wrapped up in a neat package, however. Mrs. Antrobus is still determined to subvert the speech of others:

Sabina!! Stop arguing and on with your work
... I've let you talk long enough. I don't want
to hear any more of it. Do I have to explain to
you what everybody knows,—everybody who
keeps a home going? Do I have to say to you
what nobody should ever have to say,
because they can read it in each other's
eyes? ... Well, just to have known this house
is to have seen the idea of what we can do

someday if we keep our wits about us. Too many people have suffered and died for my children for us to start renegeing now. So we'll start putting this house to rights. (III.232-233)

Mrs. Antrobus remains convinced that keeping up appearances is of the utmost importance, especially for the sake of the children. Moreover, she continues to avow that there is no necessity to articulate "what everybody knows." Again, as the dash suggests, she stops short of telling us what exactly it is that everyone knows. Mrs. Antrobus presents an interesting proposition albeit one that assumes what it sets out to prove. What if everyone does not know about past events? Sabina presumes that everyone knows Henry was the general of the enemy combatants but Gladys and Mrs. Antrobus were unaware. Similarly, at the crucial turning point in Act II, Mr. Antrobus did not know what Henry had done to the black man, and thus, Gladys had to explain what happened. Regardless of whether or not they knew in the back of their minds, the truth of the matter is that until "it" (whatever "it" maybe be) is made explicit there is no guarantee that people will know the danger, much less confront it.

A step in the right direction is to give the past a voice. In this way, as Mr. Antrobus observes, "the memory of our mistakes [will] warn us" (III.245). Articulating the past is not a panacea for humanity's problems but it does offer hope for the future. According to Mr. Antrobus, "we've learned. We're learning." (III.245). In the final moments of the play, he melds the past, present, and future, into a minute sample of words expressed through discrete grammatical tenses. His claim, which is undeniably straightforward, regards man's potential to apply knowledge from bygone eras in useful ways. Of course, this is only possible when we discard the notion that time is unspeakable. In the typical over-the-top and almost nonsensical style that pervades the play, Wilder confers the following lines as the final utterances spoken by Mr. Antrobus:

And after a while I used to give names to the hours of the night. Nine o'clock I used to call Spinoza. Where is it: "After experience had taught me—" (246)

Mr. Antrobus recalls how he literally put time immemorial into words by naming the hours. It is hard to imagine a more absurd, and yet clear-cut method for vocalizing the past (even if it is purely metaphorical) – the hours themselves become speakers, e.g. "Ten o'clock. Plato...midnight, Mr. Tremayne" (III.222), while the act of naming renders entities, in this case time, explicit. But what did experience teach Spinoza? Or Mr. Antrobus for that matter? He attests a few lines before that mankind is learning and yet, in his closing remarks, Mr. Antrobus fails to tell the past, thereby suggesting that as long as the cyclical nature of history persists, so too will the tendency to avoid recounting what came before.

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Lethbridge Undergraduate Research Journal
ISSN 1718-8482