art. By 1940 Virginia Woolf and her husband had drawn plans to commit suicide if Hitler should invade Great Britain, and soon after, their London home was bombed in the Nazi air raids. By 1941, shortly after finishing *Between the Acts,* Virginia Woolf felt the terrifying and all too familiar presence of madness returning. Fearing she might not recover, she composed a loving letter to her husband, filled her pockets with heavy rocks, and drowned herself in the River Ouse.

Albee, in all likelihood, did not compose his masterwork with Virginia Woolf per se on his mind. On the other hand, there is that conspicuous title. To overlook Virginia Woolf's presence in the title and her influence on modern literature in general is to risk missing part of the deeper symbolic resonance emanating from the play. Beyond the nursery rhyme tune of the "Mulberry Bush," whose words are deleted and replaced with the title of the play, remains Virginia Woolf. For Albee's is a play about those reckoning with a lifelong struggle against madness, and one that concerns itself with a Martha who can finally answer the question posed in the play's title by admitting, "I . . . am . . . George. . . . I . . . am. . . ." (242). Like her own fictionalized child, Martha fears life itself. This accounts, too, for Albee's explanation of the play's title. "And of course, who's afraid of Virginia Woolf means who's afraid of the *big bad* wolf . . . who's afraid of living life without false illusions[?]" (*CEA,* 52). The differences between Albee's and Woolf's works, in terms of language, subtlety, and psychology, are vast, and yet certain thematic similarities present themselves in considering Edward Albee and Virginia Woolf.

What is seen and how "the real thing" is knowable, the impending decline of civilization, the combination of lucidity and madness, the fusion of a modernist tradition with new imaginative inventions, death and sexuality—these are just some of the issues to which both writers seem drawn. Albee has said that his task, as artist, centers on dramatizing "imbalance. Most plays are about people out of kilter. . . . I represent what the imbalances are."[3] Woolf elaborated on the same idea years earlier in her well-known "Modern Fiction" essay. "Life is not a series of gig-lamps symmetrically arranged; life is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end."

From: Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? Necessary Fictions, Terrifying Realities By Matthew Roudané

And here Woolf anticipated Albee's sense of psychic imbalance. "Is it not the task of the novelist to convey this varying, this unknown and uncircumscribed spirit, whatever aberration or complexity it may display, with as little mixture of the alien and external as possible?"[4]

Perhaps the most compelling link between Virginia Woolf and Edward Albee concerns their preoccupation with *fear.* Woolf's public art mirrored greatly her private reflections, and in *To the Lighthouse,* as elsewhere, she drew upon her own anxieties while sculpting her language and plots. As a child, Virginia Woolf was fearful that the fire in her nursery might flame high enough to touch the wall of her room; in *To the Lighthouse* Cam fears the dancing shadows on the nursery wall; in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* the fictional son as a child kept a toy bow and arrow under his bed, we are told, "For fear. Just that: for fear" (219). In her autobiographical work, *Moments of Being,* Woolf reported that her mother, to allay her child's fears at night, would tell Woolf to think of beautiful distractions to get her mind off of the fire; in *To the Lighthouse* Mrs. Ramsey, the mother, does the same thing for Cam, the child. In *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?,* as the exorcism process gains its own momentum, Martha recalls how she comforted her "beautiful, beautiful boy" (220). Fear of the unknown, of psychic dark spaces, of living itself without psychological crutches—these fears paralyze George and Martha, although their ultimate awareness of such ubiquitous fear enables them to rise above its corrosive influence.

> Before they slept, they must fight; after they had fought, they would embrace. From that embrace, another life might be born. But first they must fight, as the dog fights with the vixen, in the heart of darkness, in fields of night.
>
> —Virginia Woolf, *Between the Acts*

Albee's Virginia Woolf–like awareness of and sensitivity to fear informs the exorcism of the play. Whether in praise or scorn, the exorcism that brings the play to a climax has been the source of endless debate. It is also, I believe, the source of the play's theatrical largeness. Throughout the play, as we have now witnessed, Albee has been

constantly challenging the audience's sense of logic and what is or is not real. This subversion of audience perception reaches its apogee through the exorcism of the son-myth. But we do not comprehend this until after the fact. Although *after* seeing the play the audience realizes that Albee has worked very carefully to orchestrate what turns out to be the murdering of the son-myth, the audience has no clue (from the performance at least) that the child is anything but real. While seeing the play unwind, live, the audience finds itself caught, like Nick and Honey, in the cross fire, and the furthest thing from our minds is the notion that the child does not live at all. Until Nick's epiphanic moment of comprehension minutes before the play ends—"JESUS CHRIST I THINK I UNDERSTAND THIS!" (236)—we are plainly led to believe that the son lives. No evidence contradicts the notion. The son is mentioned only minutes into the play—"Just don't start in on the bit about the kid," George warns (18)—and will be referred to with growing frequency as each act develops. Even in the midst of exorcising the son-myth, Albee draws upon that very illusion to highlight the mixture of appearances and realities, and to keep the audience's sense of what is verifiable shrouded in mystery. "He is away at school, college," Martha tells us, and "he is fine, everything is fine" (224).

If the audience harbors some doubt about the existence of "the bit," such misgivings seemingly vanish in act 3. For as the play hurtles to its closure, Martha recalls with great clarity her son's birth and early years. There really is nothing too remarkable about a parent recalling the birth of her child; what stands out is the specificity with which Martha retells peak moments of the past. The delivery was difficult but became "an easy birth . . . once it had been . . . accepted, relaxed into" (217). Appearing as if in a trance, Martha goes on to recall other moments, as when he broke his arm and she had to rescue him: "I carried the poor lamb. George snuffling beside me" (221). Other details keep surfacing as Martha, with George, recollects a past filled with happiness.

The meticulous recall of the child confirms his very being-in-the-world. Various portraits of the boy's childhood, from the "antique bassinet from Austria" in his room (218) to the "arrow he kept under his bed"

out of "fear" (219), ratify for the audience that, indeed, the boy lives. These details lay to rest any suspicions the audience may have had relative to his place in the world. Even George concedes the point. George, whose levelheadedness maintains the psychic order of the play, announces before all that "the one thing in this whole sinking world that I am sure of is my partnership, my chromosomological partnership in the . . . creation of our . . . blond-eyed, blue-haired . . . son" (72). So all dialogue, all nonverbal gestures, the very intensity and frequency with which George and Martha refer to their child reinforce our conviction that the child lives. This requires no great deduction on the audience's part. Simply put, to think otherwise would be to miss what the characters have been telling us and each other for nearly four hours. *In effect Albee sets us up:* he prepares us for an even greater emotional shock by emphasizing the presence of the illusion that, through the unexpected reversal and subsequent recognition, will explode before our gaze.

In act 3 Albee explores the interstice generated by the truth and illusion matrix. The fictive son assumes a most *real* place within Martha's consciousness during the exorcism. She has a pathological obsession with her child, a fantasy conceived out of her fearful need twenty-one years before to fill a void in her marriage and her own existence. "Oh, I had wanted a child [. . . .] And I had my child," she confides (218). Psychically dependent on her fantasy, she crosses a threshold, for her child does not merely occupy her thoughts—he *possesses* her, like some demon spirit. George knows this and, especially in the final act, sets his sights on one thing: to banish the son-myth interpenetrating his and Martha's world.

George precipitates a ritualized form of expiation through the exorcism performance. Albee mediates the entire third act with a stylized process of expunging what at one time was an innocuous private game but has grown to assume horrific proportions. For Albee wishes the audience to associate the exorcism with the mythological history of past rites of cleansing evil demon spirits inhabiting individuals. Mythologically, an exorcism is a ceremony that attempts to dispel or frighten away evil or demonic forces. Structurally, then, act 3 plays counterpoint to the Walpurgisnacht of act 2. In old German lore, St. Walburga, a British

missionary, worked in an eighth-century convent that became one of the chief centers of civilization in Germany. She is often associated with Walpurgisnacht, the May Day festival in which witches reveled in an orgiastic, ritualized Sabbath on Brocken, the tallest peak in the Harz Mountains. Located on the border of East and West Germany, these are rugged, craggy mountains that in St. Walburga's day were thickly forested. During "Walburga's Night" (the witches' Sabbath), as it is called in central Europe, demon spirits are exorcised from villages and villagers by a rite in which a cacophony of loud noises, incense, and holy water are used to achieve purgation. The mysteriousness of all the religious and cultural connotations we bring to our understanding of the exorcism myth and ritual becomes an invisible force, part of the iconography of Albee's play. By invoking the rite of exorcism, Albee broadens the scope of his domestic drama: the sacredness of the unknown, the inscrutability of an existential terror become the mystical screen upon which George and Martha enact their fears. In act 3 demon spirits are first confronted, then externalized through "Bringing Up Baby," and are finally frightened away by the exorcism itself.

In his influential study of myth and ritual, Rene Girard theorizes that sacrifice is essential if community order and harmony are to be restored. "Violence is the heart and secret soul of the sacred," Girard writes in *Violence and the Sacred*.[5] Sacred violence in the form of a ritual sacrifice, suggests Girard, ultimately cleanses the community of violence. Girard develops a fascinating account concerning the relatedness of anthropology, classical tragedy, and Freud; and his ideas about the roles of violence, sacrifice, and the ways in which these forces influence community and spiritual vitality place the violence and exorcism we see in act 3 of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* in a positive context. George, by the third act, must come to terms with the sacred violence that he must unleash. Thus, as conductor of the exorcism, George first must discover "some way to really get at" his wife (156), a point that critics often seem to take as proof of the couple's viciousness and hatred for the other. Quite the opposite is the case, I think. To orchestrate the exorcism, George necessarily begins with an invocation to the inner demons released in Walpurgisnacht by enraging Martha to a psychological breaking

point. He thereby can bring up the demons for an essentially religious reckoning. Hence the escalation to "Total war" (159). The viciousness of their arguments is a needed ingredient, as Girard might suggest, a method of exteriorizing the unconscious fear, the demons lurking within Martha's psyche.

George arranges fiction to reorder reality. Confiding to Honey news that his "son . . . is . . . DEAD!" (180), George initiates the exorcising process. He discusses the need to "peel labels" (212), a reference to stripping away the emotional attachments blocking Martha from accepting the death of their son. While he seems unsure of his exact procedure, George knows how far the peeling process must go:

> We all peel labels, sweetie; and when you get through the skin, all three layers, through the muscle, slosh aside the organs (*An aside to Nick*) them which is still sloshable—(*Back to Honey*) and get down to bone . . . you know what you do then?
>
> *Honey:* (*Terribly interested*) No!
>
> *George:* When you get down to the bone, you haven't got all the way, yet. There's something inside the bone . . . the marrow . . . and that's what you gotta get at. (*A strange smile at Martha*) (212–13)

Symbolically, as George probes from the skin toward the marrow, so, Albee suggests, the aware individual must explore the various levels of consciousness, from the surface to the deeper levels of perception and experience.

Albee creates the image of George-as-surgeon. Like the surgeon, George carefully probes, but into the metaphysical body of his "patient," Martha. As the doctor relies on assistants, so George uses assistants, Nick and Honey, whose unwitting participation in the ritual makes for a successful operation. It is an ontological operation. Throughout, Albee balances the heaviness of the occasion with humorous moments, his method of blending wit and witchcraft, of always decentering the gazing spectator. So it is that a mystified Honey, while in the throes of her own existential awakening and while watching in horror as Martha pours out a lifetime of frustration, can back up George's outrageous story about his

son's death-by-car-accident: Yes, she lies, George devoured the Western Union telegram "crazy Billy" delivered, which bore the tragic news (234–35). And the directing force for the metaphysical procedure is *passionate involvement*: to "get at" the marrow means to demystify the child, to excise the illusion, to restore, finally, spiritual health. Although the prognosis for full recovery remains tenuous at best, George takes responsibility for the process.

Playing the game by his rules, George guides Martha through the ritual, providing the objective corrective when needed, the loving assurance when necessary. The dramatic focus is on the depth and power of Martha's psychic attachment to their myth, a child whose existence for twenty-one years counterbalanced the barrenness of their marriage, whose presence was created out of a fear of unfulfillment, an existentialist experience of nothingness.

George evolves from metaphysical surgeon to high priest exorcist. When Martha becomes transfixed on her child and hurts the most, spreading her hands in a crucifixion pose, George recites the Mass of the Dead. Through these hypnotic scenes, Albee places us within "the marrow" of the play. Their illusion shattered by George's latest fiction concerning her son's car accident (the third and final re-presentation of a "Bergin" story), Martha cleanses her soul—"(*A howl which weakens into a moan*): NOOOOOOoooooo" (233)—her purging cry signifying the death of the illusion and the rebirth of some semblance of sanity.

George becomes the celebrant clad in secular vestments. His earlier mention of the "Easter pageant" (208) anticipates the emblematic resurrection that will transpire. He ministers chanted prayers, an offertory series of eucharistic prayers. An incantatory service founded on love, George chants *Kyrie eleison*, invoking the Lord's mercy for the postlapsarian world he and Martha have created. Act 3 becomes a requiem. But this is quite different from Arthur Miller's famous denouement in *Death of a Salesman*. For all the emotionally charged aura surrounding Willy Loman's requiem, Miller distances the audience from the experience. We watch the watchers watching. We *feel* for Willy, of course, but like those attending his funeral, we remain outside *le tourbillion*, the whirlwind, that led Willy to suicide. By contrast, Albee removes the invisible fourth

wall within the proscenium arch, enlisting us as active participants in this Mass, a congregation whose very presence actualizes the requiem for the souls of the dead. We become part of the frenzy, rapture, the holy storm.

George recites the Mass of the Dead, its polyphonic quality filling this theater-turned-church. The contrapuntal structure of Martha's English side by side with George's Latin gives the performance a musical quality. "That's a conscious choice of George's to read the Requiem Mass which has existed in Latin for quite a number of years," Albee observes. "I like the sound of the two languages working together. I like the counterpoint of the Latin and the English working together" (*CEA*, 59). This stands as the emotional high point of the entire play, all of the verbal assaults leading to this moment of expiation, a cleansing intensified by George's religious plea for mercy evoked by his *Dies irae* allusion, the portion of the Requiem Mass that describes the judgment and is a prayer to Jesus for divine mercy. Apocalyptic in texture, at once a mixture of a penitential rite and secular plea, the exorcism ushers forth a host of canonical associations.

George's Mass is a performance within a performance. As a parallel to the ritual of the Christian sacrament of the Eucharist, act 3 becomes a secularized enactment of George and Martha's Last Supper with their child and disciples, Nick and Honey. They partake in a communion. The exorcism of the child becomes a reenactment of a crucifixion of the son-myth and paves the way for the resurrection of their own essential selves.

Albee would not wish to push the religious dimension of his play too far. After all, the son is but a fiction created by an all-too-secular couple, and it is not as if generations of religious people have placed their faith in this kid. Still, Albee's script radiates a sense of redemption and secular salvation. There is "*a hint of communion*" in George and Martha's tender exchanges at the play's end (238). Albee himself regards the exorcism as a celebratory occasion: "George and Martha end the play having exorcised some self-created demons and cut away through all nonsense to try to make a relationship based on absolute reality. Strikes me as being a fairly affirmative conclusion to apply" (*CEA*, 152–53).

CODA

> Sometimes a person has to go a very long distance out of his way to come back a short distance correctly.
>
> —Jerry in Albee's *The Zoo Story*

The denouement of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* suggests that the son-myth, for now, has vanished. The "*hint of communion*" informing George and Martha's verbal and nonverbal communication implies the start of a loving armistice, a definitive change in their relationship. The play's closure, with its Joycean affirmative texture, implies more than a reconciliation of man and wife; it further implies that they can now accept their life, its cajoling ambiguity and terrifying flux included, without illusion. In their resolution, they, and perhaps Nick and Honey, acknowledge the dread implicit in human existence, and affirm the importance of living honestly. The messy inconclusiveness of the play's closure, then, minimizes sentimentality while functioning thematically: Albee provides no promise that their marriage will be redeemed, that the illusion is inexorably shattered. But he does present the very real possibility for a truthful, loving renaissance for his heroes. Their new-tempered union will be measured in terms of their willingness to keep at bay the illusion that was once a source of happiness but, on this night in New Carthage, erupted in all its appalling forms.

In *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?,* necessary fictions ultimately yield to terrifying realities. However, such realities, for Albee the donnée of human experience, allow George and Martha to accept and, with acceptance, to love and, with love, to repair the ruins of their past. Through their long night's journey into day, they have come a very long distance out of their way to come back a short distance correctly. This is why the exorcism, indeed the entire play, stands as Albee's valediction forbidding mourning.

NOTES

1. Historical Context

1. Richard E. Amacher, *Edward Albee,* rev. ed. (Boston: Twayne, 1982), 5.

2. Mas'ud Zavarzadeh, *The Mythopoeic Reality* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1976), 18, 38.

3. Alice van Buren Kelley, *"To the Lighthouse": The Marriage of Life and Art* (Boston: Twayne, 1987), 2.

4. Introduction, *Edward Albee: A Collection of Critical Essays,* ed. C. W. E. Bigsby (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1975), 4.

5. Bigsby, Introduction, 5.

6. Matthew C. Roudané, "An Interview with Arthur Miller," *Conversations with Arthur Miller,* ed. Matthew C. Roudané (Jackson and London: University Press of Mississippi, 1987), 374.

7. Matthew C. Roudané, "An Interview with David Mamet," *Studies in American Drama, 1945–Present* 1 (1986):79.

8. Daniel Blum, *Theatre World: Season 1962–1963,* vol. 19 (New York: Chilton Books, 1963), 6.

9. Jack Poggi, *Theater in America: The Impact of Economic Forces, 1870–1967),* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1968), 46–49.

10. Walter J. Meserve, *Heralds of Promise: The Drama of the American People during the Age of Jackson, 1829–1849* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1986), 8.

11. Frank Rich, "To Make Serious Theater 'Serious' Issues Aren't Enough," *New York Times,* 19 February 1984, quoted in Thomas P. Adler, *Mirror on the Stage* (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 1987), ix.

12. Martin Esslin, " 'Dead! And Never Called Me Mother! ': The Missing Dimension in American Drama," in Matthew C. Roudané, ed., *Studies in the Literary Imagination* 21 (1988): 31. For additional excellent discussions of this point, see Herbert Blau, "Hysteria, Crabs, Gospel, and Random Access: Ring Around the Audience," in *Studies in the Literary Imagination,* 7–21; and Adler, *Mirror of the Stage,* ix–xiv.