Chapter 4

Cold War Tactics: Fear in Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?

GEORGE: Who’s afraid of Virginia Woolf
Virginia Woolf
Virginia Woolf,
MARTHA: I . . . am . . . George . .
GEORGE: Who’s afraid of Virginia Woolf . .
MARTHA: I . . . am . . . George . . I . . . am . . .

The Cold War. The confrontation of global superpowers. Nuclear armament. The United States versus the Soviet Union. Democracy versus communism. Good versus evil. The United States was a scary place in 1962. The world had a lot to be afraid of.

Edward Albee’s work has, at times (in academic literature), been grouped with the Theatre of the Absurd because of Albee’s similar “radical devaluation of language.” In a particularly relevant essay, Jeane Luere observes terror and violence found in Vienna’s English Theatre’s 1987 production of Albee’s Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf? Luere argues that this terror and violence is an adjunct of the same “omnipresent issues of communication, awareness, and identity” found in “the works of his peers Beckett, Genet, and Pinter.”

Though this reading is suggestive, Luere’s reading relies on the all too common readings of miscommunication. However, though I believe that the cause of terror and violence found in these plays is more complex than these communication breakdowns, I do generally agree with Luere’s conjecture of the importance of terror
in Albee’s play. The play is, after all, called *Who’s AFRAID of Virginia Woolf?* (MY EMPHASIS). Though not discussing terror in any respect, Jill R. Deans was onto something when, writing about Albee’s *Box*, she argues, “there and not there, both defined and empty, the ‘box’ resembles adoptive subjectivity, present in absence.” I would like to play off of Deans’ assertion and suggest that in *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* George and Martha’s “son” is a conceptual “box” that serves as a holding place for the “present in absence” in order to ease their feelings, not exactly of terror, but more specifically, of fear (and I will return to the difference later). This reading is significant because, as Deans observes that *Box* is “one of Edward Albee’s most existential dramas,” my reading places Albee’s *Virginia Woolf* outside of the sole province of existentialism.

The fear in this play does not derive from existential angst. Though the idea of the “present in absence” connotes a form of affirmation of existence, the preoccupation of the characters is less about whether they exist and how their existence defines them, but more about the question, how are we to live and be happy? In a sense, *Virginia Woolf* is a carefully crafted psychological drama that engages the issues of existential existence while simultaneously suggesting the use of reason can be used to triumph over fallacious defense mechanisms.

However, though deriving his philosophical understanding from and participating in the same “being versus doing” (and the engagement in History) debate that Beckett tussles with in *Waiting for Godot*, Albee moves beyond that debate and dwells, instead, on the debates within philosophy that were more contemporary to both his time and place: the simultaneous birth and death (or rebirth) of analytic philosophy. As a conceptual “box,” where George and Martha’s “son” represents the “present in absence,” the philosophical debate is over logical positivism’s principle of verification and analytic philosophy’s response, where the “son” “exists” as a rational concept, but observation is impossible. George and Martha’s Wittgensteinian “language-games” describe their everyday life, their reality. Here, I am engaging with *Virginia Woolf*’s history of being read through the “games” that George and Martha play. However, thinking about their “games” both literally and metaphorically as “language-games” (via Wittgenstein), this...