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Phobos. In Defence of Fear¹

To think that fear requires defending, or even deserves it, may seem paradoxical. In contemporary social practice the calls to overcome various fears are plentiful and not at all questioned. One should agree with the statement made by Adorno and Horkheimer, who have seen in the Enlightenment, interpreted as an "advance of thought", a project of liberating human beings from fear.² To remove fear was also the goal of the whole endeavour of psychoanalysis, which is still continued today in various forms of modern therapeutical practice. Fear, however, as the researchers occupied with this phenomenon point out, has not given up.³ Yet the reasons behind this state of affairs will not be directly examined here. The question about the possibility of succeeding with such a project are going to be put aside as well. The issue that is being undertaken can be instead characterised as the one which concerns the very nature of fear, that is its internal form. The idea at the foundation of this article can be summarised as follows: fear has its own internal structure, which can be somehow conceived, and every systematic investigation of this phenomenon will necessarily adopt some kind of this presupposition.

Phobos undoubtedly takes more than only one form. We could list its numerous instances: a sudden scare, chronic anxiety, existential dread, or clinic fear – the kind that is not experienced, only diagnosed. Freud distinguished between natural phobias that have their origin in the primeval habitus of the human being, such as the fear of animals, the fear of violent natural phenomena, or the fear of the dark – and the phobias that are acquired, being a result of an undesired event in a life of a person.⁴ But even after taking under consideration the multitude of the figures of fear, its cultural image remains unambiguous: it is without a doubt something that is not wanted. That kind of attitude towards fear is not at all anything new. On the other hand, the discovery that takes place along with technological acceleration is quite the opposite. It relies on the fact of turning the attention towards the fear itself, instead of merely experiencing it. This theorisation of Phobos is forcing him to leave his original area of influence, the mind of a human being. Fear is being externalised and considered an object of expertise, and this reorientation reverberates in the totality of cultural space in a way that eludes limited description. It can be however stated that in certain historical moment fear plunged into defence, in a fully deserved turn of events, as it would seem.

The way of taking a stance with a regard to the issue under consideration is therefore going to be a separate question. Most certainly, the thesis presented hereby is not to be considered a call to any kind of phobisation of the reality, as a solution for any sort of scarcity of fear. Surely, we have it more than enough. Instead, a subject of research is to repeat a gesture of objectifying fear and

1 The original article "Fobos. W obronie strachu" was first published in the journal "Filozyn. Niezależny magazyn filozoficzny", accessible under the internet address www.filozyn.pl. The following text was translated from Polish to English by the author.

2 T. Adorno, M. Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.

3 M. Filoni, *Anatomia obłączenia. Strach w mieście*.

4 S. Freud, *Studies in Hysteria*.

define the formula of its social reception.

Unspeakable terror

Let us go back to the period of the hegemony of fear. In ancient Greece the god of fear was Phobos, and the god of dread was his brother, Deimos. Both accompanied Ares, the god of war.⁵ A suggestive depiction of Phobos can be found in Hesiod's description of the shield of Heracles.

Upon the shield Pursuit and Flight were wrought,
And Tumult, and Panic, and Slaughter.
Strife also, and Uproar were hurrying about,
And deadly Fate was there holding one man newly wounded,
And another unwounded; and one, who was dead,
She was dragging by the feet through the tumult.
She had on her shoulders a garment red with the blood of men,
And terribly she glared and gnashed her teeth.
And there were heads of snakes unspeakably frightful, twelve of them;
And they used to frighten the tribes of men on earth
Whosoever made war against the son of Zeus.⁶

The description provides substantive components of the primal phobic image, such as exposed teeth and gaze fixed upon the prey, without omitting the essential, emotive area of fear's influence, the one that "takes away reason and heart". It is of no coincidence that Phobos was depicted right on the shield of Heracles. His image foreruns the appearance of the hero and is an inherent part of his might. Protecting the warrior, Phobos inflicts wounds to his enemies, by destroying their will to fight and compromises their ability to rationally judge the situation. We know about his strength through the relation from the another side of the barricade. Aeschylus gives a poetic description of the frame of minds of citizens from besieged Thebes, that no calls from leaders can appease.

I mark his words, yet, dark and deep,
My heart's alarm forbiddeth sleep!
Close-clinging cares around my soul
Enkindle fears beyond control,
Presageful of what doom may fall
From the great leaguer of the wall!
So a poor dove is faint with fear
For her weak nestlings, while anew
Glides on the snaky ravisher!⁷

Phobos is without doubt a distributor of the kind of fear that in the first place bears association to direct violence and the threat of being killed. But before this thread finds its full development, it will perhaps prove beneficial to examine yet another, less common form of Phobos in the ancient world. It seems that Phobos was not a deity that was widely and eagerly worshipped in ancient Greece.⁸ However, there are known instances of his cult in Sparta, where he was elevated to a rank of instrument of law as "the fear that makes citizens obedient".⁹ And yet, even there the temple of

5 W. Burkert, *Religia grecka*.

6 Hesiod, *Shield of Heracles*.

7 Aeschylus, *Seven against Thebes*.

8 E. J. Stafford, *Greek Cults of Deified Abstractions*, J-P. Vernant, *Źródła myśli greckiej*.

9 J-P. Vernant, *Ibid*.

Phobos was located outside of the city.¹⁰ That fact would likely indicate the deity being also a symbol of exile, a special kind of god that gets the offering before the war, but who is at the same time politely asked to remain outside; he is a god – like Aeschylus' Erinyes – that makes humans "shudder in the dread of power".¹¹ Yet another attempt at explaining the rarity of the cult of Phobos is his incomplete personification. Although the god has its own depictions, like the one on the shield of Heracles mentioned above, it is noticeable that the visual arts of ancient Greeks were more often occupied with the leading figures of hellenic pantheon, depicting in sculptures Zeus, Poseidon, Dionysus, or Apollo, Artemis, Hera, and Athena in a way that makes them easily identified thanks to their accompanying attributes.¹² Phobos, on the other hand, is sometimes mentioned as belonging to the procession of the god of war, Ares, whose "war charriot carried fear and dread, *Phobos* and *Deimos*".¹³ Nonetheless, a wider approach to greek religiousness could allow here to a certain exoneration of Phobos. Although the relations about his self standing cult are scarce, there is a sense that allows us to picture Phobos as a force that is always present in the sacral sphere, the path to which leads through a sacrificial ritual. The act of offering an animal to please god had a form of a celebration organised around an established scenario, and its climax was a "shock caused by the deadly fear from the warm, running blood".¹⁴ It should also be acknowledged that the name of god, Phobos, as well as his sphere of influence, fear itself, are denoted by the same word *φόβος*.¹⁵ On the other hand, Ares bears his name exclusively, since war is denoted by the word *πόλεμος*.¹⁶

In "Pericles's Funeral Oration" Thucydides eternalised a homage to Athenians fallen in the Peloponesian War. It is not merely a funeral speech, but also a praise for the rules of the polis of Athens, towering above other organisational forms of greek city-states. It is a political system worthy of every sacrifice, even the ultimate one. In the first place, the acknowledgement of this political form, and only in the second a drive to protect their lives, is then the main force behind Athenians' motivation to fight. Two main areas at the root of the strenght of Phobos are also visible here. An ancient human being is religious with mythical, vitalistic, and participative religiousness, and not with the reflecrive kind, which is a sphere that belongs to philosophy.¹⁷ What happens to him, the events he takes part in, have the value of directness. This becomes particulary clear in the Homeric era. As Walter F. Otto writes: "old Greek religion (...) was politeistic, antropomorphising, close to nature, not quite moral, in a word: it was »pagan«".¹⁸ A human being coexists with gods, who inhabit the world, and actively participate in the course of its events, creating the history through their own goals, motivations and actions. Gods surpass humans with their power. They are beings that inflict fear. They can easily couterplot human endeavours, or send a severe punishment. Myths inform us about their ruthlessness. Gods devour, imprison, change their victims into animals, or into objects, condemn to exile, eternal suffering, or neverending toil. If we could investigate into the whole repertoire of punishments dealt by the gods to each other, or to the human kind, we could arrive to a conclusion that the common thread giving them the power to rule over mortals is the fear of death, or the fear of slavery. The slavery takes many forms. Sisyphus forever rolls a boulder up a hill, Persephone is sent to Hades, Pasiphae falls in love with a bull, Prometheus is unable to end his suffering. This motif of imprisonment will later find its representation in the gothic novel that developed the figure of labyrinth, a space regulated by laws different than these from the

10 E. J. Stafford, *Ibid.*, 52.

11 Aeschylus, *Ibid.*

12 W. Burkert, *Ibid* [all citations translated by author, unless indicated otherwise in the bibliography section].

13 *Ibid.*, 454.

14 *Ibid.*, 167.

15 The Liddell, Scott, Jones Ancient Greek Lexicon.

16 *Ibid.*

17 P. Hadot, *Czym jest filozofia starożytna*, W. Otto, *Teofania. Duch religii starogreckiej*, W. Burkert, *Ibid.*

18 W. Otto, *Ibid.*

regular experience.¹⁹ Whereas when it comes to death, it means a definitive end. But an end of what, actually? Emmanuel Lévinas taught us that the mere possibility of asking this question is a privilege of the living.²⁰ Death means namely an end of what we can know, not closing the road to what we can think, therefore it leaves us to face demise right where it is absent. That fact finds its reflection in many myths, which in various ways deal with this experiencing of death while being alive. The myths allow protagonists to symbolically transcend death: amber is a reminder of Phaeton's fate, flower – of that of Narcissus, and the constellation of lyre reminds about Orpheus and Euridice.

In the most primal, unmediated, almost animalistic form of Phobos, an internal differentiation starts to take place. It will soon advance into a full split. Fear ceases to be a mere reaction to a given stimuli. It is no longer an unconditional response to threat, but instead transforms into a sort of constant attitude towards facts or events of high importance, or towards the last things. Here a plural character of the phobic event can be seen. Phobos never occurs individually. In order to come into existence he needs at least two components: that what evokes terror, and one who experiences it.

In a classic science-fiction horror film "Alien", directed by Ridley Scott, a complex example of that kind of phobic situation is to be found.²¹ The crew of the spaceship "Nostromo" wakes up from the hibernation sleep and decides to follow a detected radio signal. It turns out that the signal comes from abandoned spaceship that crashed on the nearby asteroid in an unknown course of events. On the scene, one of the crew members becomes infected with an unknown life form that later dies. The danger is however not averted, as the organism of astronaut becomes an incubator for the highly aggressive and unknown to science specimen. This life form then leaves the organism of its host in a gruesome way, causing him to pass away, and quickly becomes an equally deadly threat to the remaining crew members. This is an introduction to the primeval drama of the prey hunted down, with the only exception that it takes place in the confined area of the spaceship. The eponymous alien is certainly given a role of an archetypic enemy that has to be defeated. It is so, however, as long as the film is perceived from the position that Homeric gods used to occupy in myths, the position that allowed them to witness events at the scene of the world and take sides of their favourites. Without a doubt this is the way that not only a film work is usually perceived, but also all popular works of culture which rely on the narrative plot. But if we agree to leave this Parnassus for a moment, and abandon the prescribed role of a spectator, then a construction of a depicted situation opens up in a perspective especially valuable to our examination – a phobic perspective. This perspective takes into account already mentioned pluralistic character of a phobic event. Let us now return to the plot of the film. We have seven members of the crew, whose routinely running mission is disturbed by the ultimate threat. They face a prospect of death that comes from the organism which surpasses them in terms of perceptive and motoric abilities. Still, the organism cannot be included on any list of villains. It displays no murderous motives, it is not malicious and cunning, but instead represents a purely biological and impulsive intrusion in the space governed by the instructions and algorithms of the central computer. Specifically, the fact that this being was born on the spaceship cannot be omitted, as it instinctively recognises the ship as its territory and diagnoses threats, as any sufficiently advanced life form would do. The alien is then not only a factor evoking fear, but apparently experiences it as well. On this point we have a fictional repetition of any mythical confrontation, consisting in the rivalry for the title of the hunter, the one who manages to forge the phobic tension to his advantage. However the picture is not yet completed, as it misses one more element. As the plot progresses, it turns out that one of the crew

19 M. Aquirre, "Geometria strachu. Wykorzystanie przestrzeni w literaturze gotyckiej", A. Izdebska "Gotyckie labirynty" [in:] *Wokół gotycyzmów: Wyobrażenia, groza, okrucieństwo*.

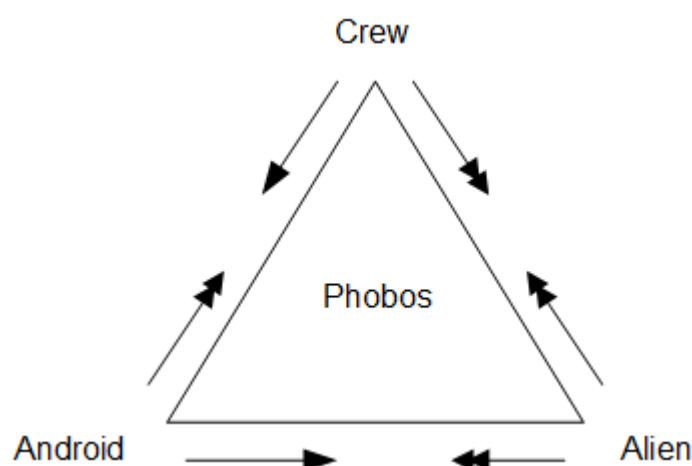
20 E. Levinas, "Filozof wobec śmierci" [in:] Ch. Chabanis, *Śmierć, kres czy początek?*

21 R. Scott (dir.), *Alien*.

members is an adroid, a sythetic humanoid, undistinguishable from the real people. His task relies not on supporting the crew, but on controlling it, and guaranting that the course of mission is in accordance with the wishes of his principals. This unseen figures are not in any way interesetd in bringing back the crew, but are determined to capture and examine an unknown to science organism. The android manifests one more level of fear. He is concerned with the succesful achievement of the true purpose of the mission. The human part of the crew, which is determined to fight for their lives, is for this purpose a threat no lesser than the aggresor itself. This interrelations can be presened as a phobic triangle (picture 1). They mutually affect themselves, elevating fear in a phobic feedback loop effect.

This triangle formula can be easily identified as mirroring the Freudian theory of psychic conctruction. The robotic crew member represents superego. The part consisting of real humans is the ego. And the alien has already been identified as the domain of the drive – the id. In Freud's theory id is an unconscious force, directing human beings to action in order to gain an instant reward.²² This force is countered by the superego: a set of norms and socio-cultural restrictions. Between the two spheres resides the ego, the conscious and individual "I" of every human being. Its task relies on mediating between the directness of drives and the demands that organise every community. The picture below can perhaps serve as a convinient illustration for the perticular logic of the phobic event that is being examined. Double arrows indicate the relation of hostility; single arrows indicate non-violent attitude. Idetic alien is a challenge to both spheres: the one of norms, the superego, and the egotic one, the consious "I". The crew counters the id with the same force that the alien is an instance of, in an attempt to overpower the id. This state of affairs can be understood only after taking into the account the third element of the equation. Here, the domain of the superego completely abdicates from its role of opposing the id, and instead tries to protect it, by directing the vector of hostility towards the figure of the ego. The ego becomes unstable, and is forced to leave its mediating role. In an dramatic attempt to restore balance it self-transformes into the executionary of norms.

Picture 1. Phobic triangle



The axis that determines the complexity of the phobic image exemined here, will therefore be, in the first place, the betrayal of the superego, and only subsequently will it be a threat frome the mostrous id. This betrayal is a catalyst of already mentioned process of expanding of fear, an incontrollable

²² S. Freud, *The Ego and the Id*.

and unstoppable chain reaction that finds its symbolic resolution in the final scenes of the film.

Fear condemned

The embedding of the above interpretation in the broader context of scrutiny requires a complement. Polish psychiatrist Antoni Kępiński describes fear as a sort of unspecified feeling. "Something poses a threat, but what exactly? There is an anticipation of the future in anxiety; we don't know what will it bring. When this anxiety is not very intense, it forces to take on action, to face what is approaching. In greater intensity a man no longer has courage to head on the challenge, he backs out and confines himself in the present moment, and this very moment is filled with anxiety. Vicious circle closes".²³ Anxiety, as opposed to fear is here characterised as relatively constant disposition to remain in a rather unfavourable emotional state for a long periods of time. In the formula adopted in this article, a research problem was described as a kind of objection to fear. The differentiation between fear and anxiety, or between any other forms of the same phenomenon will therefore be important as long as they serve the requirements of this perspective. However, what indeed attracts attention is Kępiński's perspective of projection into the future. This perspective determines the way a certain disposition to the experiencing of fear as a clinical case is formed. By taking on the considerations from this point, we would like to develop a more general, cultural picture of fear. If we agree that fear is a phenomenon not only individual, but collective, which means that it always takes form within the frames of a given social structure, then we will face the fact that a phobic situation itself is already a result of a certain projection that took place in the past. Again it should be stressed that an attempt at reaching the absolute origin of fear, whatever it might be, will not be a part of the endeavour undertaken here. It will instead revolve around the question of cultural and social functioning of fear.

The figure of the betrayal of the superego, developed through foregoing interpretations, will now be taken into account as a model of a certain, well pronounced constitutive trait of contemporaneity. With accordance to the former reservations, the ideas of Freudian psychoanalysis will not be referred to in their original context, that is as referring to the individual psychology, but as a modes of social organisation. This particular framing is not designed to overinterpret Freud's theory by unjustifiedly extending his conceptual apparatus, but merely tries to include an already mentioned fact of pluralistic, and collective manifestations of Phobos. In this respect, the presented approach will also not refrain from the version of psychoanalysis developed by Jung.

Although very brief, the insight into the sphere of Phobos in the ancient world allowed us for at least provisional reconstruction of the ways of its past manifestations. A similar endeavour should therefore be also possible to conduct in the contemporary times that we have a direct connection with. However, when taking on a quest to find Phobos we will not encounter raging heroes, neither we will hear a clang of iron. Fear is by no means absent, but it seems to be pushed on to the margins, and passed over in silence. He is ignored. A modern man has no fear, or rather: he should not fear. He has no fear not because of his courage and capability to face challenges, neither because there is nothing to fear, but rather because his psychic apparatus took into account changes in the surrounding world and underwent a transformation itself. It should be stated that fear is not expected from a human being. Fear has been condemned and became a taboo.

The pointing to the alliance of the superego and the id is probably one of the most distinctive accomplishments of the Frankfurt School. The "Dialectic of Enlightenment" by Adorno and Horkheimer expresses this idea most completely. Main thesis of this work can be summarised in a claim that in the modern times the rationality of technological processes of production become extrapolated onto the psychological sphere of the human being. Cultural industry, as the authors dub

23 A. Kępiński, *Lęk*.

the phenomenon of massification of entertainment and culture, has namely discovered mechanisms regulating the domain of impulses and managed to use it to its advantage. Popular culture is then not a representative of what is unconscious, as it has been in the case of a traditional work of art, in which a sublimated drive was revealed, but this very drive is now elevated to the rank of a norm. This is indeed a domain of the superego, so a drive that becomes a normative principle at the same time takes role of a restrictive force. "The culture industry endlessly cheats its consumers of what it endlessly promises. The promissory note of pleasure issued by plot and packaging is indefinitely prolonged: the promise, which actually comprises the entire show, disdainfully intimates that there is nothing more to come, that the diner must be satisfied with reading the menu".²⁴ After having invited the unconscious drive to the domain of the normative, superego can no longer preserve its sovereignty. Freudian tripartite division crumbles and its place is overtaken by a grotesque structure consisting of the normative drive and the impulsive superego. Psychological functions, compelled to work within this failing environment, can no longer perform their duties, which result in desolation of the domain of the conscious ego. That is why Adorno and Horkheimer can firmly claim that cultural industry "does not sublimate: it suppresses".

The critique concerns cultural phenomena that could actually be deemed outdated, when taking into account the time it was published. However, it is not the content moulded to fit modern readers that stands in the foreground, but the fact of navigating between the specific points of Freudian topics. In particular, a thesis from the "Dialectic of Enlightenment" that "the relentless unity of the culture industry bears witness to the emergent unity of politics"²⁵ proves itself very up to date. Fear should be namely examined not as a purely esthetic phenomenon, but as a cultural one. It covers all other areas of humane collective activity, as the ones that take place in the space of media or of politics. For example, a category of phobia was taken out of its original, clinical context and used to label various processes, finally becoming a convenient suffix, attached everytime when there was a need to quickly counter an adversary. The phobising adjustment in the politics of mass media outlets does obviously have much wider sphere of influence, a reconstruction of which would go beyond the frames of this article. Suffice it to mention an array of threats, such as biological, concerning national safety, natural catastrophes, repeatedly brought up with eagerness inversely proportional, as it would sometimes seem, to the actual state of affairs.

In the face of upcoming danger, a modern man should feel obliged to take up a position that can be referred to as relaxed anticipation. In fact, through enduring exposition to the repertoire of various threats lurking on, he is being served a sort of exercises in panic. It is a spectacle, in which he, as an actor, is expected to guess what the scenario is, and adopt proper, yet mutually excluding reactions. He must therefore be worried, but not paralysed; should treat the threat with the proportional gravity, but not undertake any countermeasures; be ready to care for his own safety, but not step ahead of the crowd, etc. Finally, the very fact of experiencing fear, becomes a symptom of social maladjustment, and in consequence it results in the feeling of guilt. With coming back to the issue sketched at the beginning of this chapter it is now possible to say that the result of the condemnation of fear is the internalisation of anxiety.

Terror uttered

We managed so far to distinguish themes that constitute Phobos in the modern era. In the first place, his plural character should be indicated. Furthermore, the differentiations that take place within his very own essence need to be acknowledged. In the next step the figure of the betrayal of the superego is recounted, and the sequence closes with the act of the condemnation of fear. This

²⁴ T. Adorno, M. Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 111.

²⁵ Ibid., 96.

construction is fully supported by the two elements that constitute the primordial experience of fear: the fear of death, and the fear of enslavement. Until this point various objects of fear seemed to be reducible to one of this two categories, which themselves remained separate. There can be, however, one more phobogenic sphere that is neither of this two categories, but exists as both of them simultaneously. This sphere is infinity. Its distinctiveness is attested by the fact that it cannot be encountered in any way as a direct threat. What is more, it does not at all belong to the domain of sensual experience, but is accessible exclusively as a function of the specific states of mind. Pascal expressed the experience of this terror most explicitly in his reflection on two infinities: the one that is infinitely small, and the second, infinitely large. Between them, there is a place that the human being happens to be occupying. By asking "what is human in infinity?", not from the position of a geometrician, but that of a thinker riveted with the perspective of the absolute, Pascal achieves two things. Firstly, he anticipates existential philosophy,²⁶ and secondly, he discovers the phobic plexus that was already present in the myths of Sisyphus, and of Prometheus, where it was the source of true terror: a trapping that even death cannot end, unending moment of dying, or being enclosed within ever renewing loop.²⁷ The Pascalian human is therefore "nothing in respect of infinity, everything in respect of non-existence, placed midway between nothing and everything. Infinitely removed from understanding the extremes, the finality of things and their beginnings invincibly hidden from him in impenetrable mystery; equally incapable of seeing the nothing whence he came in the first instance, and the infinite in which he is engulfed".²⁸ The experience of this terror is recapitulated in the one of his most famous fragments: "The eternal silence of infinite spaces terrifies me"²⁹.

An image of infinity marked with a peculiar unease can also be found in poetry. Here are the verses of the poem opening a poetry book "Księga przeczuć" by a Polish poet Bolesław Leśmian that picture infinity with a metaphor of two mirrors reflecting themselves.

Dwa zwierciadła, czujące swych głębin powietrzość,
Jedno przeciw drugiemu ustawiam z pośpiechem,
I widzę szereg odbić, zasuniętych w wieczność,
Każde dalsze zakrzepłym bliższego jest echem.³⁰

These verses bring into mind the thought of Pascal, as they position human being in the chain array of repeating imaginery that has no end and neither a beginning, but is only accessible from the place given independently of the beholder himself, the one of the mind, and not of the senses. Another poetical picture of terror, which also refers to the motif of reflection, but embraces the primal sphere of fear as well, is present in the poem "Tyger" by William Blake.

Tyger! Tyger! burning bright,
In the forests of the night;
What immortal hand or eye,
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?³¹

The expression "fearful symmetry" will be crucial here. It can be asserted that this symmetry refers to the effigy of the predator, a tiger faced in the wild. However, a rivaling interpretation, with a

26 M. Błaszczuk, "Pascal jako prekursor filozofii egzystencjalnej".

27 This motif is also undertaken by some of the modern science-fiction subgenres.

28 Pascal, *Thoughts*, 4.

29 Ibid., 203.

30 B. Leśmian, "Prolog" [w:] *Poezje zebrane t. 1*, 53.

31 W. Blake, "The Tyger".

regard to the way a phobic situation is constructed, can prove itself no less probable. We propose the axis of symmetry to be defined as the line between the object arousing fear, and the subject experiencing it. Thereby, we can gain a repetition of the "mirrory" formula of arousing fear that exists also in the poem of Leśmian. Let us once more return to his verses. The beholder is now not merely an array of his own reflections, but he himself looks at his own mirror image.

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