

# Fearful Symmetries

Representations of Anxiety in Cultural, Literary  
and Political Discourses



# **Fearful Symmetries:**

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# Fearful Symmetries:

## Representations of Anxiety in Cultural, Literary and Political Discourses

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# Introduction

This book has grown out of a project called “Civilisation and Fear,” which culminated in an international conference – held by the Institute of English Cultures and Literatures, University of Silesia, in 2010 – that addressed manifestations of anxiety in culture. *Fearful Symmetries* is mostly about how fears, apprehensions and phobias find their representation in writing. Consequently, these essays are not psychological, philosophical or sociological studies of anxiety. That is to say, we are not concerned here with fear in the abstract: the individual contributions focus on texts in which anxiety has appeared in discourse, thus as a contextualized and historicized presence. The readers who expect clear-cut answers to such fundamental questions as “What is fear?” may be disappointed. However, those who expect inspiring insights into textual manifestations of anxiety are likely to find these essays of interest. We do believe that the value of this book lies in the viable, not infrequently fresh approaches to some of the most problematic and complicated junctions between fear and civilisation. The overarching assumption which underlies most of the essays is that fear feeds on the individual psyche, and certainly cannot exist in a social vacuum; discourse, as an element of culture, seems to be its natural habitat.

Such ideas as anxiety and fear may be used to reduce the multiple matrices of civilisation, and the many discourses which represent them, to a common denominator. Still, in this book, we aim to recognise the potential for differentiation at the heart of civilisation. Inevitably, the essays vary in scope, historical context, angle of vision and interpretive method. We see such differences as an asset, rather than a threat. Divergent, perhaps deviating, approaches and methodologies should not multiply anxieties; instead, they may increase the chances of containment and dissipation. As a result, a book like this may be useful in coming to terms with those fears which thrive on the



unknown and the (yet) unnamed. Diversified treatment, in the scholarly sense, may, in the long run, translate into treatment in another, therapeutic, sense. Once articulated and exposed to the analytical light of academic discourse, the fears and anxieties which our civilisation has foisted upon us are likely to look less manacng.

As editors obliged to produce an introduction to a volume of essays by other authors we want to be clear about our role in prefacing this publication. In order to give our readers a lucid picture of what those essays are concerned with, we are bound to introduce them by the usual means of summary and paraphrase. Still, the authors themselves might be anxious that we misrepresent their ideas by selecting and highlighting what we consider crucial about their contributions. That is why henceforth we let the authors speak on their own behalf by almost literally quoting their abstracts, which – sometimes minimally edited – shall serve as vignettes of their own writing. In what follows, you will find brief descriptions of the themes raised in each essay and the claims that the authors make.

**Anna Antonowicz, “Indian Zigzags – the Industrial Monster.”**

The governmental reform of decorative art undertaken in the mid-Victorian period aimed to imbue low-quality British artefacts with the principles of Indian art. It provoked the war of values in the period of great anxiety over the influence of technological advancement upon aesthetics and taste. This essay analyses the negative views of John Ruskin upon the reform and confronts them with those of Owen Jones.

**Dorota Babilas, “The Victorian Culture and the Fear of the Talented Woman in George Eliot’s *Daniel Deronda*.”**

Victorian culture, with its preoccupation with social order and clearly defined gender roles, was both titillated and alarmed by the possibility of the feminine talent. This essay explores a selection of examples dealing with the themes of the musical talent displayed by the heroines of George Eliot’s novel *Daniel Deronda* (1876). The visions of an angelic creature, a dangerous siren, and an un-sexed monster are all variations on the theme of musically gifted women.

**Katarzyna Blacharska, “The Renaissance *Plus ultra* and the Recurrence of *Non plus ultra* as Reflected in the Poetry of John Donne and John Milton’s Epic *Paradise Lost*.”**

The *mappae mundi*, characteristic medieval world maps which are a reflection of a ubiquitous anxiety that permeated the period, provide partly allegorical image of the world, but also communicate certain ideas, most notably the notion of *Non plus ultra*, which marked the Pillars of Hercules as the ulti-

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mate border of the world, beyond which there was nothing. This medieval notion continues to be relevant through the Renaissance, in the poetry of John Donne and John Milton.

Katarzyna Chruszczewska, **“To Be Saved by Chaos’: ‘Emancipation’ of Self by Mutilation and Perversion. Chuck Palahniuk’s *Invisible Monsters* and *Choke*.”**

In Palahniuk’s fiction, the struggle for a true identity explodes in a total rebellion against the cultural regime, manifested through different forms of sexual perversion or through the intentional mutilation of one’s body. The necessity to hybridize one’s identity entails the destruction of the main structures of the self. Palahniuk’s characters aim for indefinability of the self by disputing sexuality and questioning the body.

Joanna Jodłowska, **“Who’s Afraid of the Supermarket: A Study of Andrzej Wójcik’s and Ewan Jones-Morris’s Semi-documentary *Brand New World*.”** “Who’s Afraid of the Supermarket...” offers a comparison of the kinds of dystopian fear embodied by the experimental semi-documentary *Brand New World* (2005) directed by Andrzej Wójcik and Ewan Jones-Morris in comparison with Aldous Huxley’s 1932 novel *Brave New World*, and expressed in the way these two works handle the themes they have in common: consumerism, marketing, the functioning of the mass-media, and rebellion against modern society.

Paulina Kamińska, **“Civilisation, Fear and Trauma in Doris Lessing’s Writing.”**

By analysing the representations of civilisation in Doris Lessing’s writing, one can discern imaginary societies at different stages of their development: from their beginnings, through the breakdown, to attempts at the rebuilding of social structures. Fear and threat of death are imminent within all these transformations. Such features of trauma narratives as the breakdown of chronology, multiple narrators, the impossibility of a faithful account surface in Doris Lessing’s novels, and enhance her depictions of civilisation.

Robert Kielawski, **“Masochism and Its (Dis)contents: The Politics of In-Yer-Face Theatre and Mark Ravenhill’s *Bodies in Crisis*.”**

The article tries to account for the politics of masochism in *Faust is Dead* and *The Cut* by Mark Ravenhill by making links between in-yer-face aesthetics and anti-humanist tradition of Antonin Artaud and Sigmund Freud. The oppositional energy of the analysed plays is identified with the way the characters’ political agency is restricted to masochistic acts. In phenomenological terms, the body in pain becomes a site of political intervention.

**Sławomir Konkol, “What Else is Civilisation For? Narration Overcoming Fear and Trauma in Graham Swift.”**

Fragmented and repetitive, the structure of most of Graham Swift’s narratives represents the characters’ sense of being separated from the world and trapped in traumatic temporality which refuses linear development. While mourning the impossibility of retrieving original wholeness, Swift’s novels celebrate the contingency of the human condition since the protagonists’ efforts at overcoming fear can only be temporary and tentative. At the same time, the status of the narrative is questioned as morally ambiguous, potentially violent and responsible for the irreversible involvement of the subject in temporality.

**Anna Krawczyk-Łaskarzewska, “‘Seek and Ye Shall Find’ – Conspiracy Theories and the Mechanisms of Online Exposure.”**

Fuelled by fears related to terrorism, surveillance, and signs of collapse of the global financial system, the conspiracist and/or synchrony-seeking webpages have shown remarkably similar, suspicious/hostile attitudes towards a variety of issues, e.g. global warming research, government-imposed vaccination programs, alleged diabolical pacts made by global elites concerning mind and population control, the influence of the Illuminati and all things occult, etc. But the fear of enslavement and subordination they so often express proves to be a double-edged weapon manipulating the readers’ sound judgment even further.

**Sławomir Kuźnicki, “Civilisation Renewal Project – the Ultimate Solution of Margaret Atwood’s *Oryx and Crake*.”**

By focusing on biotechnology and the commercialisation of life, Margaret Atwood, in her dystopia *Oryx and Crake* (2003), questions the morality of genetic engineering procedures. As a result, she proposes a revolutionary shift, an apocalypse, after which the old order ceases to exist and is apparently succeeded by a heaven on earth. This article is concerned with Atwood’s reasons for annihilating our present civilisation, but it also points out why the new version of the world, although preconceived and logically manufactured, has no real chances of succeeding.

**Tadeusz Lewandowski, “Indulging a Terrorist’s Fears: A Critical Evaluation of Theodore Kaczynski’s *Industrial Society and Its Future*.”**

In mid-September of 1995 the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* published Theodore Kaczynski’s *Industrial Society and Its Future*, a 35,000-word essay that decried the effects of technology on mankind and the natural world. When made public, the manifesto garnered a surprisingly positive reception in the American media. Though *Industrial Society and Its Future* certainly expresses some rational fears, this essay argues that its importance as an ideological tract has been overestimated by readers drawn to Kaczynski’s bizarre

charisma, strong pro-environmentalist stances, and an ability to tap into the frustration of those disenchanted with modernity.

**Tomasz Markiewka, “‘The Gently Budding Rose’: Greeks and Fear in Teodor Parnicki’s Historical Novel *The End of ‘The Concord of Nations’*.”**

*The End of “The Concord of Nations”* (*Koniec „Zgody Narodów,”* Paris 1955) marks a turning point in the development of Teodor Parnicki’s oeuvre. In a world of constant and profound fear, the protagonist, a half-Greek and half-Jewish adolescent by the name of Leptines, is caught in the network of secret services and, being constantly interrogated, starts a quest for self-identity. The essay examines the clash of civilisations and cultures, which is dramatized and internalized in Leptines, who embodies the situation in which the borderline between “I” (Greek) and “the Other(s)” falls within the protagonist’s self.

**Gabriela Marszołek, “Fetch Me My Feathers and Amber’: Gary Snyder on Civilisation and the Primitive.”**

In “Poetry and the Primitive,” Gary Snyder says that part of our being modern means to be “contemporary with all periods”; it is to be one with our own beginnings, since civilisations do not “rise and fall,” but absorb, bloom, burst, and scatter their seed. This essay presents Snyder’s standpoint on the notion of civilisation in regard to the native American theme of hunting magic. Gary Snyder, influenced by such anthropologists as Stanley Diamond and Claude Lévi-Strauss, depicts the modern man as the one who has failed to understand the richness and complexity of ancient cultures.

**Przemysław Michalski, “Original Sin, Fear and Metaphysical Poetry.”**

This essay sets out to discuss the problem of the relationship between the original sin and fear in metaphysical poetry. One of the key questions it grapples with is to what extent the legacy of the doctrine of the original sin informed the poetry of John Donne, George Herbert, Henry Vaughan and Thomas Traherne, and how far it shaped their general *Weltanschauung*.

**Dominika Oramus, “Gods for the Final Days: Selected Religious Systems Devised by Kurt Vonnegut Jr. and Philip K. Dick.”**

In the mid-twentieth century in the West, the political atmosphere of insecurity spawned religious radicalism and made more and more people pay heed to preachers announcing the approaching doom. L. Ron Hubbard devised and marketed a new religion, the Church of Scientology; Kurt Vonnegut Jr.’s post-modernist novels *Sirens of Titan*, *Cat’s Cradle* and *Slapstick* also describe new religious systems. Philip K. Dick, in turn, presented religions of his own making, Mercerism, and belief in the Four Manifestations of God, in the short story “The Little Black Box” and novels *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep* and *A*

*Maze of Death*. This essay compares these religions in order to show how they take advantage of human fear and anxiety and what they offer to their followers.

**Kamilla Pawlikowska, “Fear of the Inside: Neurology as a Science of Sensation in Victorian literature.”**

Despite the attempts undertaken by nineteenth-century psychologists, philosophers and physiologists to define “sensation,” the latter remained a conspicuously fluid notion. This indefiniteness provided a vast hermeneutic space for writers seeking new rhetorical devices to convey the complexity of human nature. This essay examines a variety of diverse accounts of “sensation” in Victorian fiction, discusses their functions and approaches to the mind-body relationship.

**Izabella Penier, “The Black Atlantic Zombie: National Schisms and Utopian Diasporas in Edwidge Danticat’s *The Dew Breaker*.”**

This essay discusses Edwidge Danticat’s collection of short stories *The Dew Breaker*, which is about the terror and trauma caused by the horrifying system of repression brought by the Duvalier regime. It deals with the theme of the subjection and dehumanization of Haitians, expressed through a new Haitian aesthetics of degradation, whose most salient trope is zombification. Zombification is a mechanism of terror and debasement that turns Danticat’s protagonists, both torturers and their victims, into the living dead, deprived of the self, human dignity and freedom.

**Maciej Piątek, “Fears and Fictions of Samuel Beckett.”**

This essay is an interpretation of Samuel Beckett’s short stories (“The Calmative,” “The Expelled”) and dramaticules (“That Time,” “Footfalls”) as literary expressions arising from the overwhelming feeling of fear. Beckett’s writings show that creating fictions to repress fear is on the one hand necessary, but on the other, this process is bound to fail in the postmodern age. His texts do not speak about this failure in a descriptive mode – they actually stage this failure by their own structure and meaning, which remain always on the verge of collapsing.

**Brian Reis, “Deeper Darkness: Fear of the Dionysian Ultimate in H.P. Lovecraft.”**

H.P. Lovecraft’s tales of terror strike at key questions of human existence – specifically, the origins of fear. Creating narratives that invoke and capitalize on Nietzsche’s fear of the advent of nihilism, Lovecraft drafted a world that was alternately mysterious and terrifying, and also coldly rooted in the scientific determinism that was at the core of his materialist atheism. In doing so, he uproots Nietzsche’s hope for man to transcend beyond the “death of God” and the subsequent nihilistic retreat into outmoded religious ideas.

John Eric Starnes, “Mr. Turner’s Fears and Fantasies: *The Turner Diaries* and White Fear in America.”

This essay explores the White Nationalist novel *The Turner Diaries* and analyses the themes that are prevalent within the novel. By analysing these themes and by placing them in their historical context, it is hoped that a clearer picture will emerge of the fears and trepidation expressed by certain sectors of white America. These fears include attempts at subverting white power by the manipulation of “aliens,” blacks, and other minorities.

Nurseli Yeşim Sünbülüoğlu, “Gender Implications of Literary Representations of Anxieties about Modernisation in Turkey: *Aganta, Burina, Burinata* (1945).”

The years 1940–1950 was a period in which Turkey went through profound social, political, and economic changes. The reactions towards these changes can be regarded as an intersection of discontent, fears, and anxieties on various levels. Through an analysis of a novel (*Aganta, Burina, Burinata*) written in 1945, this essay examines the literary representations of those concerns. The response of the novel’s author to these anxieties was to reconceptualise nature as an alternative space – pure, harmonious, and homogeneous – where a much needed reconstruction of modern masculine identity would take place.

By way of concluding this introduction, we would like to indulge in an observation which led to the choice of the main title for this collection of essays. Our reference to William Blake’s “Tyger” and its enigmatic phrase bespeaks an ambivalent attitude to whatever is capable of inspiring fear, anxiety, and awe. The authors of the following essays are singularly attracted to those works and phenomena which are surrounded by an aura of anxiety. Thereby the contradictory energies of attraction and repulsion – fascination and fear – are responsible for the thematic paradox of this volume: despite the fearsome and portentous nature of many aspects of contemporary civilisation, we continue dissecting them, even at the cost of exposing our own fears and anxieties in the process. We are preoccupied by what we should, by definition, keep at a distance – does that mean that we are poised to overcome those fears or, on the contrary, that we have developed a morbid taste for wallowing in them?

*Leszek Drong and Jacek Mydla*

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