

Norwid's Critique of Conspiratorial Reason

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Critical remarks on conspiracy are ubiquitous in the writings of the Polish late Romantic Cyprian Norwid (1821–1883). An inquiry into this network of remarks, both discursive and poetic, could commence, in a way, from any point. I suggest entering it through a literary text, *Quidam* (1862), to then consider, in various nineteenth-century contexts and with a flexible conceptual framework, Norwid's prose writings, i.e., letters, essays, and scattered notes on conspiracy and "openness" which he passionately advocated as an antidote to secret agitation.¹

Quidam is one of Norwid's most important and original works. If this digressive Roman epic has any external organizing factor or graspable "motor" of the plot then it is, interestingly enough, a conspiracy, namely the conspiracy that (according to the fictional world of *Quidam*) led to the Jewish revolt of Bar Kokhba (AD 132).² Rome's decadent elite, including Caesar Hadrian, is incapable of

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1 I should point out that my treatment of conspiratorial motifs in Norwid's work is anything but exhaustive. Instead, I will focus on particularly productive passages. For an excellent advanced key word search see the internet-based dictionary of Puzynina/Korpysz.

2 Cf. Fieguth 2011: 300.

anything but “idle” gestures and is provoked by news of riots from the province of Judea to mobilize its power. As a result of this declaration of the state of war, two of the main characters, the Greek philosopher Artemidor and Rabbi Jazon Mag, are expelled from Rome. The anonymous fictional protagonist Quidam, this truth-seeking “someone,” loses his life in an out-of-control ritual bull sacrifice at the Roman Forum Boarium (*Plac Przedajny*), which had probably been organized for the sake of the enhancement of social cohesion, again, as a reaction to the threat to imperial integrity from the margins.³ One could even say that conspiracy has the last word in *Quidam*, given that it closes with an exclamation by the Roman statesman, Lucius Pomponius Pulcher, to the conspirators, “I did not know you, Jews.”⁴

The Christians have a remarkably small impact on the *plot* of the epic, even though the reader clearly feels that they represent the Empire’s actual new force and enjoy the author’s sympathy. Their appearances are sparse. The parable of the mustard seed from the Gospel according to Matthew (Mt 13:31–32)—spread throughout the text as a leitmotif⁵—shows how Norwid conceives of the mission and transmission of the Christian message: as careful labor within the realm of the *small*. However, this carefully circumscribed labor, in an inverse proportionality, is supposed to bear all the more fruit, in analogy with the tree in the parable of the mustard seed.⁶

Zygmunt Krasiński, the third “bard” (*wieszcz*) of Polish Romanticism and a more or less close friend of the notorious outsider Norwid, reportedly called *Quidam* utterly obscure and incomprehensible to the Parisian salon worlds of the Polish émigré community.⁷ Moreover, Krasiński might have also criticized the fact that Christianity was not triumphant in *Quidam*. Norwid’s epic referred to

3 Cf. Fieguth 2011: 301. For a comprehensive study of the Bar Kokhba revolt see Mor 2016. As Mor (*ibid.*: 2) notes: “It is not surprising that the enigmatic character of Bar Kokhba and the lack of sufficient sources to understand him have fired the imagination of writers and led to a rich flowering of literary works on this subject in Israel and around the world.”

4 Norwid 1971–76/III: 232 (Song XXVIII, v. 59). All translations are mine, Ch. Z. All emphasized passages from Norwid are original.

5 Cf. “Kto siał gorczyczne ziarno, zgorzknął, zbawił: / Gorczyczne ziarno liche i pieprzowe, / Prochowi równe, który noga zwiewa, / Lecz wyżej serca urasta, nad głowę, / I tak się staje podobieństwem drzewa, / Że ptak niebieski gniazdo na nim miewa.” – *ibid.*: 146 (Song XIII, vv. 305–10).

6 Cf. Trybuś 1993.

7 Cf. Chlebowski 2014: 132.

Krasiński's own Roman drama, *Irydion* (1836),⁸ in which a Christian perspective did triumph insofar as the failing conspirator Irydion, a pagan, was resurrected by the author in the epilogue and sent from Ancient Rome to nineteenth-century Poland with a Christian mission.⁹ While intervening through his epilogue, as a *deus ex machina*, Krasiński eventually gave Christianity a national scope in his drama.¹⁰ Irydion's revengefulness towards imperial Rome (he has a Greek father and a "barbarian" mother) and his plan to murder Caesar Heliogabal is not effectively conducted but, in a way, perpetuated through the trick of the epilogue. In the preface to *Quidam*, presented in the form of a "fragment of a letter" to Krasiński, Norwid, then, reacts not only to Krasiński's objection but also to the very premises of *Irydion*. He writes: "Civilization and its Christian womb are made up of the achievements of Israelite, Greek and Roman knowledge, and do you indeed believe that, in the self-conscious reality, it [Christianity] has already been triumphantly revealed?"¹¹

Now, the fact that in *Quidam* the Jews act "cabbalistically" (the term appears several times) in the "shadows" must surely be viewed from the context of nineteenth-century anti-Judaism and its set of stereotypes. However, Norwid is clearly not in line with the anti-Semitic theory of Jewish world conspiracy, for which no one other than Zygmunt Krasiński had provided the founding myth with his *Nie-boska komedia (Un-Divine Comedy, 1835)*.¹² The key difference between Krasiński and Norwid, in that regard, lies in the fact that *Quidam* does not suggest infiltration and subversion as features of the Jewish conspiracy. Rather, it is depicted as an anti-imperial emancipation movement, that is, as at least a partially *legitimate* answer to the despotic (religious) policy of the Roman Empire under Caesar Hadrian.¹³

With "prophetic words" (*słowa wieszczce*), Jazon Mag sends his disciple Barchoh to Judaea to make him the leader of the uprising and, what is more, the longed-for Messiah.¹⁴ Thus, the conspiratorial complex of motifs related to Ja-

8 See, among others, Rzońca 2005: 76–85; Fieguth 2014: 172–78.

9 Krasiński 1967: 159–68 ("Dokończenie").

10 See, for example, Śliwiński 1992: 130–31.

11 "Cywilizacja składa się z nabytków wiedzy izraelskiej – greckiej – rzymskiej, a łono Jej chrześcijańskie, czy myślisz, że w świadomej siebie rzeczywistości już tryumfalnie rozbrłyś?" Norwid 1971–76/III: 80 ("Do Z.K. Wyjątek z listu", 79–80).

12 Cf. Janion 2014: 90–115.

13 For a recent discussion of Norwid's peculiar stance between "philo- and anti-Semitism" see Samsel 2017.

14 Norwid 1971–76/III: 170 (Song XVI, v. 169).

zon's mission inevitably, if summarily, makes the reader think of Polish Romanticism and of Adam Mickiewicz's Romantic politics in particular with its combination of Messianism and an anti-colonial agenda.¹⁵ It is plausible, then, that Krasiński found *Quidam* to be not only confused literarily but also unacceptable in its conceptual layout: the Bar Kokhba revolt parallels the rebellious Polish Romanticism—at least potentially so—whereas there are no allusions to Polish patriotic features whatsoever in the representation of the early Christians.

If the Jewish conspiracy in Norwid's epic nonetheless turns out to be evaluated as clearly negative, that is, as a *particularistic* endeavor, then this is a Christian and quite clearly anti-Judaistic criticism. Still, it should be noted that Norwid directed the reproach of particularism, in a broadly homological way, at Polish Romanticism throughout his oeuvre. He had accused many of the exponents of Polish "Romantic" nationalism precisely of a lack of public spirit, of a narcissistic understanding of emancipation and of a glorification of violence. At the same time, the fact that Norwid mostly writes *konspiracja* when dealing with what the Polish language calls *spisek* ('conspiracy') points to a virulent European dimension of the problematic including, for instance, the iconic nineteenth-century conspirator Giuseppe Mazzini and his myriad of secret actions all over the continent. Mazzini not only had lively connections to clandestine Polish activists, but was also an admirer of Adam Mickiewicz.¹⁶ Norwid, by contrast, praised himself for having fought the revolutionary movement, as represented by Mazzini, Garibaldi, and Mickiewicz, on Pope Pius IX's side (he ran on the Quirinal Hill trying to stop the surging crowds of demonstrators in April 1848 together with Zygmunt Krasiński).¹⁷

In *Quidam*, while relating Barchob's acceptance of his "messianistic" mission to the Province of Judaea, the narrator asks: "What did he feel?"¹⁸ The answer the narrator provides is: "Ardor" (*żar*), but, again, a kind of ardor that lacks both "sails" and "anchor" as it knows neither authentic "inspiration" (*zapał*) nor

15 Mickiewicz's specific traits within the descriptions of Jazon have been repeatedly identified by Norwid scholars. See, among others, Zaniewicki 2007: 28; Zieliński 2011: 386. Norwid's association of Mickiewicz with Jewish characteristics is no surprise if one thinks of the fact that he harshly rejected Mickiewicz's idea that Israel was an equal "elderly brother" in faith for the Church (in the latter's 1848 "Skład zasad"). On this problematic see Piechal 1937: 72.

16 Cf. Koropecy 2008: 399–400.

17 Cf. Trojanowiczowa/Dambek 2007: 312; and Walicki 1983: 296–98.

18 "Co czuł?" – Norwid 1971–76/III: 169 (Song XVI, v. 161).

a foundation in scrupulous and constant labor.¹⁹ The narrator's comment on Barchob's last walk to the city of Rome goes: "Obscurity—and a new abyss became visible. / Thoughts, uncertain of shape, though sublime in content."²⁰ Clearly, the narrator is hinting once again at the mustard seed, which would eventually "grow beyond the heart, beyond the head":²¹ the Christians' public confession of faith, their martyrdom, is compared to a "kernel" (*gorzyczne ziarno*), an elementary form out of which things most "elevated" may grow one day. By contrast, the idea of an insurrection, motivated both politically and messianistically, is shown to be a deceptive affect ("sublime in content") without any distinguishable contours.

The Conspirator as Monk and Tightrope Walker

To widen the perspective and to turn from *Quidam* to a broader corpus of prose pieces, one can say that the most common feature of Norwid's conceptualization of conspiracy is that he places himself, his narrator or his lyrical speaker outside of it as a *non-participating observer*. By virtue of this attitude, he creates space for both the devastating rejection of, and a sympathetic testimony to, conspiracy. Norwid wrote in a letter in 1866, during the Austro-Prussian War and three years after the failed January Insurrection in Poland, that:

So much do I think it is right (in *unjust ages*) to be on the side of the vanquished and the non-triumphant that I am *not only today with Austria, but that I almost went deaf in a wet prison together with Polish conspiracy ... so much ... that, of course not as a martyr and confessor, but why not ... as an amateur.*²²

19 "bo nie zapał – żaglem, trud – kotwicą" – *ibid.*: v. 163.

20 "I mrok – i znowu otchłań rozwidniona. / Myśli, niepewne kształtem, treścią szczytnie" – *ibid.*: 170 (Song XVI, v. 166–67).

21 "wyżej serca urasta, nad głowę" – *ibid.*: 146 (Song XIII, v. 308).

22 "Tak dalece (w Epokach-niesprawiedliwych) uważam za słuszne być po stronie zwyciężonych i nietriumfujących, że nie tylko jestem dziś z Austrią, ale nawet straciłem słuch w wilgotnym więzieniu z konspiracją polską ... tak dalece ... naturalnie, że nie jak męczennik i wyznawca, ale tak sobie ... jako amator." – Letter to Karol Ruprecht, soon after 8 April 1866; Norwid 1971–76/IX: 214. This letter refers to Norwid's imprisonment in Berlin in June–July 1846 after he helped two compatriots escape from the Kingdom of Prussia in 1845 and 1846 respectively. To one of those fugitives, Maksymilian Jatowt, he had handed over his very own passport. When Jatowt later

To return to *Quidam* once again, the historical age narrated in it—Rome under Hadrian—is undoubtedly precisely one instance of such an “unjust age.” Accordingly, there is, as sketched out above, a kind of sympathy with the conspirators, the critical distance notwithstanding.²³ The point is, however, that according to the epic’s logic, conspiracy would be a *false* “martyrdom” at best. This is made manifest in contradistinction to the Christians’ *genuine* (to Norwid) martyrdom. In his many comments on conspiracy, he seems to know exactly how to regulate his “amateurism” (*amatorstwo*) and not to let himself go with it. In that context, a letter from 1863 is of particular interest, in which he portrays the conspirator as a hybrid being:

There is only one thing [the Poles] estimate higher than bigos and sauerkraut soup: technical conspiracy—but! Any juggler can do the same on the hippodromes. I (as you know) have always avoided conspirators. I sat at the edge of the table ... and drew something in the sand ... but to listen to them, I was never unhappy about that ————

The technical conspirator of the nineteenth century (a Titan) is something between a monk and a ballet dancer, and just as it is impossible to combine the rigor of a monk with the elasticity of a tightrope dancer and juggler, so if you nonetheless *do*, you give up your loyalty and you become, without knowing it, a hybrid being. –

(No one has ever brought a monk and a dancer into one without charlatanism.)²⁴

identified himself with this document at the Russian Embassy in Paris, Norwid—who was staying in Berlin—came to the attention of the Prussian authorities and was arrested. – Cf. Trojanowiczowa/Dambek 2007: 183–228; and Trojanowiczowa 2010.

23 The way Norwid works his way through conspiracy is, in a way, reminiscent of Mahatma Gandhi, who essentially developed his program of non-violent, anti-colonial resistance in critical confrontation with the notorious conspirator Giuseppe Mazzini – see Donno 2008. I thank Thomas Newbold for pointing this parallel out.

24 “[Polacy] [u]mieją nad bigos i kapuśniak cenić tylko jedną rzecz – konspirację techniczną – – ale! na hipodromach toż samo umie każdy saltymbanka. Konspiratorów (jak wiesz) zawsze unikałem – siedziałem w kącie stołu ..., rysując sobie coś na piasku.... ale ich słuchać nierad byłem nigdy – – – – / Konspirator-techniczny XIX wieku (Tytan) jest to coś między mnichem a baletnikiem, et comme il est impossible de réunir la sévérité d’un moine avec l’élasticité d’un danseur de corde et saltimbanque, il en résulte qu’en réunissant l’impossible on devient peu loyal et sans le savoir sujet à la duplicité. – / (Mnicha i baletnika w jedno bez szarlatanizmu nie zebrał nikt.)” – Letter to Karol Ruprecht, March 1871; Norwid 1971–76/IX: 481.

It is remarkable how carefully, or should we say how *amateurly*, Norwid develops the image of the monk and the tightrope walker only to then denounce that “hybrid being” more mercilessly. Anyone familiar with Norwid’s poetics will hardly deny the coexistence of asceticism (stylistic and ethical) on the one hand and a tricky playfulness (most notably, a powerful paronomastic predilection) on the other; they are deeply characteristic of *his* work. He was a “voice in the wilderness”²⁵ within the Paris salon or, as Jan Zieliński once aptly described him, a “Christ figure with a cigar.”²⁶ There is something deeply oxymoronic about Norwid, both in style and behavior. As a matter of fact, is not the seemingly cool “listener” to the conspirators precisely a ludic rigorist?

I believe that one need not have recourse to psychoanalysis or deconstruction to notice in Norwid’s letter the expression of a *faible* for something that he denounces in the very same paragraph as “charlatanry.” Just as a Jewish conspiracy could become an allegory of Polish political Romanticism in *Quidam*, so here conspiracy as such, apparently so “disloyal” to the truth, becomes a plausible, however subliminal, description of Norwid’s own poetic outlook.

“Openness” versus “Machination”

It is not my intention to diminish Norwid’s rejection of conspiracy. This rejection is, more often than not, completely unambiguous. To mention just a few examples: In his early drama *Zwolon: Monologia* (*Zwolon: A Monologue*, 1851) he subjects the second Romantic generation to a devastatingly pejorative portrait. The young conspirators follow a blind compulsion for revenge and the hero, Zwolon (roughly meaning, the “excepted”) objects that they transform life into a “cemetery.”²⁷ More than twenty years later, Norwid dramatically wrote: “Peoples in decline have only *conspiratorial* or *machinating* reason, there is no historical and open [*jawna*] reason in them, for if there were any their nation would

25 Cf. the title poem of Norwid’s famous collection of verse *Vade-mecum* (1866), “Klaskaniem mając obrzękłe prawice...” (With swollen hands from clapping...): “He [the finger of God] commanded me to live in the desert of life!” (“Żyć mi rozkazał [Bożypalec] w żywota pustyni!” – Norwid 1971–76/II: 15, v. 10).

26 Zieliński 2002.

27 Cf. Kubale 1983: 53, 56.

still be alive.”²⁸ What is necessarily omitted in conspiratorial reason is—and here we are at the heart of Norwid’s criticism—an *open* engagement with history and historicity. The Polish term for openness, *jawność*, can be translated as ‘public,’ ‘medial discourse,’ ‘free press,’ and the like. However, I hold that it is important to capture in this concept the very idea of *open appearance*. In what follows, I therefore suggest not translating, and not rendering too specific, the concept of *jawność*.

By the end of the 1840s, Norwid called *jawność* a “cornerstone of this age”²⁹ and counted it among men’s “most conservative instincts.”³⁰ His position in that regard certainly seems to be conservative. As Stefan Chwin has shown in his book *Literatura i zdrada (Literature and Betrayal, 1993)*, conservatives categorically refused so-called “Wallenrodism,” i.e., the strategy of infiltration of the enemy labelled after Mickiewicz’s epic tale *Konrad Wallenrod (1829)* as irreconcilable with the Polish gentry’s old republican virtues.³¹ Any mimicry of the hegemonic power would be in discordance not only with an aristocratic codex of honor, but it would also affect the moral integrity of the conspirator himself. The latter argument strongly resembles Norwid’s reproach of machination, disloyalty and charlatanry; it is not by chance that all of these are moralistic categories. When he affirmed: “It was Mickiewicz’s right to say, Wallenrodism, I say [following Słowacki], Winkelriedism,”³² he puts the readiness to self-sacrifice in Juliusz Słowacki’s *Kordian (1834)* above the longing for revenge in Mickiewicz’s *Konrad Wallenrod*. It may be assumed, however, that Norwid is pointing specifically to the *ambivalence* of Słowacki’s own representation of conspiracy. In the conspiratorial scene in the crypt of Warsaw’s Saint John Cathedral from *Kordian*, Słowacki had the leader of the young conspirators say the following

28 “U ludów gasnących jest tylko inteligencja konspiracyjna albo intrygancka, ale historycznej i jawnej nie ma – bo, gdyby była, naród żyłby.” – Letter to Józef Bohdan Wagner, early December 1874; Norwid 1971–76/X: 33.

29 “... probierzcy kamień wieku: jawność!” – Letter to Stanisław Egbert Koźmian, September 16, 1847; Norwid 1971–76/VIII: 53.

30 “Ale emigracyjne wszystkie ruchy niewczesnymi będą (tak jak były), póki z miejsca warunków wyprężnięte, a w czas jedynie – że tak powiem abstrakcyjnie – rzucone wychodźców umysły przeciw-wagi w pracy, w prawdzie, w jawności, w konserwatywniejszych (że tak nazwę) obudzeniach instynktów – mieć nie będą.” – Norwid 1971–76/VII: 23 (“Listy o Emigracji” – Letters on the [Polish] Emigration).

31 Cf. Chwin 1993: 25–29 (ch. “Etos rycerski wobec etosu maski”).

32 “Mickiewicz miał prawo mówić: Wallenrodyzm, ja mówię: Winkelrydyzm.” – Norwid 1971–76/VI: 444; in the 1860 Paris Lectures on Słowacki.

words: "May the black face of conspiracy not see the light of the world, / For there the sun of God shines over the wide world!"³³ Norwid's emphasis on *jawność*, then, has to be understood not only "civically" but also metaphysically, as an option for the divine law, as an approval of the biblical commandment "You shall not kill," and as a call for spiritual purity. It is not by chance that Zwolon, the saintly but tragic hero of Norwid's eponymous drama, ends up being walled up (*rozmurowano*) after boldly speaking out against the lethal logic of his young fellow activists.³⁴ That is, both the conspirators and the state fail to recognize the liberating power of *jawność*. In this context, one should recall the juxtaposition of the Jewish conspiracy and Christian martyrdom in *Quidam*. What is at stake here is precisely Norwid's distinction between a problematic latency and the courage to disclose oneself. Thus, we read in *Quidam*: "The Jew remained silent in his chambers contained like coffins. / The Christian vanished, but publicly [*jawnie*] and actively."³⁵

I hasten to add that poetically, *jawność* is not the only or perhaps not even the most crucial principle for Norwid. In his short essay "Jasność i ciemność" ("Clarity and Darkness," 1850), in which he defends himself against the accusations of being "obscure," he reverses the logic of those objections and calls darkness "the outline and contour of the shape of truth."³⁶ The tension between austerity and playfulness mentioned above then seems to be doubled by a differentiation within Norwid's very rejection of obscurity. He argues that clarity too is only a "quality" (*przymiot*) of truth, namely its "color," not an end in itself. As a poet he holds that truth in order to be grasped needs both clarity *and* obscurity. Now, this dialectical view of the transparent and the opaque, I assume, does not invalidate or fundamentally undermine the functioning of the positive concept of *jawność*. Still, Norwid's fascination with conspiratorial obscurity and its use as a means for *jawność*, reflect the aesthetic, epistemological, and hermeneutical argument of "clarity and darkness" to a certain degree.

33 "Wstrzymać ich na Boga! / Niech myśl młodych, ciemnicy nie przestąpi proga, / Niech spisek z czarną twarzą na świat nie wychodzi, / Bo tam na świecie białym błyszczą Boga słońce!" – Słowacki 1986: 83; Act III, scene IV, v. 148–51.

34 Norwid 1971–76/IV: 78 (v. 44).

35 "Żyd – milczał w izbach zawartych jak trumny; / Chrześcijanin zniknął, lecz jawnie i w czynie." – Norwid 1971–76/III: 61; Song XIII, v. 60–61.

36 "obrysowaniem i konturem kształtu prawdy" – Norwid 1971–76/VI: 599–600. The text is addressed to "A. C." and "Z. K.," that is, to August Cieszkowski and Zygmunt Krasiński.

To conclude this section, I will mention that Adam Mickiewicz, in his Paris Lectures in the early 1840s, had introduced the highly interesting paradox of an “open conspiracy.” On the Decembrists’ plot against the Tsar in the 1820s he remarked that: “They were conspiring openly [in French, *On conspirait ouvertement*; in Polish, *Spiskowano jawnie*] ...; officers and civil servants gathered in houses with windows overlooking the streets. Public opinion ... imposed more than government threats.”³⁷ To be sure, Mickiewicz judged “open conspiracy” to be too dangerous and eventually irresponsible (he had witnessed the Decembrist’s plot at close range while being exiled in Saint Petersburg). Still, Mickiewicz was able to describe it with admiration. By contrast, even the possibility of such a conspiracy, worn and covered by public opinion, is nowhere to be found in Norwid’s writings. I suppose (had he commented on it) that he would have condemned it on the basis of his radically binary thinking to be a risky “hybrid.” Both the oxymoronic and the dialectical dimensions, although they may considerably affect the “binary code” at times, generally remain undeclared in his rhetoric.

To Make Use of One’s Freedom

I will now address a second point of reference for *jawność* in Norwid’s writings. Because many of his remarks on conspiracy date from the 1860s and 1870s, it is hardly plausible to conceptualize them within the framework of Romanticism solely, or even against the background thereof. They should also be seen in the context of a new system, namely Positivism. I would like to briefly discuss this reframing with reference to Eliza Orzeszkowa’s notion of “simple virtues.” According to Orzeszkowa, the great female writer of Polish Positivism/Realism, the disregard for the “simple virtue of sincerity”³⁸ lies at the root of any societal evil. The topic of Orzeszkowa’s essay is not conspiracy, but rather the culture of informality in a broader sense, which she argues undermines the possibility of agreements and in particular renders the observance of contracts impossible. In Norwid’s analysis of conspiracy, however, there is a highly similar strand of critique: the idea of the right use of legality. Thus, in 1869, he emphatically recalls “that nations have been wiped out as a result of their non-sensitization to, and non-use of, laws and/or rights, their distrust of legal institutions, and instead,

37 In Polish: Mickiewicz 1952: 338. In French: Mickiewicz 1849: 289. Cf. Chwin 1993: 30–36, especially 33 (“Psychospołeczny paradoks ‘jawnego spiskowania’”).

38 “prost[a] cnot[a] uczciwości” – Orzeszkowa 1884: 35.

confidence in rumors and chatter and their crystallization, i.e., conspiracies.”³⁹ Norwid—like Orzeszkowa—deplores the lack of what we today call civil society. Conspiracy, conversely, becomes a metaphor for the voluntary renunciation of a public sphere. “[H]ere,” he notes in the 1870s, “here ... where no one wills to make use of his freedom—here no one, too, reveals himself.”⁴⁰ Norwid describes this shortcoming as a specific form of an abuse of power. Conspiracy turns out to be self-enslavement.⁴¹ Elsewhere, as early as in 1851, Norwid remarked, “he who does not fulfill his civic vocation will sink into the deeper category of those dissatisfied or of the conspirators who did not use their power by truth and by *jawność*.”⁴² Here, the warning about the “black face” of conspiracy from Słowacki’s *Kordian* is once again palpable. On the whole, however, the call to *make use of the law and of one’s rights* and the idea of a cultural flourishing within a given legal framework (as rudimentary as it may have been in partitioned Poland), is obviously far removed from the “Prophetic” model of Romanticism.⁴³ To make use of the law and of one’s rights in a non-subversive way

39 “narody bywają z historii wymazane za nieczujność, za nieużywanie praw, nieufanie władzom prawnym, a ufanie plotkom, gawędkom i ich krystalizacji, to jest konspiracjom.” – Norwid 1971–76/VII: 170 (“Kwestia bieżąca Zmartwychwstańców” – “The Current Question of the Resurrectionists”).

40 “u nas ... gdzie nikt wolności nie używa – nikt nie objawia się.” – Norwid 1971–76/VII: 190 (“Dopiski na egzemplarzu broszury ‘Pożegnanie pułkownika Adama Kozłowskiego’” – “Postscript on a Copy of the Brochure ‘Farewell to the Colonel Adam Kozłowski’”).

41 Cf. “Polak tylko jest w stanie coś podobnego wypowiedzieć! Trzeba na to być sto lat niewolnikiem i kilkadziesiąt konspiratorem, aby ... coś podobnego napisać ... Tak powiedziałby Anglik, Amerykanin, Szwajcar, Grek Peryklejski i Rzymianin za Scypionów – ale tak nie powie Polak dzisiejszy żaden, dlatego że się rodzi z niewolników, a zenitem jego myśli jest personalna konspiracja.” – Letter to Józef Rusteyko, February 1870; Norwid 1971–76/IX: 445–46.

42 “nie spełni swojego Obywatelskiego powołania i przejdzie na kategorię niższą mal-kontentów lub konspiratorów, którzy władzy swojej w prawdzie i jawności nie użyli.” – Norwid 1971–76/VII: 110 (“Memoriał o młodej emigracji” – “The Young [Polish] Emigration Memorial”).

43 Adam Mickiewicz, like many after him, including Norwid, analyzed the partitions of Poland as cynical instantiations of legalism and thus stressed the perverse potential of the “written law” (*prawo pisane*). That does not mean, however, that Mickiewicz simply dismissed legal considerations. He was obviously an heir of the (French) natural rights tradition: According to him, the Poles should make reference to their “innate

must be tantamount to *unoriginality* when measured by a worldview of the “re-volt against the mediated world” (to put it alongside a phrase by contemporary German writer Botho Strauß).⁴⁴ By contrast, Norwid is a poet and intellectual who in the context of late Romanticism is trying to save the honor of the mediated world, that is, of law, diplomacy, journalism and so forth. This is, to be sure, a peculiar enterprise, for it soon becomes clear that his way of thinking remains incompatible with Positivism in a crucial respect. Thus, in the poem “Prac-czoło” (“The-Forehead-of-Labor,” 1858), the Positivist approach to economic matters is referred to derogatively as “your *real-school* of the day”⁴⁵ doomed to “shallowness” and “insincerity.” There *is* a deep-seated skepticism towards institutions and institutional rationalization in Norwid, which in the end is certainly still romantic, and it even leads him to severely limit his mantrically repeated ideal of *jawność*.⁴⁶

Norwid wrote in 1849 that “*jawność* is the only remedy in the political sphere—for what is *jawne* is not addressed to anyone personally, but only to this time as such.”⁴⁷ The category of “impersonality” (*impersonalność*) appears to be the condition of possibility for *jawność*. However, impersonality in Norwid’s lexicon also designates an anti-expressivist stylistic ideal, which shows that it can hardly be meant to propagate technocratic neutrality. Instead, he suggests a series of polemical counter-concepts to institutionalism with regard to French public life all of which directly attack the reduction of *jawność* to daily news. Still in 1849, he wrote:

right” (*prawo przyrodzone, prawo wrodzone*) in their struggle for freedom. See the seven-page entry on “Prawo” in the *Słownik języka Adama Mickiewicza* (Górski/Hrabec 1969). Typically, late German Romanticism is considered to mark the end of natural rights universalism in the name of the “national spirit” (*Volksgeist*). Mickiewicz’s position could be, then, defined as a complex mix of the natural rights tradition and national spirit historicism. – See Gottfried 1968 and Lizisowa 1994.

44 Strauß 1999. Strauß’s text was first published as an afterword to the German edition of George Steiner’s *Real Presences* (1989; *Von realer Gegenwart*, 1990).

45 “wasza dziś *realna-szkola*”, “zarówno płytka, jak nieszczera” – Norwid 1971–76/II: 92

46 For a general account of civilizational skepticism in nineteenth-century Poland see Jedlicki 1999: 140–41 and *passim*.

47 “*jawność* jedynym jest lekarstwem na fata morgana polityczne – bo co *jawne*, to nie jest do nikogo osobiście zmierzonym, ale do czasu tego tylko.” – Norwid 1971–76/VII: 31 (“[Odpowiedź krytykom ‘Listów o emigracji]” – “Reply to the Critics of the ‘Letters on the [Polish] Emigration’”).

Jawność, which is in particular the quality of being present, has enclosed the French mind in that interim state, in that slimming of the present that is becoming a daily fact and accordingly, is of ephemeral value.

For the present (i.e., for *jawność*)—the link with the relatively non-present, i.e., with the non-obvious, i.e., with both the past (tradition) and the future (addition) is broken—there is virtually no sequence, or if there is, then only a governmental and mechanistic one—which is why everything becomes sequence-less.⁴⁸

Public life in the West would be that which is evident *right now*, regardless of both the origin and possible anticipations of the outcome, a kind of pre-stabilized interplay of politics and journalism or an institutional self-reproduction. Norwid, then, is seeking a stance on the narrow ridge between the unreliability of “personal conspiracy” (*personalna konspiracja*⁴⁹) in Polish communities on the one hand and the all too “impersonal” public life in the West on the other. How can we make sense of this “third” position? What is clear is that it would have to answer the two key criteria of (a) openness and (b) the ability to make use of one’s rights. But that openness would have to be non-sensational and, instead, embrace an archeological dimension, that is, a readiness to “dig” into cultural memory. Similarly, the use of one’s rights would have to be distinguished from the pretense of individualistic and hedonistic consumption.

***Jawność* between Utopia and Prophetic Pragmatism**

We now begin to see that the sphere that Norwid is trying to occupy as an intellectual has not yet been defined—unless we admit very generally that the eleven or eighteen volumes (*Pisma wszystkie* or the more recent *Dziela wszystkie* respectively) of his *Collected Works* sufficiently represent that sphere. Again, that

48 “*Jawność*, będąc przymiotem obecności szczególnie, zawarła tu umysł francuski w tę doraźność, w te obecności zeszczuplenie, które dniowością już się staje i efemeryczną też ma wartość. / Dla obecności (to jest *jawności*) – z nieobecny-m-względnie, to jest z niejawnym, to jest z przeszłym (z tradycją) i z przyszłym (z addycją) pozrywano – sekwencji nie ma prawie żadnej, albo guwernemantalna i mechaniczna tylko – niekonsekwentne zatem wszystko.” – *ibid.*: 32.

49 See n. 41. Maria Janion has shown, on the basis of confessions made by members of the “Association of the Polish People” (*Stowarzyszenie Ludu Polskiego*, second half of the 1830s), how shallowly their “conspiratorial ethics” was often rooted and how easily it could be “broken” during interrogations. – Janion 1976: 33–35.

would be inappropriate even from Norwid's own perspective because his writings remained largely *unpublished* during his lifetime. One of his many remarks on journalistic issues may give us an indication. He wrote:

There is not one single [Polish journal] that would, I do not even dare to say, answer the question, but that would even ask it, What is man? What is life? What is time? What is labor? What is money? What is the higher? What is harmony? What is *jawność*?⁵⁰

What Norwid is imagining here is a fundamental journalism of *essences*. My proposal would be, then, that the sphere of *jawność* clearly bears “metaphysical” traits, as I mentioned above while discussing Norwid's high esteem for Słowacki's *Kordian*. Moreover, that sphere in a political sense reveals many utopian features and therefore *programmatically* escapes graspable concretizations to a certain extent. This tendency may be illustrated by the fact that Norwid often deliberately seems to ignore the tight limitations of engagement in the partitioned Poland of his times. In so doing, he presents *jawność* as radically possible even if it in fact was not. Now, it might be helpful to understand this utopia more as a hypothetical or even counterfactual strategy with a very *practical* aim; namely, to persuade (future) readers to completely exhaust the limits of what can be done legally. Consequently, a utopian interpretation of *jawność* would make way for a “prophetic pragmatism” reading of sorts—to use Cornel West's paradoxical phrase.⁵¹

50 “Ani jednego [pisma polskiego] nie ma, które by, nie powiem już: odpowiedziało, ale zapytało przynajmniej: co jest człowiek? co jest życie? co jest czas? co jest praca? co jest pieniądz? co jest wyższość? co jest ład? co jest jawność? — — — zatracają Serio!!” — Letter to Marian Sokółowski, 2 August 1865; Norwid 1971–76/IX: 184.

51 To be sure, the social philosopher Cornel West introduced the concept in a completely different context historically, politically, and religiously. West defines prophetic pragmatism as “a form of American left thought and action in our postmodern moment,” inspired by prophetic Christianity, especially the black liberation movement (Martin Luther King Jr. and others). Prophetic pragmatism's aim is the “reinvigoration of a sane, sober, and sophisticated intellectual life in America and ... a regeneration of social forces empowering the disadvantaged, degraded, and dejected.” — See West 1989, 239. The emphasis on sanity, sobriety, and sophistication in public discourse is reminiscent of Norwid indeed. The advocacy for the disadvantaged is too, to a certain degree. One cannot fail to think of Norwid's two poems on the abolitionist John Brown which are marked by a deep sense of solidarity (“Do obywatela Johna Brown” [To the Citizen John Brown, 1859]; “John Brown” 1863). — See also Dickenson 1990.

The conspirator in the epic *Quidam* was characterized by a one-sided, self-encapsulating “gloom.” The Romantic conspirator, Norwid’s contemporary, is a “hybrid” of monk and tightrope walker, an obscene mix, according to Norwid, of ascetic rigidity and the agility of a trickster. But even that irreconcilability may not have been foreign to Norwid the poet. One could put it as follows: just as there is a kind of metaphorical intimacy with conspiracy in his writings, there is also a certain vagueness about Norwid’s panacea, *jawność*. But there is a performative power to this vagueness, a power to enact the very process of disclosure, which is promised by *jawność*.

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Abstract

This chapter addresses a series of critical statements about conspiracy, both as a political means and as a social attitude, made in the writings of the Polish late Romantic Cyprian Norwid (1821–1883). “Peoples in decline,” he notes, “have only conspiratorial or machinating reason, there is no historical and open reason in them.” Norwid laments the existence of an informal system of gossip that “crystallizes” into conspiracies. With regard to nineteenth-century Poland, his rejection of conspiracy is tantamount to a strong critique of political Romanticism, i.e., of some key aspects of the Polish insurgent tradition. What Norwid calls for instead is a culture of “openness” and a transparent, non-revolutionary, truth-seeking ethos. However, one cannot fail to observe a kind of fascination with conspiracy in his writings. This ambiguity, the chapter argues, reflects Norwid’s dialectical understanding of the role played by “clarity” and “obscurity” in his poetics.

