Why Did Cyprian Norwid Wear the *konfederatka?*: The Crime of Wearing a Black Dress

Polonya Ocak Ayaklanmasında (1863) Kadınların Modayı Silahlaştırması

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Abstract

After the partitions of Poland between Russia, Prussia and Austria, Poland disappeared from the maps of Europe. The failure of the November Uprising of 1830 against the Russian occupiers led to harsh repressions imposed by the tzarist rule on the Polish people. Many insurgents were imprisoned, or sentenced to death, or forcibly deported to Siberia, their manors and estates were confiscated, and family members were persecuted. As a result, the revival of patriotic attitudes among the subsequent generation in the Kingdom of Poland led to outburst of opposition to the imposed Russian authorities. On the 30th anniversary of the Battle of Grochów, the citizens of Warsaw organized a demonstration in the Castle Square. The Russian soldiers attacked the protesters and killed five. Around that time, a national mourning was secretly announced, and women decided to wear black dresses and silver or bone jewellery in the form of a cross or a crown of thorns, thus sending a hidden message to compatriots and to the Russians. As a result, the decree was issued against the black garments, stating that only personal mourning was allowed based on an official certificate of a family member's death, otherwise the mourners could be imprisoned. Therefore, other colours, white and violet were introduced as a sign of resistance as well. Black dresses and the *konfederatka* caps meant not just fashion during the years of the January Uprising; they gained recognition as a hidden patriotic code among Poles living both in the occupied country and in emigration. Poet-emigrant Cyprian Norwid explained the importance of wearing the special type of men's headgear, referring to the great history of his enslaved country and arguing that symbols and power of thought are powerful weapons in the modern world.

Keywords: Norwid, fashion, national mourning, January Uprising

When we think of fashion, usually the first ideas that come to mind are those of great designers, the Oscar gala, and other fancy events giving celebrities an opportunity to show themselves. Or else we may ask ourselves: Is my outfit in fashion? What colour should I wear to remain fit in the most current trends? Some of us, mostly the young ones or artists use fashion, or more broadly, the way they dress, to identify themselves either as members of the group of their choice or as completely different from others.

Fashion has been a subject of considerable research work. James Laver, poet, museum curator and art historian, focuses on costume history and drees design reflected in other applied arts, even in architecture.[1] Roland Barthes, inspired by the linguistic theory of language as a system of signs, analyses fashion on the grounds of semiology, examining fashion as representation of "a real code, although this code does not 'speak'" (Barthes, 1967, p. 8), which may become as powerful as direct instructions as if given by invisible dictators. He carries out a structural analysis of women's dresses and the impact of massive readership of fashion journals on the society in general, indicating that most women in France read regularly publications devoted to fashion, and that it is a social fact

[1] Laver also coined his famous fashion law. See *Taste and Fashion, London 1937.*

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constituting "un élement incontestable de la culture de masse, tout comme les romans populaires, les comics, le cinema" (Barthes, 1967, p. 19). Some of Barthes' ideas are reflected in Dick Hebdige's analysis of the youth fashion codes associated with different music styles emerging in the UK as a result of massive migrations from the former colonies after World War II, showing the evolution of style linked with "a whole network of subterranean channels which had for years linked the fringes of the indigenous population to the equivalent West Indian subcultures. Originally opened to the illicit traffic of 'weed' and jazz, these internal channels provided the basis for much broader cultural exchanges" (Hebdige, 1979, pp. 39-40). It seems, however, that the author owes more to methods used in sociology. Analysing different youth subcultures, he attributes the changes in the youth fashion to sociological background: "The clothes had also undergone a series of significant adjustments over the years. The aspirations of the early immigrants had been mirrored in the rainbow mohair suits and picture ties, the neatly printed frocks and patent-leather shoes which they had worn on their arrival in Great Britain," and he observes that the Rasta fashion and reggae stemmed from "desperation or at least impatience with the host country, a belief in the efficacy of action, a desire for increased status, and confidence that the Mother Country would recognize its obligations, would welcome and reward its lost children" (Hebdige, 1979, p. 41).

Analysing fashion in a broad context of culture, Fred Davis also derives his research conclusions from sociological observations. He tries to present the paradigms and their sociopolitical contexts by which one needs to study fashion, and asks an important question: "Is everything subject to fashion?" (Davis, 1992, p. 192). Davis writes that "our social identities are rarely the stable amalgams we take them to be. Prodded by social and technological change, the biological decrements of the life cycle, visions of utopia, and occasions of disaster, our identities are forever in ferment, giving rise to numerous strains, paradoxes, ambivalences, and contradictions within ourselves. It is upon these collectively experienced, sometimes historically recurrent, identity instabilities that fashion feeds" (Davis, 1992, p. 17). Analysing the place fashion occupies in today's culture, in our modern world, he notices that this phenomenon is tightly connected not only with the realm of pure aesthetics, but with that of money as well, generating, on a massive scale, enormous amounts of contemporary world's revenues. And it is worth to add, significantly contributing to contamination of our beautiful planet with millions of tons of rubbish. Can we blame solely the industrial revolution and mass consumption for that? There are more ethical questions involved in the domain of fashion than are dreamt of in our philosophy, and in literary research as well. Romantic poets, especially celebrities of their times like Byron, were using fashion as a tool enhancing their literary message. They wanted to be perceived as lonely prophets struggling with the society in the name of truth, love and freedom, and attaining wisdom through identifying themselves with the heroic past, or with ideas coming from the Orient, and so they loved to manifest such attitude in their apparel. Fred Davis refers to Oskar Wilde's phrase: "It is only shallow people who do not judge by appearances. The true mystery of the world is the visible, not the invisible" as a motto for his research book (Davis, 1992, p. 1); Malcolm Barnard used the same phrase as a *part pro toto* of commonly used proverbs and sentences referring to the importance of the way people dress. References to literary quotes and poetic metaphors enrich research in almost all the fields, even in science, but when research concerns fashion, it seems inevitable to examine how this aspect of human culture is reflected in literary works. Hebdige quotes from and refers to both the acknowledged researchers and literary writers, like Genet and Shakespeare. I will also do that later in this paper, focusing specially on a poem written by Cyprian Norwid, the Polish poet who in his everyday life was rather far from being interested in fashion, opposite to one of the most celebrated Polish Romantic authors Juliusz Słowacki, who, beyond his achievements in poetry, gained also some fame as a trendsetter in the style of shirt's collar – years after his death, young Poles were proudly wearing shirts *a la Słowacki.* Cyprian Norwid never attached attention to the garments he was wearing, with one significant exception associated with the fate of his enslaved country.

Following or setting fashion trends, and even the most profound scientific analyses of fashion, are usually problems of people living in free, democratic, and rich countries. But even in those countries, some people do not enjoy the freedom of fashion. How about the uniforms of soldiers, nuns, priests? Malcolm Barnard presents interesting insights in this respect, but he underestimates important aspects one may associate with the philosophical notion of free will. There are circumstances where the way people dress does not result from their choice. If we think about the German nazi concentration camps and the striped blouses and trousers of prisoners, of their wooden boots – is it fashion? What about the coercive measures applied to force women dress according to the ideology adopted by the authorities in their country? Barnard states: "Although it seems to be rare, it is not unknown for governments to attempt to fix the meaning of fashion and clothing. The most obvious ways in which they attempt to do this is by means of sumptuary laws […] regulating private expenditure, limiting what people can spend" (Barnard, 1996, p. 77) and gives examples from history, like the law enacted in 1327 in England by king Edward III to prevent purchasing expensive garments allowed for aristocracy by people of lower social standing, or a law passed by Henry IV in sixteenth-century France forbidding the bourgeoisie from wearing silk reserved for upper classes only, and concludes that later in history only in communist regimes similar restrictions were imposed. It seems that Barnard does not consider the history of the country which was under oppression a lot earlier than the communists occupied it after World War II.

Undoubtedly, there is a difference in fashion between the happy and less happy countries. Fashion can be used as a tool of oppression but may be also as an armament. What about fashion in an enslaved country? Can fashion become a real weapon against oppression? According to Barthes' theory, fashion may be considered as a code. In certain circumstances, it may also consist of a hidden code of the rebellion.

Before I get to the literary research point, i.e. Cyprian Norwid's rare connection with the area of fashion, I will focus on the history of my own country, Poland, where fashion once played a specific role. In the second half of the 19th century, it became a real weapon! How did it happen?

After the three partitions, the whole of Poland got finally divided in 1795 between the three imperialist powers, Russia, Prussia, and Austria, and so lost its independence until 1918. The situation in the part occupied by the tzarist Russia was the worst. After the failure of the Kościuszko insurrection, Napoleon's campaigns resulting in the establishment of the Grand Duchy of Warsaw which existed very shortly, after the fall of the November Uprising of 1830, the enslaved Polish nation lost even the fake sovereignty granted to the Kingdom of Poland (under the Russian rule of course, in spite of its proud name), established in 1815 based on the Vienna Congress' decision. However, the dream of freedom was alive despite the harsh words of Tzar Alexander II addressed to the delegation of the Polish nobility on the 23 of May 1856, the second day after his arrival to Poland, after the warm welcome he received from the citizens of Warsaw hoping for a radical change in the Russian attitude to the national aspirations and hopes. According to the relation published by count d'Angeberg on page 1117 in the collection of documents

Recueil des traités, conventions et archives diplomatiques concernant la Pologne, published in Paris in 1862, the tzar said and repeated it several times: "Messieurs, point de rêveries!" [No more dreams, gentlemen! Give up any hope!) (Kieniewicz, 1972, p. 17).

When it became clear that despite the defeat in the Crimean War, the new and more "liberal" tzar of Russia – and nominally – also the king of Poland – will not agree to any concessions for the enslaved nation, patriotic Polish people gathered at the funeral of general Sowinski's widow; that was the first manifestation on a big scale. After that, the Polish patriots decided to commemorate the thirtieth anniversary of the battle of Grochów of the November Uprising. People gathered in a vast number in the square near the Royal Castle in Warsaw on the 27th of February 1861. The Russian Cossacks killed five men. Their funeral on the 2nd of March was attended by almost all the citizens of Warsaw.

Aleksander Lesser: the funeral of the five victims of the Warsaw manifestation in 1861 [public domain]

The tragedy of civilians brutally killed during the peaceful manifestation initiated further actions. Archbishop Fijałkowski secretly declared national mourning. Women were asked to wear black dresses only and to stop going to balls, concerts, and operas. Very precise instructions were given concerning jewellery and other ornaments. According to the secret instruction, all patriotic women gave up beautiful colours in their garments. Allowed materials to be used in jewellery were limited to black lava, silver, iron, animal bones; motives used in ornaments included crown of thorns, fetters, shackles, chains, anchor, cross, Eagle (symbol of Poland), Pogoń (symbol of Lithuania), St Michael the Archangel (symbol of Ruthenia). Hence, black dress became a protest dress; religious hymns sang in churches became protests songs of the time.

Artur Grottger: Farewell to the Insurgent. Public domain

Black textiles, black hats, black gloves were in high demand; the trendy shops and tailor's shops advertised products suitable for the mourning in newspapers and fashion magazines quite overtly at the beginning, but tzarist officials realised the danger hidden in a black dress pretty soon. On the 1st of April 1861, the Commander in Chief of the I Army General Kotzebue wrote to the Commandant of the II Corps instructing him and his soldiers:

> Yesterday on March 31 the Warsaw general-governor announced that wearing any unusual garments and external signs of mourning shall be forbidden […] should persons violating this prohibition be encountered, they should not be arrested by soldiers because it is the task for the police authorities, but should any people with [such signs] approach the guardhouse, beginning with the next day of the 2nd of April they must be taken and kept under arrest for a full day and then released if no

> other offences committed by them were noticed. But you shall inform the commander in chief daily about all the persons arrested in such way. (Powstanie Styczniowe, 1973, p. 57, my translation)

Picture taken from the official website of Muzeum Narodowe Ziemi Przemyskiej

Subsequently, the police were also instructed to persecute those wearing and selling black dresses. Thus, the fake reason for mourning started appearing in advertisements published in fashion journals and other press: the death of the Duchess of Kent, Queen Victoria's mother, who happened to die on the 16th of March 1861, roughly around the time when the national mourning was generally adopted by the Polish people. But the tzarist police did not respect that anyway.

Picture from public domain

On the 22nd of January 1863 the national uprising, planned for spring at the earliest, broke out prematurely. The underground Polish National Government took the decision stemming from the forceful conscription of young Poles to the Russian army – for the 20 years of military service.

The call to arms was announced by the underground Polish National Government in Russia's Kingdom of Poland, and then in the former Grand Duchy of Lithuania (directly incorporated to the state of Russia). The aim of the insurgents was to restore the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in its territorial shape from before the three partitions. At this point, the secret Polish state, the Reds, the Whites, the peasants' issue ... That is another story, worth studying, but let us get back to fashion.

After the outbreak of the Uprising of 1863 the Russian occupants declared that wearing a black dress would be considered heavy offence, a crime of disloyalty to the Russian authorities. The official decree issued on the 16th of October by the Russian general Leon Lewszyn, Chief of the Warsaw police, imposed the official ban on the mourning dresses and "on any revolutionary markings used for the purpose of illicit manifestations" (Kurjer Warszawski, 1863). A few days later restrictions got more severe: "After the 29th of October women of any status and age who will show up in mourning clothes will be arrested and send to prison and will not be released sooner than they pay a fine" (Kurjer Warszawski, 1863). The fines were high: 100 roubles to be paid by those found in a private carriage; those in hired coaches had to pay 15 roubles each, and the coachman guilty of driving illegally dressed passengers should pay 10 roubles for each female incorrectly dressed found in the carriage, and their vehicles and horses should be kept by the police until they paid the assigned penalty. If a wife or children of an official were arrested for the crime of wearing a black dress, the husband or father of the "criminal" would lose one month's salary.

However, there was a gap in the coverage of this prohibition; a few women were allowed to wear mourning signs. According to the subsequent police announcement, it was allowed to wear black dresses if a woman had recently lost her father, mother or husband, provided that such woman obtained by the 29th of October the special certificate issued by the Chief of police based on a death certificate from the respective parish church.

Further restrictions concerning hats were imposed on the 2nd of November; the hats had to be colourful, and the black ones had to be decorated with colourful flowers or ribbons. Moreover, it was also forbidden to wear black gloves, scarfs and to carry black umbrellas.

The underground Polish National Government had to respond to that; on the 29th of October 1863, they issued an appeal to the Polish nation, stating, among other things: "The black colour of our women's dresses now serves our enemy as a pretext to extensive cruelties unheard of in all the history of civilised world. The national mourning was undertaken voluntarily by the people led by their patriotic instinct […] but from now on the National Government shall not consider it a deviation from the sacred cause if women stop wearing black dresses. Any modest dress a Polish woman wears will mean mourning to her. We do not need to protest with the colour of our dresses when we protest with our blood against the invasion."[2] However, the national mourning was officially lifted only in 1866, when the tzar announced amnesty to those who had participated in the fallen "rebellion."

Nevertheless, after so many deaths of the January Uprising insurgents, when too many were sent to Siberia, their families thrown out of their homes and property seized by the Russian authorities, when others were immediately sentenced to death or kept dying in the Citadel prison, the Polish women who once put black dresses on decided to remain faithful to the mourning *fashion*. That is why almost all the photographs and painted portraits of the Polish people of the epoch present *a woman in black*, or a man wearing the special insurgent's hat, *konfederatka*, the symbol of fight for independence since the very beginning of the imposed slavery. Cyprian Norwid, the Polish poet, philosopher and artist, being an emigree since 1848 after he had spent several months in a Berlin prison, could not participate in the uprising of 1863, but expressed his utmost solidarity in his writings and letters sent from Paris to his friends and family members, had put this hat on when his photograph was taken in 1861 and wanted to be remembered as one of the fighters for the national cause. He authored a poem specially devoted to his choice of the headwear, and this poem should be treated as autobiographical, against the restrictive commandment coined for literary researchers, which may be paraphrased as follows: thou shalt not identify the speaking: "I" with the author. Here is the translation of this poem – as far as I know it has not been translated into English so far:

To the Question: Why in Konfederatka?
My Answer
1.
The era of old arms comes to an end,
Its time runs out, then
Man of today is not forged for them
Arms, are forged for man.
2.
Neither is knight just a violent fickle,
He is the one who waits;
And colonel may rather be a cripple! -
With no athlete's traits.

Norwid in the konfederatka cap
[public domain]

[2] My translation. Leaflet issued by the National Government on the 29th of October 1863 – Appeal to the Nation, in the collection of prints held by the Polish National Library, available at https://polona.pl/item-view/0df51f6b-80cf-40f6-ad15-70105eb584a2?page=0

3.
On my temples I put the amaranth cap
Konfederatka
Because Piast had such cap in his crown
As pad – podkładka
4.
So I do not care that they all forgot
Where from it came
And that they vulgarized it – for what?
Such a thing. Oh! Shame. –
5.
Yet it is clear – I know the great gem
Of the Republic;
Since to any wreath I prefer this hem
Woven of lamb! —[3]

The poem is full of meaningful reflections. First, Norwid notices, as he did in his letter to Józef Ignacy Kraszewski of the 3rd of April 1863, that it is not sufficient to use old-style weapons because the uprising with the sword must be accompanied by the uprising with the strength of thought (Norwid, 2019, p. 185). Accordingly, those leading the struggle, like colonels, do not necessarily have to be athletes – a crippled philosopher is as needed as … a weak woman, provided that she wears adequate dress.

In the third stanza of the poem Norwid states that he values the amaranth cap rimmed with the lamb fur a lot more than he might any other wreath (may be, by default, he gives it preference even to the laurel wreath put on temples of the greatest poets). Why? Because it does reflect the greatness of Poland's history. Piast, the founder of the first historically recognized dynasty of the kings of Poland (the number including Jadwiga, the crowned woman ruler at the onset of the powerful Jagiellonian dynasty) is referred to as a *part pro toto* of the greatness of Poland and its kings before the nation got enslaved. Norwid himself was very immensely proud of his ancestry – his grandmother belonged to the family which gave Poland the famous king, John III Sobieski, and he often wrote about this fact in his letters. Thus, he understood his patriotic obligations also as a hereditary commitment stemming not only from his philosophical and artistic abilities but also from a very personal reason, from his royal Polish genealogy.

It seems that the Polish people, and especially women, heroic defendants of Poland's national identity, who used fashion as a real and dangerous weapon against the occupant of imperial Russia constitute a unique example of the use of fashion not for fancy, not for a social status or demonstration of one's wealth and importance, but for the life-or-death struggle for one's nation's being. Fashion is a serious phenomenon and should not be neglected as a subject of considerable research – not only on the grounds of semiology or aesthetics.

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[3] My translation. It is always worth reading poetry in the original language, so here is Cyprian Norwid's text in Polish available at
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