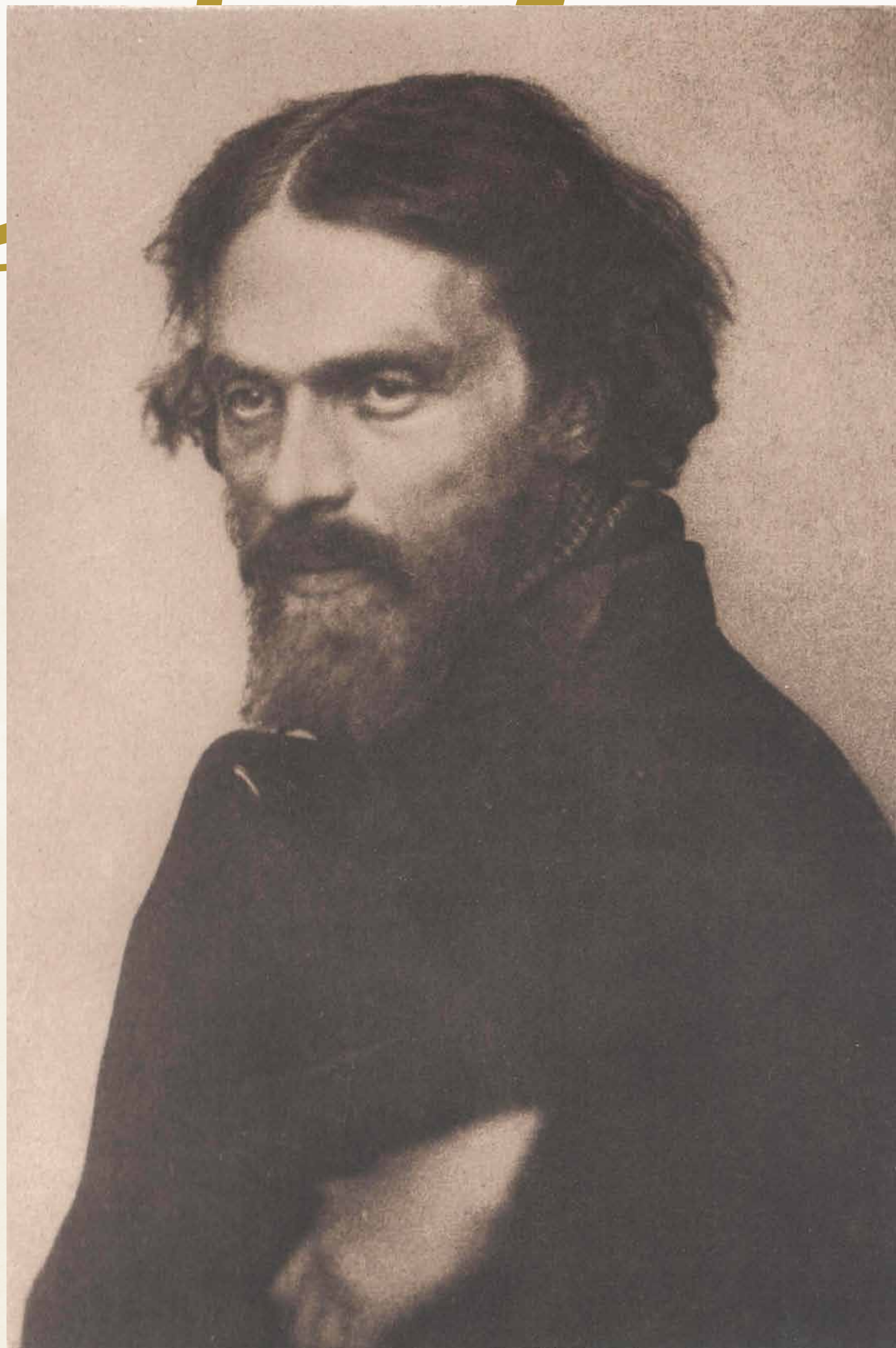


# Poetry and goodness



## NORWID – A VERSATILE GENIUS

*Wisława Szymborska, a Polish Nobel Prize winner, once described poet's work as being "sentenced to hard norwids".*

*Yet "Norwid" is no common noun here. It is a surname which for Polish readers means a characteristic bearded face, the fate of an emigrant, with life filled with hope and despair, and death in poverty. First of all, however, it stands for a genius that remained unacknowledged. It stands for an observer and a reporter. A thinker and an illustrator. A giant of philosophical poetry and the most fascinating and perhaps the most difficult Polish poet. It stands for the highest level of initiation into poetry, and an author of the most intriguing, the most beautiful, full and bold phrases.*

*Is the bird sullyng the nest, which it does,  
Or one who speaking of it does not allow?*

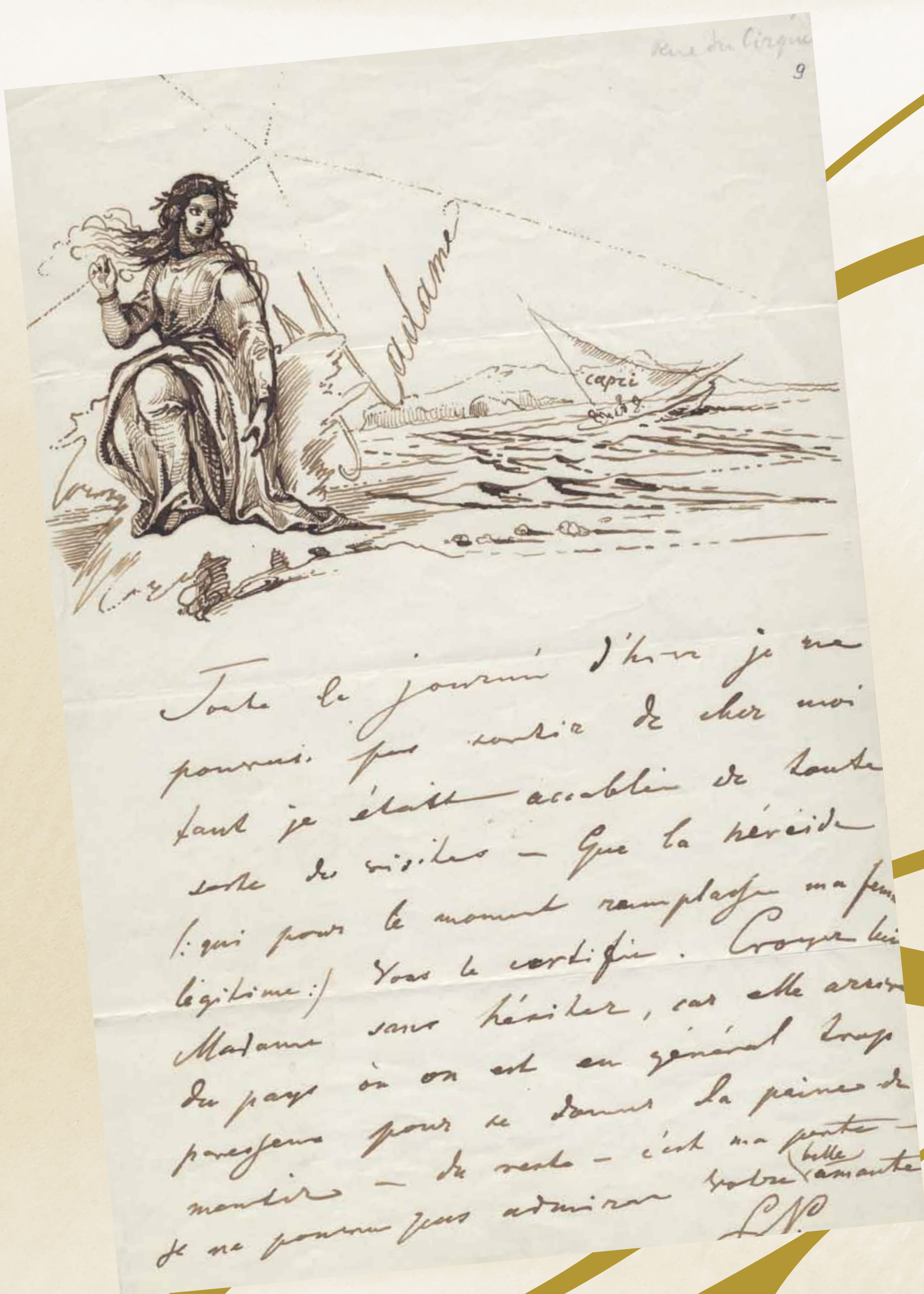


# Cyprian Kamil Norwid

## (1821–1883)

A contemporary of Charles Baudelaire. Classified among the poets of Romanticism, he used one of a kind poetic diction. He created whilst in the shadow of older, great and already famous by then poets – Adam Mickiewicz and Juliusz Słowacki, with whom he was on friendly terms.

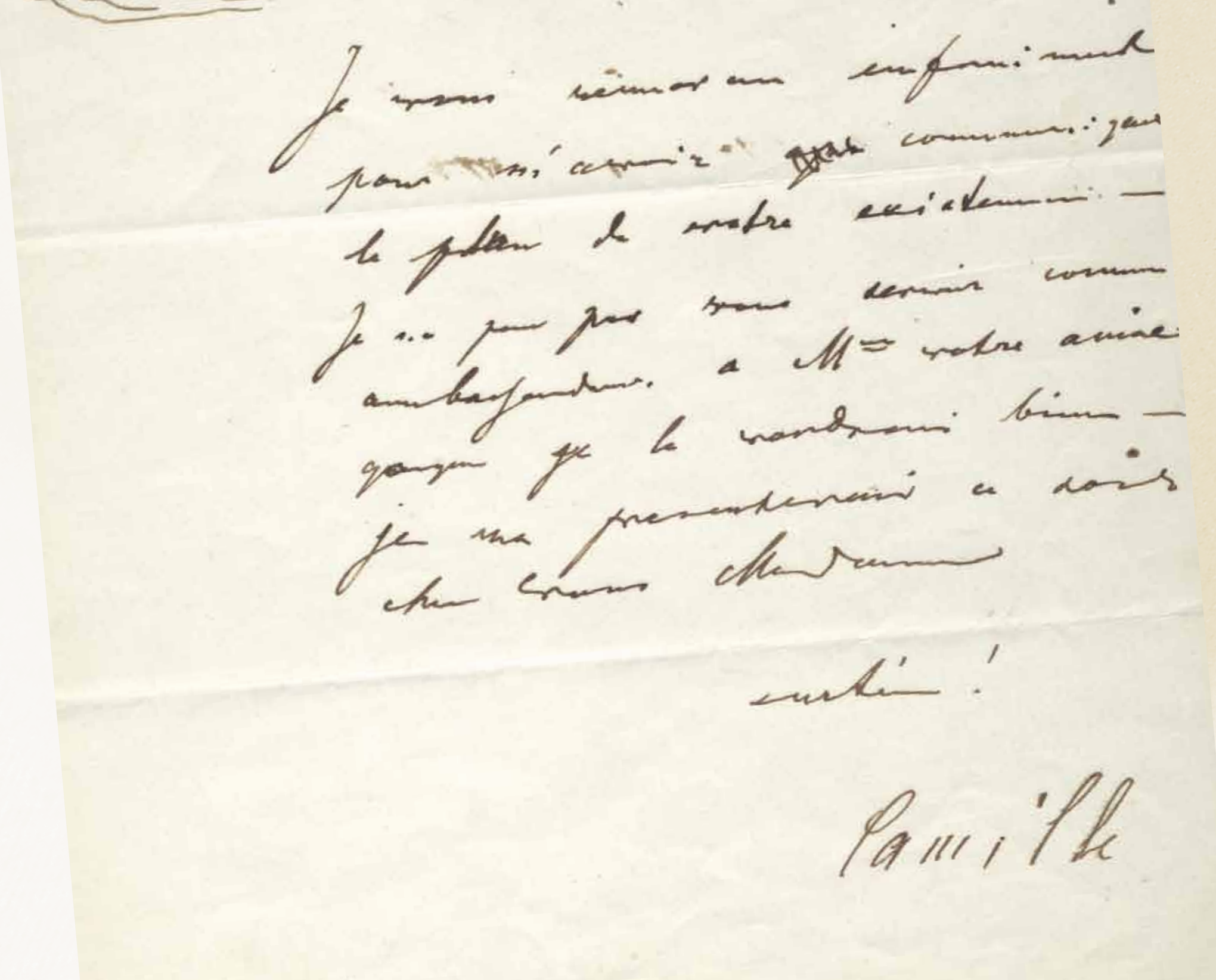
Norwid was born in 1821 in a Masovian village of Głuchy. He studied and grew up in Warsaw. In 1842, Norwid started travelling, stopping in Dresden, Venice, Florence, Rome, Berlin and Brussels. When the Springtime of Nations came, he was once again staying in Rome. He moved to Paris in 1849, where he made friends with Fryderyk Chopin.



Unhappily in love, ill and poor, in 1852 he decided to emigrate to the United States. In 1854, however, he returned to Europe and stayed in London, eventually settling in Paris.

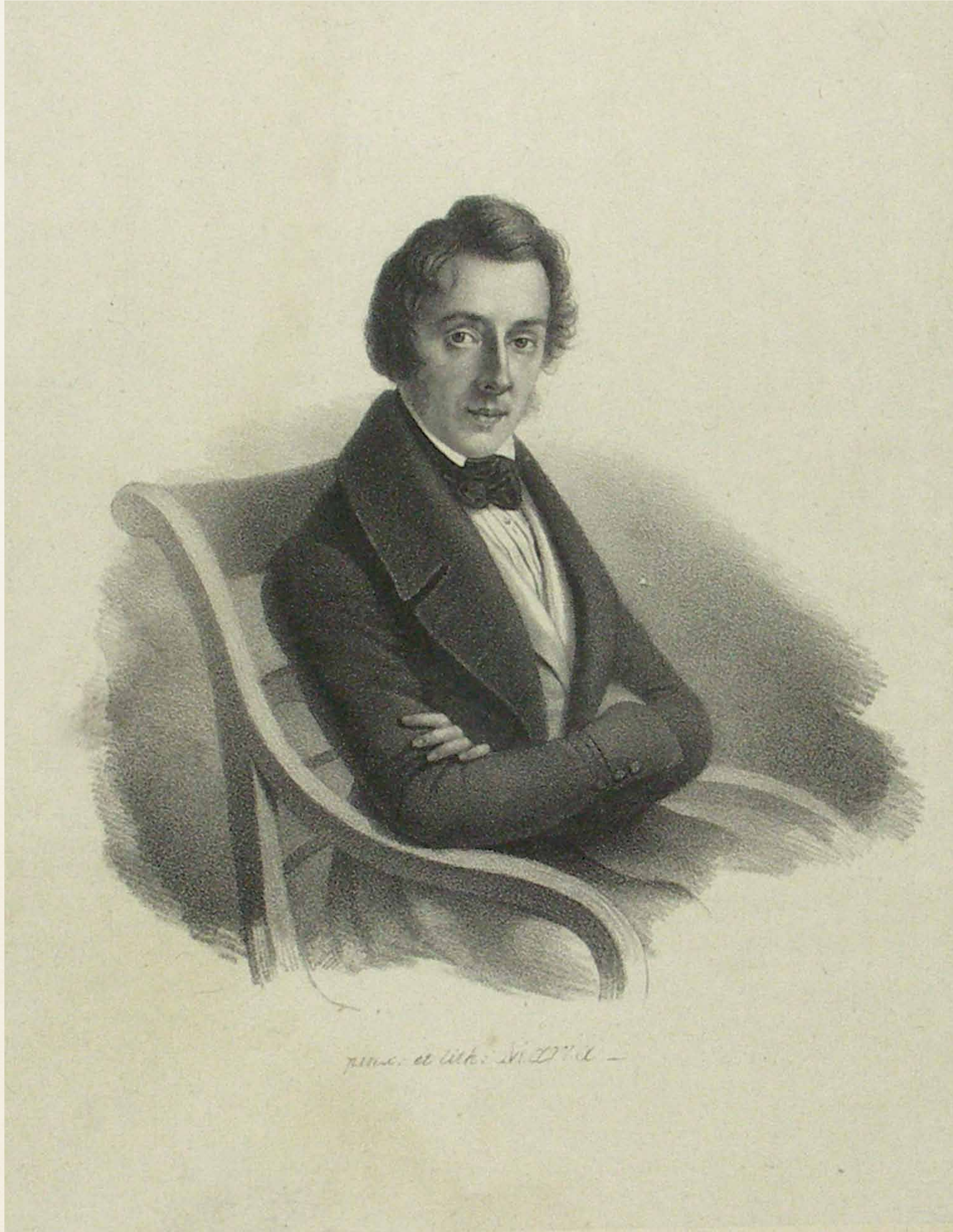
While becoming more and more deaf and blind, sick with tuberculosis, and plunging deeper into silence and sadness, he dreamt of going to Florence, in which he saw his salvation.

Meanwhile, his cousin accommodated him in the St Casimir's Institute, an almshouse in Ivry near Paris. There, he died forgotten on 23 May 1883.





# Norwid the prose writer – a friend of Chopin



*In Czarne kwiaty [Black Flowers], his prose masterpiece, Norwid wrote about his last visit at Fryderyk Chopin's:*

*In the shadow of a deep bed with its crown, on pillows he leant, wrapped in a shawl, and so beautiful he was, as he had ever been, in the-most-daily life's movements having something as if complete, or monumentally outlined... either something that the Athenian aristocracy, in the most beautiful from among the Greek epochs, might have very well taken for religion, or what the genius drama artist playfully creates with, for instance, classic French tragedies, even though none of them a thing does have in common with the great world of antiquity due to their theoretical refinement (...) Such was the naturally apothotic completeness of Chopin's gestures, however and whenever I was to find him... Still — it was him, once again, who with a broken voice, so as to cough and expectorate, began casting up to me that I had not paid him a visit for such a long time — then was to make a little joke and wish to most innocently harass me for some of the mystical ideas, which since it did indeed seem to please him I allowed — then I would speak with his sister for a while — then there would be pauses in his coughing, then again came the moment he was to be left to rest, thence I would bid him farewell, whereas he, whilst holding my hand tightly, brushed his hair back from his forehead and said to me: "...I am leaving!" — only to begin coughing once more, as I, listening to him, and knowing that firmly opposing to what he was expressing at times was good for his nerves, used this unnatural tone and whilst kissing his shoulder responded, as one would to a strong person known to be brave: "...It is every year that you are leaving... and yet, God be praised, we find you well and alive."*



*To which Chopin, ending his words cut short by coughing, replied: "What I am telling you is I am leaving this apartment to move into the one on Place Vendôme..."*

*This was my ultimate conversation with him, as soon afterwards he moved to Place Vendôme, where he eventually died, and I myself no longer had the chance to meet him on the streets of Chaillot ever again...*



# Norwid the poet – a friend of Chopin

*His last meeting with Chopin – the composer’s “penultimate days” – inspired the poet to write one of the greatest poems ever written in the Polish language: daring in terms of its experimental character and in terms of the range of emotions and associations expressed. This very piece of writing was created during the 1863 January Uprising, while its author was under the influence of the news that Russian soldiers had thrown the composer’s grand piano out of the window of one of the Warsaw palaces.*

*Fortepian Szopena [Chopin’s Grand Piano]  
(a fragment)*

*La musique est une chose étrange!*  
Byron

*L’art?... c’est l’art — et puis, voilà tout.*  
Béranger

*I*  
*I visited you in those days but last*  
*Of life’s inscrutable thread –*  
*Full – like Myth,*  
*Pale – like dawn...*  
*– When life’s end whispers to its beginning:*  
*“I won’t destroy you – no! – You I’ll enhance!...”*

*II*  
*I visited you in those days, days but last,*  
*When you became – moment, by moment –*  
*Likened to the lyre Orpheus let fall,*  
*Where force-of-thrust struggles with song,*  
*And four strings converse,*  
*Nudging each other,*  
*Two – by two –*  
*And in soft strains:*  
*“Has he begun*  
*To strike the tone?*  
*Is this the Master!...who plays...yet, disdains?...”*  
*(...)*



*IX*  
*Look!... from alleys to alleys*  
*Caucasian horses tear forth,*  
*Like swallows before a storm,*  
*Ahead of their brigades –*  
*Hundred – by hundred – –*  
*A house – engulfed by fire, which dims,*  
*Flares up again – –and here – by a wall –*  
*I see widows’ mourning brows*  
*Pushed by rifle butts – –*  
*And again I see, though blinded by smoke,*  
*As – through a balcony’s columns –*  
*A coffin-likened object*  
*They heave... it tumbled... tumbled – your grand piano!*  
*(...)*

\*

*But You? – but I? – let’s break into judgment chant,*  
*And exhort: “Rejoice, our grandson yet to come!...”*  
*The dull stones groaned:*  
*The Ideal – has reached the street – –”*



# Norwid – a citizen of the world

Cyprian Kamil Norwid, a Polish poet, was a citizen of the world and a European. He responded to events both as a person and as an artist. In 1859, he dedicated a shattering poem to John Brown, an American farmer who had attempted to organise an uprising against slavery. The piece, composed in the form of a poetic letter and written still before Brown's execution, begins with a magnificent stanza:

*Over the Ocean's undulant plain  
A song, like a seagull, I send you, o! John...*

*To the land of the free maybe in vain  
It will fly – for it doubts: is that land gone?...  
– Or, like a ray of your hair gray and noble  
White – on an empty scaffold will land:  
So Your hangman's son, with his little boy's hand,  
At the visitor gull will throw stones!*

*Thus, ere the ropes will test your bare neck  
To find it remains unyielding;*



*Thus, ere you seek the ground with your heel,  
To kick the disgraced planet aside –  
And the earth under Your feet, like a panicked reptile  
Shall flee –*

*thus, ere they'll say: "He's hanged..." –  
They'll say and stare, are lies being told? – –  
(...)*

*(Do obywatela Johna Brown [To citizen John Brown], a fragment)*



# Norwid – citizen of culture

Norwid, an intellectual and an artist, was first and foremost a self-taught man. Whilst interested in the ideas and masterpieces of foreign languages, he reached for literary works of antiquity, Italian classics and contemporary English poets. He translated fragments from Homer, Horace, Dante, Shakespeare and Byron. Having in mind the idea of the relations between the society and the individual, as well as the fate the great face both in life and after death, he composed a poem entitled *Coś ty Atenom zrobił, Sokratesie* [What Did You Do to Athens, Socrates?], which combines reflection and love for the musical composition of poetry.

## I

What have you done to Athens, Socrates,  
That people gave you a golden statue,  
Poisoning you first?...

What have you done to Italy, Alighieri,  
That two graves were dug for you by hypocrites,  
Banishing you first?...

What have you done to Europe, oh, Columbus,  
That she dug three graves for you in three places,  
Shackling you first?...

What have you done to your people, Cam es,  
That grave diggers disturbed your grave twice,  
Starving you first?...

What crimes, Kościuszko, did you commit 'gainst the world,  
That it tramps upon your tombstones in two different places,  
Rendering you homeless first?...

What have you, Napoléon, done to the world,  
That they locked you in two tombs upon your death,  
Locking you up first?...

What have you, Mickiewicz, done to your people?...

## II

The kind of urn counts little, where you're laid to rest,  
Where? when? with what visage, in what sense?  
For they'll open your grave a second time,  
Proclaim your merits in a different way,  
Ashamed today of tears shed yesterday;  
Those not seeing the human in you  
Will now shed tears to the power of two...

## III

Each one, like you, the world cannot  
Admit right away to a peaceful plot  
Nor, old as it is, did it ever,  
For clay unto clay seeps unceasing,  
While opposing bodies are nailed together  
Later... or sooner...

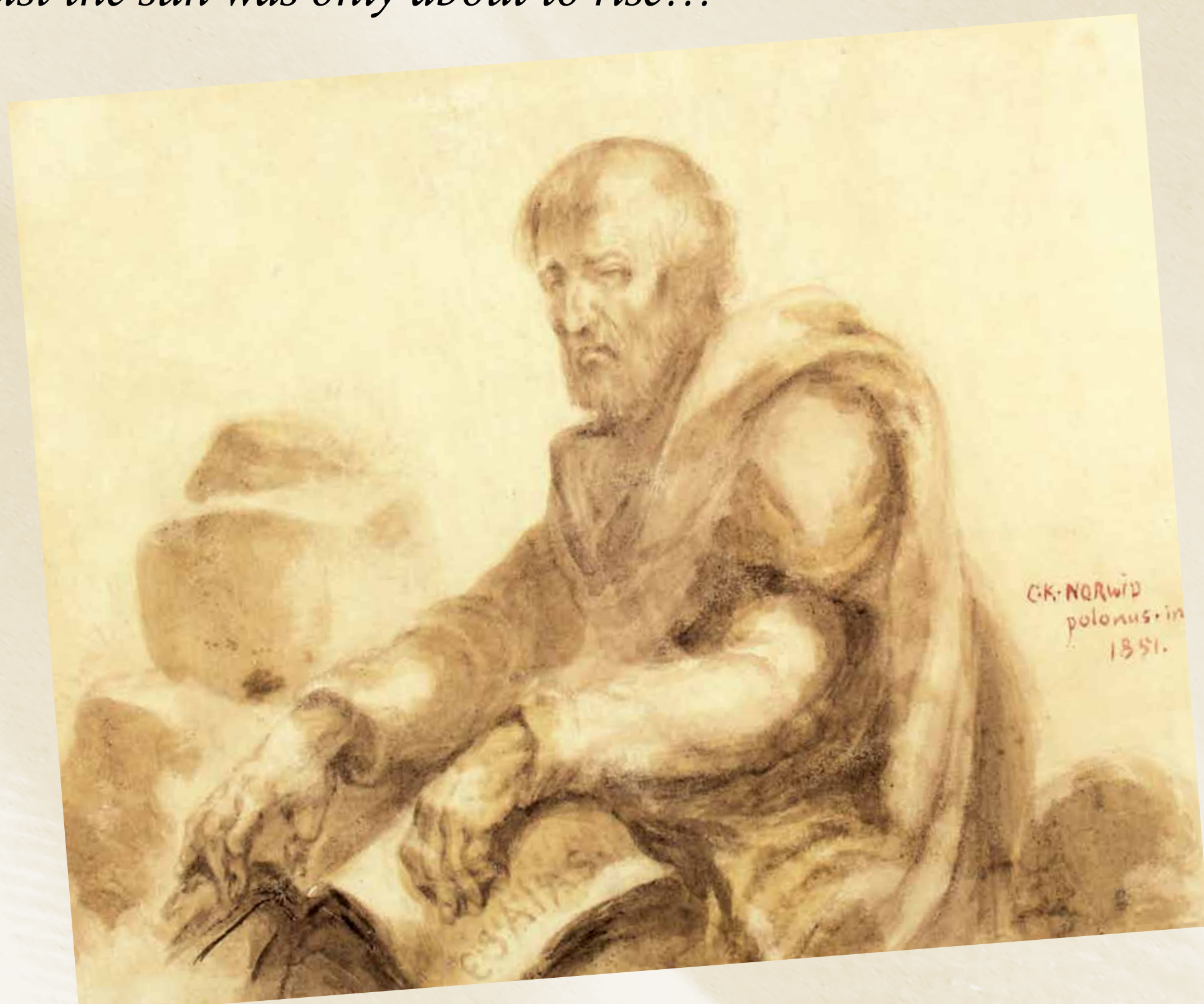




# Norwid – a reporter

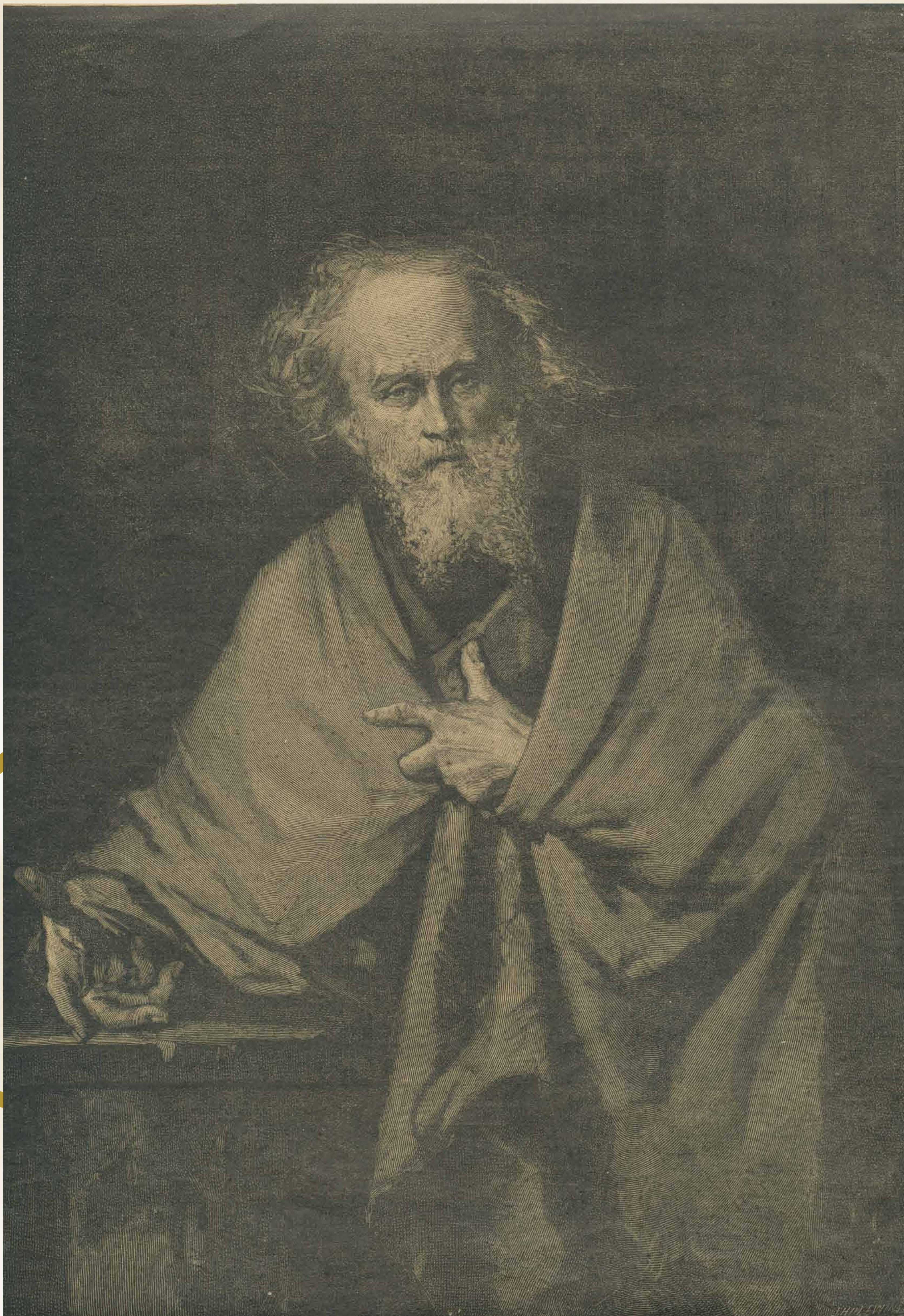
One of his notable works, *Czarne kwiaty* [Black flowers], is a priceless record of him being acquainted with the greatest figures of Polish culture in exile – Fryderyk Chopin, Adam Mickiewicz and Juliusz Słowacki. The prose writings contained in this small collection may also be seen as a pioneering form of sensitive reportage, based on observation and not lacking the author's own experience. Such is also the case with the following extraordinary passage describing a trip across the Atlantic Ocean:

*As I was sitting there, having the infinite horizon of waves before my very eyes, a woman's dress blew up in front of us, and a fellow traveller who was sitting by my side has thus addressed me in French: "... See there for yourself, Sir, you who are an artist, how beautiful the woman who has just passed us by is, as on this great journey she is carrying a plate with milk for a poor doggy, on a day like this, when any and all have been but enjoying the Sunday weather, and the poor puppy knows neither where it is nor for how long has it been strayed." — Since I did not look at first as my companion had advised me, I replied as one would whilst thinking of anything but the thing: "Now that is precisely why shall my eyes not look for her at this moment, for women are at their most beautiful when they may neither hear nor see, nor whilst they are to guess, that one is indeed watching them; I shall thus honour her beauty with another of the moments that is yet to come — only then shall I see her truly..." — which I then repeated so as to change the direction our conversation was heading. — Yet, since she certainly was a peculiarly beautiful person (some said she was an Irishwoman), one could notice that as she walked by nevertheless, all the more since, and as had clearly been known owing to the stereoscopes, a man's eyes register many a thing involuntarily, even if he were not to look at the object directly. Then, the sun went down, and wind blew no more — the moon had risen, and so I got up, and fell asleep in a confined and sweltering cabin... and it were only the guards that would wander about the triple-masted ship's deck... All of a sudden, a scream cut through the night — some people came running with a lamp — a gigantic Black Man, the ship's chief steward, here and there could be seen on the stairs, looking for a doctor... At dawn, the passengers seemed more lively than ever before — so I got up and entered the deck. This young person I had promised to see truly and the beauty of whom I was yet to honour — died all of a sudden, during the night-time. There is a custom that, if such is the case, a black-sapphire sail for this purpose designed, and with large bright stars overcast, is to cover the place where one's body has rested — and such was the stain that blackened deck's very centre whilst the sun was only about to rise...*





# Norwid – an emigrant



*The poet's last years and his death in the almshouse came as the most dramatic synthesis of the life of a Polish emigrant during the long period of partitioned Poland (1795–1918), uprisings, conspiracies and repressions. The common fate of an exile, a man doomed to being a foreigner also among his own, was perhaps one of the primary reasons why Polish artists were particularly interested in Dante, an exile from his hometown. Norwid himself did experience imprisonment, diseases, addiction, poverty, envy, misunderstanding and loneliness. "All wrong, all wrong – anytime, anywhere..." – he wrote in 1844 while in Florence.*

*A series of works by Pantaleon Szyndler, an outstanding painter who used to visit Norwid at the St Casimir's Institute, and who was to forever remain under his great influence, constitutes a dramatic record of the fate of a proud poet and an inspired pauper.*



# Norwid – an illustrator

*In his early youth, Norwid was studying drawing and painting in private schools. Later on, in exile, he tried to make a living as an artist, however, to no avail. The themes of his artworks are highly diverse. He drew mythical and biblical characters, people he saw on the streets, his fantasies, but also real people, including Adam Mickiewicz. He moreover made sketches of the works he had seen himself, so as to remember them.*



*Many areas of his poems, prose writings and plays were devoted to a reflection on art. His thoughts on imperfection, the struggle with the matter and commercialisation of artistic work the disregard for which Norwid considered to be a symptom of the decline of the culture have remained exceptionally interesting to this very day.*



# Norwid – poetry and goodness

*Both in Norwid's poetry and in his prose, one may find many a thought that have come to serve as aphorisms in the Polish language.*

*Of all things worldly, only two shall remain,  
The two: poetry and goodness... and nothing more.*

*A Varsovian by birth, a Pole at heart, a citizen of the world by virtue of his talent [about Chopin]*

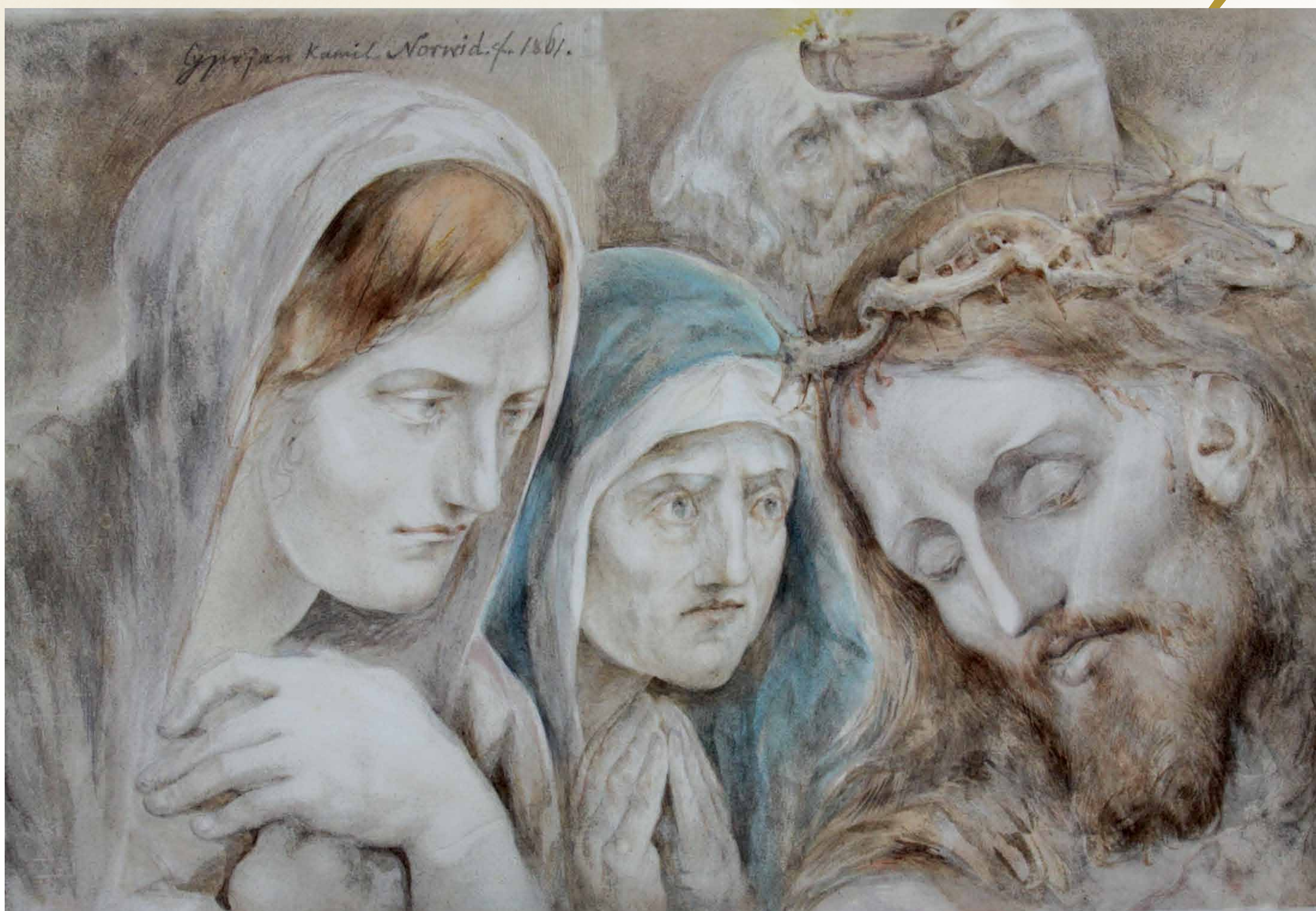
*The future only salvages what it may find useful*

*What you know of beauty forms the shape of love*

*Silence is but voices being gathered*

*The past – that is today, however anyhow further. Not just any of things mere, someplace, where no human  
has ever been*

*The word is fire; the silence is – lava*



*An exhibition celebrating the bicentenary of Cyprian Kamil Norwid's birth.  
C. K. Norwid's drawings come from the collection  
Adam Mickiewicz Museum of Literature in Warsaw.*

*text author: Jarosław Mikołajewski  
Art project: Marzena Piłko-Srzemecka*

*Translation of three poems by C.K. Norwid: Danuta Borchardt*

*Text translation and proofreading by a native speaker: LIDEX Sp. z o.o. / dogadamy.pl Sp. z o.o.*

*The exhibition was organized by the Adam Mickiewicz Museum of Literature in Warsaw  
in cooperation with  
the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Republic of Poland.*