Oscar Wilde—the man of taste

Charlus: “It’s so beautiful—the scene where Carlos Herrera asks the name of the château he is driving past, and it turns out to be Rastignac, the home of the young man he used to love: and then the abbé falling into a reverie which Swann once called, and very aptly, the Tristesse d’Olympio of pederasty. And the death of Lucien! I forget who the man of taste was who, when he was asked what event in his life had grieved him most, replied: “The death of Lucien de Rubempré in Splendeurs et Misères.’” —Sodom and Gomorrah 4: 611

Tristesse d’Olympio is a poem by Victor Hugo, evoking memories of his passionate love for the actress Juliette Drouet. The lover in the poem returns to the idyllic places in the country where he and his beloved had been so happy and, as he reminisces, realizes that you can return to a place but you cannot abolish time. This is not unlike Marcel’s nostalgia for his lost youth at the conclusion of Swann’s Way. Wilde, the unnamed man of taste, made his comment in “The Decay of Lying,” a dialogue published in 1891 (translated into French in 1906): “One of the greatest tragedies of my life is the death of Lucien Rubempré.”