

CHAPTER 5 - Parnassus

In Chapter 5 titled "Parnassus" of "The Ways of Men," the narrator recounts an enlightening encounter with Sainte-Beuve, a paramount writer and critic of the century, in his Paris home on rue Montparnasse. This memorable visit captured through youthful eyes eventually matures into a cherished memory, reinforced by the narrator's growing admiration for Sainte-Beuve's work. The narrative weaves through the years, tracing the narrator's return to Paris, the transformations of the city, and his reverence for the literary circles once vibrant with discussions and critiques that shaped the literary landscape.

The chapter artfully conveys Paris's intellectual and historical ambiance through detailed recollections of the Luxembourg Garden and its status as a poetic sanctuary in the heart of Paris, hosting busts of celebrated writers like Henri Murger and Victor Hugo, now including Sainte-Beuve. This picturesque setting unfolds as a backdrop to deeper reflections on Sainte-Beuve's influence, his unique practices of writing away from public interruptions under an assumed name, and his passionate yet tumultuous relationship with his contemporaries and literary critique.

Sainte-Beuve's complexities are explored further through anecdotes depicting his fervent work ethic, his resilience against public criticism, and his uncompromising stance on intellectual freedom during an era of poetic restraint. Despite his critical role in the literary world, Sainte-Beuve remained distanced from the political glory of his day, exemplified by a misunderstood compliment from Napoleon III.

The narrative also captures Sainte-Beuve's social persona, marked by his love for the theatre and engaging conversation, yet misunderstood by some, leading to humorous yet poignant misunderstandings on the true nature of his influence.

This chapter, rich with historical and literary references, paints a vivid portrait of Sainte-Beuve's enduring legacy, offering insight into the intellectual rigor and personal convictions that underpinned his contributions to French literature and critique. It invokes a sense of timelessness, bridging past and present, and celebrating the indelible mark of an intellectual giant within the ever-evolving landscape of Parisian society and culture.