

On reading Proust

"Your grandmother is doomed," says the doctor in Marcel Proust's semi-autographical masterpiece. "It is a stroke brought on by uremia. In itself uremia is not necessarily fatal, but this case seems to me hopeless..."The doctor is impatient, for he is an important man and has an appointment with the minister. There were no blood tests at that time, but the old lady takes to her bed and dies in considerable detail over the course of many pages.

Reading Proust is indeed a marathon. This is illustrated by the young man who began to read him in his teens. He read continuously, interrupted only for meals, firstly by his mother, later by his wife, then successively by his daughter, his granddaughter, and at last by the nurse in a retirement home. It is an appropriate story, because *Remembrance of Things Past* goes on for a long time. So hurrah for modern technology. It has produced 39 CDs that can be listened to on the way to work in about two months.

By now hundreds of critics have admired Proust's style, commented on the psychology of this complex creature, and on his description of the pains and pleasures of the "inverts" (having arbitrarily decided that the men sinned in Sodom, the women in Gomorrah), his complicated love affairs, and his descriptions of fin de siècle salons.

In her better days the grandmother was no more compliant than her modern counterparts, for as the doctor "called in to cope with a sudden feverish attack... and wrote out various prescriptions...my grandmother took these with a show of respect in which I could at once discern her firm resolves to ignore them all."

In society we meet Dr Cottard, a "more brilliant diagnostician than Potain," praised by everyone "for the quickness, the unerring judgment of his diagnoses," shy but compensating by assuming a repellent coldness, recommending sea voyages, or, more drastically, "purges, violent and drastic purges; milk for some days, nothing but milk. No meat. No alcohol," regardless of the patient's underlying condition.

The last chapters are about old age, when, released from a sanitarium, the narrator finds his old acquaintances white haired, some grossly obese, others shriveled and bent over. Often he does not recognize them. Even the doctor has become old.