Nolite Confidere in Principibus

by William J. Watkins, Jr.

There's More to Life Than Politics
by William Murchison
Dallas: Spence Publishing Company; 279 pp., $22.95

Politics obsess Americans. Everything from a child's education to medical care for the aged is now a political question—indeed, a national political question. Once upon a time, families chose how to educate their children and care for elderly parents, but in modern America this freedom is fast becoming *passé*.

Trapped in the ephemeral world of the political, we often need a reminder of the ethereal. Enter William Murchison and his new book, *There's More to Life Than Politics*. In this medley of columns, Murchison delights and instructs as he explores the vexatious issues of our day. Describing himself as a "recovering political junkie," Murchison leads the reader in a discussion of the limits of politics.

Though cheering the waning of totalitarianism abroad since the fall of the Berlin Wall, Murchison laments that "state power in our own country rocks and rattles forward like a freight train." Unfortunately, Americans believe the state can do all. The recent debate over the national Ponzi scheme of Social Security is an excellent example. Rather than call for the abolition of the entire system, the reformers and the progeny of the New Dealers both agreed that government-financed retirement should be saved. The political combatants merely disagreed as to the means for preserving the state's role.

Not one easily fooled, Murchison recognizes that, as Americans have abandoned religious teachings of the past, we have redirected our energies to the altar of the state. According to Murchison, a Christian nation would view the birth of Jesus Christ as

> a rebuke to the pretensions of all those princes and princelings we are bidden not to trust overmuch. Who are they, these petty potentates with large titles, against the Son of God?

Nowadays, not only do we trust our elected potentates to cure what ails us, but we believe their sordid trailer-park morals can be separated from the tasks of governance.

But the blame for the state of American religiosity cannot be pinned solely on the political creatures who prefer the sofa and the Sunday morning talk shows to the pew and the sermon. Murchison correctly concludes that "religion is in flux, thanks to the official teachers of religion, many of them questing spirits who can't believe truths can be true for more than twenty years at a stretch." Hence, we have such obscene spectacles as the ordination of homosexuals and the use of the pulpit as a glorified political soapbox. Were it not for the singing, Murchison reminds us, modern worship services could easily be confused with a Planned Parenthood rally.

Such antics in the pulpit cause one to ask just who is in charge. Clearly, modern man prefers to think he, rather than an omnipotent creator, is running the show. In light of scientific advances such as cloning, the question becomes all the more pressing. Murchison remembers a time when we knew our place in the chain of being and

> our fathers found lessons in the Bible, and in history. Neither consolation appeals profoundly to moderns, who, with their computers and power plants and government agencies, know both more and less than the old folks did.

And so what is Murchison's prescription for our maladies? The author offers no grand plans or schemes. He simply reminds us that there's more to life than politics. He causes us to recollect that the main business of mankind should be conducted in the twin settings of family and religion, where we "honor (or, alternatively, reject) historic teachings as to what life is for, how a man or a woman should live, what principles guide our footsteps, where our primary allegiances lie." As for the author, his allegiances plainly lie with the angels, rather than the apes who reject the notions of limits. In an age of planners and pedantry, Murchison's gentle reminders are refreshing and highly recommended.

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Kreisleriana

by J.O. Tate

Fritz Kreisler: Love's Sorrow, Love's Joy
by Amy Biancolli
Portland: Amadeus Press; 453 pp., $34.95

Walking out of Maxim Vengerov's recent recital at Avery Fisher Hall, I thought of the intermission more as a remission. At a bar in Penn Station a few minutes later, where I heard some Junior Wells on the sound system, the playing (if not the music) was better than anything that the violinist had given. Apparently, for all of his posturing, Maxim just could not get the lead out of his Vengerov. Fritz Kreisler came to mind, as to many he often does. There are quite a few people around who still remember him in performance over 50 years ago, and many more who know him from recordings made as long ago as 1904.

For people like those and for others, I hope, Amy Biancolli's new biography is just the thing. Her rethinking of Kreisler's career is the first extended treatment it has received since Louis Lochner's *Fritz Kreisler* of 1950. Biancolli has not written a straightforward biography like Lochner's, but rather an analytical engagement with a man, a personality, and a style. She was right to do so, and right again to see Kreisler as a "problem" to us, musically as well as culturally.

Fritz Kreisler (1875-1962) is a challenge because he represents the old

world from before World War I, and even before the turn of the century. His upbringing in Vienna marked him for life, and something of Viennese grace always stamped his playing as well as him. As a child, Kreisler knew Herr Doktor Freud, who dropped over for chamber music sessions at home. He studied with Anton Bruckner and consulted with Johannes Brahms. Kreisler came to embody the myth of Old Vienna as much as any modern artist did, with the possible exception of Richard Tauber. Biancolli has taken on Kreisler's cultural background, the context of violin playing in his youth, and the continuous vibrato that was his distinctive contribution to technique. She has attacked boldly and with humor the idiosyncrasies of Kreisler's personality—his laziness and his weaknesses, his marriage for over 60 years to a woman few could abide, his outrageous tall tales, and his "politics." Kreisler, as a good Austrian, served in the Great War, and was later reviled for it in America. He lived in Berlin from 1924 until 1939 and denied his Jewish background all his life, so imbued was he with the Viennese image that informed the self he had assimilated. But after World War II, he never went back to Europe.

Biancolli implies that the "Kreisler problem" is bigger than all this; that it is, actually, a musical problem. Her analysis of Jascha Heifetz's approach to the instrument and to music, in great contrast to Kreisler's, is a bold one, suggesting, as I understand it, that the lack is on the side of reductive modernism. Heifetz blew away the *Gemütlichkeit* from the violin repertoire; he was the enemy of all indulgence. Kreisler admired Heifetz's mastery, but he probably liked Milstein and Francescatti considerably more. His favorite of the younger players was Oistrakh, of whom he declared, "He does not play too fast. This is very unusual today. We are living in the time of money, and power, and violence, and, above all, speed." In this statement, we see how musical issues are related to broader cultural and political ones as matters of style and value. We can also see that Kreisler thought that the younger generation was on the wrong side, and we cannot say that things have gotten any better since then.

World War I, industrialism, modernism: They killed Kreisler's values, but there was a cultural lag. His sentimental compositions still pleased those who remembered them: *Liebesleid*, *Liebesfreud*, *Schön Rosemarin*, *Caprice Viennois*, and all the rest. And what a touch he had in playing them! Kreisler was a hero, a pop idol, in the 1930's, yet Biancolli indicates that she has written about Kreisler because today he is in danger of being forgotten. In doing so, she has accomplished much to prevent such a loss of memory and of musical standards. For that, as for quoting Oscar Shumsky's judgment ("I think Heifetz was a destructive influence in a very great sense") and suggesting that a return to the romantic mysticism of Kreisler is long overdue, she is much to be commended.

Appended to Biancolli's biography is a scholarly discography by Eric Wen. Kreisler's recorded output is mostly available today on compact discs produced by EMI, BMG, Pearl, and Biddulph. Needless to say, Kreisler's own performances of his encore pieces are nonpareil. But perhaps it *does* need saying that his performances of standard repertoire are far from being obsolete, in spite of the steady march of technology, technique, and duplication. Kreisler's first recordings of the Beethoven, Mendelssohn, and Brahms *concerti* remain as fascinating today as they were when he made them in Berlin in 1926-27. If you think—not unreasonably—that his miniaturism, *rubati*, *portamenti*, and regressive fiddling tendencies rendered him *hors de combat* in such pieces, you will nevertheless be impressed and even charmed by Kreisler's warm lyricism, relaxed approach, and colorful point-making. To know the possibilities of those greatest of violin *concerti*, listening to Kreisler is mandatory.

Kreisler's Beethoven sonatas are also indispensable, as are the three sonatas he recorded with Sergei Rachmaninoff. Such playing set a standard not only for the violin but for communication itself. Born of change and technology, yesterday's latest thing is today's quaint souvenir, yet it is more than that. Kreisler may have been sentimental, but he was human and a humanist. As we proceed in a technological nightmare of which he was a part, Kreisler will be remembered as a man as well an instrumentalist—as an image of the projection of refined emotion. He made the violin the vehicle of a unique fusion of feeling and thought. As much as any performing artist in the 20th century, he put the musical statement (whether popular or exalted) together, dramatized it, projected so it could be apprehended, and personified it. He stands as a reproach today to a dehumanized world, and to music without soul.

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Filling a God-size Hole

by George McCartney

Heavy Water and Other Stories
by Martin Amis
New York: Harmony Books;
208 pp., $21.00

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During a BBC interview in 1984, Martin Amis (son of Kingsley) casually mentioned that he wished he could believe in God. "Do you really mean that?" his chat host asked, tossing his well-coifed locks in a show of secular amazement. With a sigh, Amis explained himself. Without belief, what was there after all? One day's pretty much the same as the last, isn't it? You work, you drink, you talk with friends, and, sooner or later, it ends badly.

As an evocation of life without faith, this was admirably spare. No angst. No pining for Godot. Just a testament to the flat boredom that can overtake us without faith in a purpose larger than our own puny aspirations. In spite of their well-known disagreements on other matters (Kingsley turned rightward after making his pile, while Martin remains a good deal left of center), the younger Amis seems to stand forlornly shoulder to shoulder with his father in matters theological. In 1990, he told *Rolling Stone* he felt a "God-size hole" in his life. He wished it could be filled, but he concluded, God is "not available anymore."

You would not expect someone as seemingly *au courant* as Amis to admit to such nostalgia for absolutes. That he does makes him, I think, far more interesting than many other novelists of his generation. Like his father, his struggle with nihilism has made him a devotee of the cankered muse of satire. He is only too happy to find the world a sty of unremitting hustling and selfishness, buf-