

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 re-

membered 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



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-

foonery and delusion. Like Swift and Waugh, he takes ferocious delight in displaying people at their ugliest, their most swinish, their most feckless.

Amis likes to take us inside his narratives and show us how he works his tricks. It's the postmodern thing, but with none of the solemn self-importance American practitioners flaunt. Amis sacrifices verisimilitude for a legitimate purpose: Doing so enables him to keep his distance from his disturbing subject matter. This leaves him room for the poise and wit necessary to delineate a metaphysically repellent world without succumbing to its cynicism. Things may be bloody awful, but that's no excuse for losing your sense of humor. Or your hope, which, in the final analysis, may be the same thing.

This strategy is on exhibit once again in *Heavy Water*, a collection of stories which includes seven previously published works and two new ones. These narratives frequently resemble tightrope walks over an abyss. Like a seasoned showman, Amis rises superbly to the technical challenges of each feat, all the while making sure we do not lose sight of the awful emptiness that lurks beneath his performance.

In "Straight Fiction," he turns human relations inside out. We find ourselves in a world in which homosexuality is the norm. People shrink from the spectacle of pregnancy as if it were a disease worse than AIDS. They are alarmed to learn that San Francisco has become "the straight capital of the world," where "breeders" have the audacity to hold Straight Freedom Day parades. Against this background, Cleve, the gentle and tolerant gay protagonist, undergoes an identity crisis. He meets a pregnant woman in a Greenwich Village coffee shop and finds her unaccountably fascinating. His friends begin to worry about him. Whenever they can take a break from their relentless bed-swapping and anonymous alleyway assignations, they warn him against his perverted interest in a breeder. At first, the story seems to be a lesson in tolerance, a what-if-the-tables-were-turned sketch. But the politically correct will not be reassured by its depiction of gay culture regnant. Certainly not in this scene: Postcoital homosexuals watch television to relax after their exertions, only to be deeply offended and thoroughly sickened by film footage run in "queasy propaganda slo-mo" showing "women and young children at play" on

"a green hillside."

But Amis is an equal-opportunity basher, and the hetero male gets his in "Let Me Count the Times." Here, Amis ridicules the contemporary obsession with rating, measuring, and quantifying sex. Vernon, an otherwise conventional and happily married businessman, decides one day to keep score. He finds that, on average, he makes love to his wife "three and a half times a week." Then, refining his study, he tallies what might be delicately designated their Clinton variations. For him, it is "every fourth coupling, on average, or 45.625 times a year, or .8774038 times a week." Her average turns out to be "60.8333 times a year, or 1.1698717 times a week." Then, on a rare business trip away from home, he decides he cannot compromise his averages. Although there are women in the hotel bar, he does not want to cheat. Instead, he repairs to his room and resorts to something he has not done in years. In no time at all, he becomes a champion of what used to be called self-abuse. Soon he is "averaging 3.4 times a day, or 23.8 times a week, or an insane 1241 times a year." But, as his orgasms multiply, he is puzzled that his relations with his wife are declining drastically. He is forced to turn to images. Too refined for real pornography, he at first finds sufficient provocation among the photos in his wife's fashion magazines. Later, with quality his watchword, he progresses to the great heroines of literature. "After quick flings with Emily, Griselda, and Criseyde," he goes on to have a "strapping weekend with the Good Wife of Bath." Then, in a fit of erotic delirium, he very nearly takes the next logical step. "Confusedly and very briefly he consider[s] running away with himself." The end of obsessive sex, it seems, is what we see so much of today: a loony, loveless narcissism.

In "The State of England," Amis visits one of his favorite milieus: the environs of the semi-criminal, partially employed, and remarkably well-heeled underclass. We meet Big Mal, an aging part-time bouncer and full-time thug, dutifully attending parents' day at his son's school, "a smart one, or at least an expensive one." Mal is nothing if not upwardly mobile. He has been told that all the old barriers have been knocked flat:

Class and race and gender were supposedly gone. Right thinkers everywhere were claiming that

they were clean of prejudice, that in them the inherited formulations had at last been purged.

But he has doubts, and why wouldn't he? He is a man marked by class, as the story makes literally and painfully clear. It is visible in the wound he received the night before. Although he keeps a cell phone clapped to his ear, his technologically certified affluence cannot disguise the hideous, underclass gash throbbing along his jaw—a souvenir from a scuffle with some opera-goers who caught him tampering with their luxury cars and beat him silly with a pipe wrench. Long live class warfare!

In the collection's most playful story, "The Janitor on Mars," Amis puts his cards on the table. In this extravagant science fiction parody, a foul-mouthed robot janitor left behind by a long extinct Martian civilization cleans up some cosmic loose ends for the benighted denizens of the third planet. He first makes it clear how contemptibly low our species ranks in the fiercely monitored hierarchy that prevails among the numerous civilizations inhabiting the "Ultraverse." While Martians were "up and running" 3.4 billion years ago, life on earth was "still a bubble of fart gas. Goop. Macrobiotic yoghurt left out in the sun." Finally, however, he concedes that humans have one distinction, and a charming one at that. All other life forms in the Ultraverse are driven to achieve the same goal: "the superimposition of the will." On this front, humans are at least somewhat different. "Your science and politics were . . . brutally depressed in order to foreground your art." However retrograde, the janitor finds this almost touching. We have the ability to surrender our will to dominate in order to contemplate disinterestedly the design of existence.

For Amis, art is clearly the avenue to redemption. It is the one pursuit in which we can step aside from personal and ideological interest. It encourages a selfless contemplation of reality as mediated through aesthetic design. Could it be that it might also fill that God-size hole that troubles him? If art can unearth design in the rancid clay of existence, can intimations of a Designer be far behind?

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## Letter From England

by Michael Stenton

### Thoroughly Modern Monarchy



The pace of cultural redefinition in Britain is steady and strong. Since the day in 1991 when Prime Minister John Major refused to veto the Maastricht treaty, a new picture has emerged. To put it crudely, the Tories and the monarchy are looking unprecedentedly vulnerable. The only good argument for their continued survival is that they have been so strong for so long that a difficult period should be seen as normal, not terminal.

Perhaps so, but there is a new mood. The general election landslide for the Labour Party was an explosion of distaste—a grand alliance of resentments—much broader than the narrow issue of who governs. The anti-Tory fury has not relented yet, but the monarchy and the Act of Union stand not much higher in public affection. There is little doctrinaire opposition to the monarchy, but the public mood is highly susceptible. We are still going through a moment when the country looks round to be told how to modernize itself. Mr. Blair and the Queen can do what they want with the constitution.

Mr. Blair is not proving very strong on ideas. Whether he is professionally hyper-cautious or just conventionally empty-headed, the effect is the same. He is a second-order personality who expects to be told what is going on. But once he senses an instruction, there is the chance he will do something. The Queen is a conservative but not a reactionary, and her advisors were badly shaken by the malice of the mob at the time of Diana's funeral. The Palace, too, wants to be told what to do. The royal family is putting its very sound finances on a more private footing—just in case.

A redefined monarchy is contemplated by both the church and the state. The current ideas are that the monarch should cease to be supreme governor of the Church of England, that the hereditary principle of succession should be “preserved” by ending its sexist form, and

that the monarch should be pushed even further back from political life by surrendering her remaining functions to the speaker of the House of Commons.

It has already been decided that the aristocracy should be removed from the House of Lords. We could also lose the state opening of Parliament and the whole symbolism of the victor in a general election having to go to the Palace to kiss hands. In the Church of England, disestablishment would suit more consciences and strain fewer loyalties than ever before. North of the border, the Scottish National Party sits high in the opinion polls and takes an avuncular interest in the vexed question of England's post-British identity. Reform of the electoral system is imminent. There will be referenda: The People will consent.

The end of the incredible Tory administration of 1979-97; the final, final end of the empire, televised from Hong Kong; and the death of Diana: These three events made the long summer of 1997 unforgettable. The most cynical of us could not escape the mood, which has not dispersed. If Northern Ireland can change, so can mainland Britain.

But constitutional innovations pick up quickly on the fashions of the age. Would a monarchy redesigned by New Labour be worth having? Would it symbolize the sovereignty of a nation, or the erosion of a state tradition to fit the new European context? This observer is no friend to the pseudo-imperial monarchy for toffs and bureaucrats that we have had since “Ind Imp” (*Indiae Imperator*) went off the coins. But the New Monarchy could be worse. Should a patriot resist reform or try to rescue the imminent constitutional shift from its worst advocates?

The sense of the British constitution was once the balance of King, Lords, and Commons. Then the government—the cabinet—captured all three. Throughout this century, “the Crown” has meant the government, not the monarch. There once was a sort of thrill in conceding that Britain was, in strict form, an electoral tyranny in which absolute power was conferred on one government after another. This meant that our liberties have been preserved—or not—by cultural consensus, not by constitutional checks. This is the sense of the constitu-

tion which is about to be replaced . . . by something or other.

The monarchy once gave glamour to parliamentary sovereignty and implied the unswerving support of a loyal and attendant ruling class. But if national-parliamentary sovereignty is not wanted, the monarchy must be re-tuned; and if the great and powerful in the realm are disloyal, absent, or foreign, a “democratized” monarchy can be introduced less as a pledge of renewed citizenship than as an expression of the truth that Parliament is no longer where the power is. The tide runs toward new constitutional texts; that is, toward lawyers; and toward lawyers who sit in foreign courts. The lawyers will surely find new language to make this sound more appropriate.

The difficulty for the Euro-skeptic is that there is so little solid to cling to. The price of not embracing a more democratic symbolism in the late Victorian period—when the imperial hullabaloo was at its worst—is that today's “Europeans” have a cheap, even costless, way of sounding fresh and modern. The language of citizenship, which was never grafted onto monarchy in Britain except in World War II, can now be used to cover the loss of sovereignty. Queen Elizabeth may not embrace a new Euro-status with the painful vulgarity of Queen Victoria's passion for being “Empress of India;” but the monarch has long been an inert tool of the politicians constituting “the Crown.” The Queen is supposed to have the right to “admonish”—but only her ministers, and only in private. She did not presume to call on Parliament to protect her grandchildren from the press persecution which killed Diana.

Oliver Cromwell was not a doctrinaire republican, but he did have a non-aristocratic idea of the public good. His refusal to be king was a decisive moment in English history, because he did not doubt that there should be a monarch, and he knew that what the English expected was King, Lords, and Commons. Refusing to be king, he made the Restoration inevitable and so allowed English monarchy to relapse into an intensely aristocratic context.

Britain's post-aristocratic elite now contemplates another trick with crown and scepter. An alteration has begun. The division of Britain—the disuniting