

vain lacks the tension of poet-clergyman R.S. Thomas's poetry. Outside of his ballads, which are not much in evidence in the current collection, he lacks a single distinctive quality—of tone, of idiom, or of sound—that might set his poems apart from those of any number of skilled poets. The quality of the work is high, to be sure, but there is no "Mr. Bleaney" or "Church-Going" here crying out to be read again and again.

Causley was born in 1917, and his many poems about his youth and extended family rank among his finest. The England of his childhood was filled with the human wreckage of the Great War. "Dick Lander," a veteran who, according to one of the poet's playmates, is "shell-shopped," daily stands on a corner "playing a game of trains with match-boxes." The poem concludes with a childish prank:

At firework time we throw a few
at Dick.

Shout, 'Here comes Kaiser Bill!
Dick stares us through
As if we're glass. We yell,
'What did you do
In the Great War?' And skid
into the dark.
'Choo, choo,' says Dick. 'Choo,
choo, choo, choo, choo,
choo.'

One relative recalled is "Uncle Stan," who died in a military training camp in British Columbia. "He might have been a farmer; swallowed mud / At Vimy, Cambrai," muses the poet, "But a Canadian winter got him first." Most

painful are memories of the poet's father, an invalid who died when his son was seven: "Once again my dead / Father stood there: army boots bright as glass, / Offering me a hand as colourless / As phosgene." In poems like these one hears second-generation echoes of Sassoon and Graves.

Since his retirement from teaching, Causley has traveled extensively. Several poems draw on Australian locales, "A detritus / Of boomerangs and bells and whips and saddles." The focus of his descriptions, however, is more often than not on people instead of landscape. "Grandmother" describes a Czech-German survivor of wartime dislocations who "guillotines salami with a hand / Veined like Silesia." "Bamboo Dance" describes a frenetic Filipino combination of music, movement, physical danger, and love:

The dance is love, love is
the dance
Though bamboo shocks their
dancing day.
Ceases. Smiling, the dancers go,
Hand locked in gentle hand,
their way.

At "Gelibolu," the Turkish name for Gallipoli, he goes beneath surface, sensing the presence of history: "But this is savaged air. Is poisoned ground. / Unstilled, the dead, the living voices sound, / And now the night breaks open like a wound."

Aside from Hardy and Landor, it is hard to think of other poets in their 70's who have written this well. In the book's final poem, "Eden Rock," Causley imagines a reunion with his parents, "mother, twenty-three, in a sprigged dress," and "father, twenty-five, in the same suit / Of Genuine Irish Tweed." The call for the poet to be gathered to the bosom of his elders is phrased in restrained measures:

The sky whitens as if lit by
three suns.
My mother shades her eyes and
looks my way
Over the drifted stream. My
father spins
A stone along the water.
Leisurely,
They beckon to me from the
other bank.
I hear them call, 'See where the

stream-path is!
Crossing is not as hard as you
might think.'

I had not thought that it would
be like this.

There is a valedictory tone that runs through these haunting lines. In Charles Causley's case one can only hope that it is premature.

R.S. Gwynn is the editor of the *Dictionary of Literary Biography* volume, *Contemporary American Poets*. He lives in Beaumont, Texas.

Invocations of Malebranche by David Klinghoffer

Lives of the Saints: A Novel
by David R. Slavitt
New York: Atheneum;
213 pp., \$19.95

◆
"The great issues don't need to be vulgarized," observes the narrator of David Slavitt's 15th work of fiction. "They are vulgar, for they are exactly those things that everybody worries about." Of those great issues, perhaps the most inscrutable is the one most poignantly summarized in the title of Rabbi Harold Kushner's 1982 best-seller, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*. Even before the long-suffering life of Job and longer still before Rabbi Kushner came along, the question was this: given the premise of an all-good and all-powerful Creator, how to explain the presence of rampant evil in the world? Crucial and ultimately irresolvable, the question has attracted responses ranging from the self-deluding to the completely mystifying—with Rabbi Kushner's little book, dealing in a tidy brand of self-help theology, tending more in the former direction. By now it's all been said before, and many times over. The wonder of Mr. Slavitt's novel is that it manages to address the problem without ever quite going stale on us, or being—on a paragraph-by-paragraph basis, anyway—less than refreshingly lively.

The narrator in *Lives of the Saints* is

BOOKS ON CASSETTES

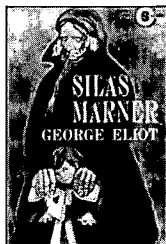
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an unnamed reporter for a Florida tabloid, the *Star*: a middle-aged man with intellectual tastes, once a teacher of remedial composition at a community college, who through failure and despair finds himself reduced to manufacturing grotesque confabulations for the enjoyment of his paper's credulous readers.

It is a type of work that directs the mind toward the contemplation of absurdity. Though Mr. Slavitt might have swiped these from real-life tabloids on sale at supermarkets across America—and with equally amusing results—his headlines for *Star* scoops are nonetheless witty inventions. “Dieter Goes Berserk, Tries to Eat Dwarf,” is a typical example; while better yet is this classic pair: “Space Alien Bodies Found on Mt. Everest,” to be followed in the next week's edition by “Little Green Corpses Mangled by Bigfoot.” Inspired also by his study of the lives of Christian saints, Mr. Slavitt's narrator has been affected by the views of Nicolas de Malebranche, a French theologian and mathematician of the 18th century. According to Malebranche, evil can be accounted for if you merely assume that things just *happen*, without reason or motive except in the mind of God, which itself is unknowable. There's no point in trying to figure out why innocent people suffer and evil people prosper. In the sense of following necessarily from previous conditions, neither circumstance comes about in any intelligible way.

It is one of his book's faults that on the hundredth invocation of Malebranche, interesting though he may be, the reader is tempted to start skimming. The other fault of *Lives of the Saints* is that, in his enthusiasm for mapping out the implications of Malebranchianism, Mr. Slavitt skimps on storytelling. His narrator's assignment is to write a series of articles documenting the lives of a collection of people, all victims of a parking-lot shooting spree, by reference to the minor personal possessions they left behind—relics of these modern-day martyrs. So we proceed from one victim to another, including a failed poet, a travel agent, a little boy, and an exile from Khomeini's Iran, each leaving behind mourners with their own ways of dealing with grief—while Mr. Slavitt, in brief paragraphs, offers page upon page

of reflections on their fate.

On the other hand, *Lives of the Saints* offers other pleasures. Mr. Slavitt has a gift for writing fresh, bouncy, even funny prose about such knotty philosophical problems as the relationship between cause and effect. “There are,” he says in a typical passage,

according to Malebranche, two ideas of how nature works. In one, nature is a dynamic storehouse of causes and forces with their implied effects and consequences. This is the widespread but false view. The other possible idea is simpler, clearer, less widespread but nonetheless true—that there is only the temporal relation of *before* and *after*. What we think of as causality has nothing to do with any earlier events but is solely the will of God.

It is in the discrete details of his story, however, that Mr. Slavitt's imagination is revealed to greatest advantage. His narrator talks about the “intimate authority” of personal relics, and Mr. Slavitt has invented a catalogue of them that could not offer more luminous testimony had they been plucked from real life. For example, at the home of Professor Stratton, the poet *manqué*,

we find pencils

lined up . . . on his desk pad. Not just a random handful, but an even dozen. And all of them sharpened to beautiful conical points.

Which suggests that writing didn't come easily to him.

So he hated his job . . . He wanted, as Stephanie [his wife] has told me, to put his teaching behind him and devote himself to art. But the desk suggests a pencil sharpener rather than any demoniac maker of sentences.

Mr. Slavitt's thumbnail descriptions of the characters he introduces are equally economic and telling. Of one fat young woman, he writes, “Cheryl was an intelligent and attractive girl before she undertook to eat herself into immenseness and thereby avoid those strenuous sexual sweepstakes of which she had been the reluctant observer.” Of his narrator's overseer at the *Star*: “Lansberg is a quadrisexual, which is a person willing to do anything with anyone for a quarter.” Though the novel breaks down when read in full, the pleasure of its bits and pieces is considerable.

David Klinghoffer is a film and TV critic for the Washington Times.

LIBERAL ARTS

LEADING BY EXAMPLE

Following the lead of Marion Barry, whose arrest in January for cocaine possession occurred during the week he was hosting a national conference on drugs, the head of Houston's Drug Enforcement Administration office was arrested a second time for driving while intoxicated.

Marion Hambrick received his first DWI charge on August 9, 1989, when en route to a DEA news conference he crashed his car into the back of a city bus. His blood alcohol content was 0.14 percent, above the state standard for intoxication. A pre-trial motion, however, suppressed this information, and he was found not guilty. The acquittal eased a work predicament for Hambrick, who had nearly completed the 20 years of federal service necessary for retirement.

Hambrick's second arrest came on June 1, the day after he hit and seriously injured a sixty-six-year-old cyclist. This time Hambrick refused the Intoxilyzer test. As of this writing, he was awaiting arraignment and was free on a \$500 bond.

Mark Evans, lead prosecutor in Hambrick's first trial, said, “He just didn't learn much of a lesson last time. It's my opinion he was guilty [in the first trial] based on the evidence, and he should've been found guilty.”

Letter From New York City

by Murray N. Rothbard

It Was a Long Hot Summer



I returned to New York at the end of May for my summer stint to find that both bellwethers of New York life, the far-out left *Village Voice* and the chic liberal *New York*, were headlining (respectively) "Race Rage," and "The Race Mess." Yes, the fabled and much-dreaded Long Hot Summer was already well under way.

In fact, the "summer" had been raging ever since February, when a still-continuing boycott was launched against two Korean fruit stores by militants in a black neighborhood in Brooklyn. Details of the February incident are murky, especially since, as one of the baffled Brooklyn district attorneys put it, "the Korean and the black witnesses say the opposite things, and there is no way of deciding between them." All sides agree, however, that at the root of this and many other incidents is a "clash of cultures" between blacks and Koreans. The blacks claim that the Koreans "never smile," that they "dis" (show disrespect for) feisty black women, and that the Koreans don't understand the West Indian (the black woman in the February incident is a Haitian) proclivity for higgling and haggling over prices.

The first point to note is that the "never smile" charge can only be calculated to impress non-New Yorkers. Since when do *any* retail clerks in New York smile? In fact, the New York customer, in any retail dealings from "Bloomie's" on down to the supermarket, considers himself lucky if the clerk doesn't chew gum in his face. I remember the first time that I, a born and bred New Yorker, lived in California. It was a real shock when bank tellers said to me, "Hello, sir, how are you?" and "Have a nice day." My immediate reaction was, "What's she

up to?" and "What scam is she pulling?" It took months outside of New York to decompress.

Furthermore, how come that Koreans are not systematically rude to *white* customers, be they male or female? And how come that blacks, even Haitians, don't expect to higggle over prices at any *other* stores? No, the real culture clash is very different from what has been portrayed in the left-liberal media. Over 200,000 Koreans have migrated to New York City in the last decade, and they have opened up 4,000 greengrocer stores throughout the city. Not only that: the stores invariably have far better vegetables and fruit (though of course at higher prices) than the quasi-garbage offered at the supermarkets, they are open 24 hours a day, and Korean families pitch in and work 18 or more hours a day. In short, the Koreans have not only revived the old, much-lamented Mom-and-Pop stores outcompeted by the supermarkets, but they have proved that hard work and thrift is the path to success and upward mobility. Typically, the Koreans spend next to nothing out of their modest revenues and, in a few years, save enough money to open up other stores. In the classic immigrant tradition, the Koreans have overcome the great barriers of language and lack of capital (even though they were middle-class and well-educated in their native land, the South Korean government, until recently, only allowed them to take a maximum of \$5,000 per person out of the country).

Leftists see this phenomenon as another race "exploiting" the "black community." But why do blacks flock to buy the Korean wares? And why don't consumers in white neighborhoods feel they are being "exploited"? And why can't blacks open up stores and work hard? Liberals counter that white racist banks refuse to lend money to stores in neighborhoods with high crime rates and declining property values. How then do Koreans get the capital? From a network of Korean families and self-help organizations, which pool their savings to lend money

for precisely such purposes. There is no reason why blacks couldn't form similar organizations.

Black activists also complain that Korean stores in black neighborhoods "don't give any money back to the community," which in plain English means hiring blacks and paying money to black churches and other "community organizations." The Koreans answer, and quite rightly, that their family labor force is extremely dedicated and low-cost, and that unlike large corporations, they can't afford such thinly veiled blackmail in the name of altruism. Besides, they resent such demands.

Which brings us to another "culture clash." The February incident in Brooklyn occurred when a Haitian woman, exasperated at standing in line, decided to walk out of the Korean fruit store. Suspicious that the woman had purloined some of their fruit, the Korean owner and his workers demanded to see her bag. She refused (even though every large store in New York displays a sign proclaiming the store owner's right to search a customer's bags). A scuffle then ensued, during which she claims that she was knocked to the floor (and suffered a slight cut finger) and the Koreans claim that they discovered in her bag three dollars worth of fruit.

In short, part of Korean "culture" is to resent theft of their property very deeply. Trained also to be suspicious of any police, the Korean storekeepers prefer defending their property themselves. These storekeepers, either out of bitter experience in New York or because they have imbibed white racist stereotypes (take your pick), are particularly suspicious of black customers, and are therefore possibly more ready to "dis" them than whites. And there we have it.

This black boycott has become an integral part of rising black militancy in Brooklyn. Mayor David Dinkins—the first black mayor in New York history—and his administration are caught between two opposing sets of expectations. His white liberal supporters