The New Criterion

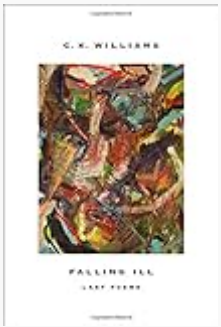
Verse Chronicle December 2017

Hobson’s choice

by William Logan

On recent poetry by C. K. Williams, Michael Longley, Simon Armitage, Brenda Shaughnessy & Robert Pinsky.

BOOKS IN THIS ARTICLE



C. K. Williams
Falling Ill: Last Poems

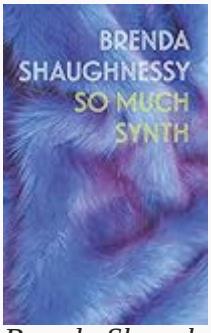
Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 64 pages, $23.00

Michael Longley
Angel Hill

Wake Forest University Press, 72 pages, $14.95

Armitage S
The Unaccompanied

Faber and Faber, pages,



Brenda Shaughnessy
So Much Synth

Copper Canyon Press, 88 pages, $22.00

Robert Pinsky
At the Foundling Hospital: Poems

Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 80 pages, $23.00

C. K. Williams died of cancer two years ago at the age of seventy-eight. His last poems, each restricted to five tercets of unpunctuated free verse, impose a shape on what otherwise might have been unbridled rambling. Waiting for the end is for most unrewarding, nothing but discomfort and dread. Only a cantankerous old Greek can swig down the cup of hemlock, a steely old Roman step into the warm bath and open his veins. Johnson said, “When a man knows he is to be hanged . . . , it concentrates his mind wonderfully”; but the nearness of extinction just makes it hard to focus. A reader must appreciate the will required when the horizon is so bleak—courage is necessary to write at all, or at least the longing for distraction from the unbearable.

It would be tempting to suggest that the restraint of form in *Falling Ill* acknowledges the imprisonment of fatal illness, that the run-on sentences reflect the panicky thoughts of a dying man.1 What defeats the terror lurking in the margins is, for the reader, not the philosophical maundering, but the mundane moments Williams arrests before they pass from view ("*From your workshop the usual commotion/ the insistent exhalations of your torch/ a hammer banging shy tings from silver").* Memory of classical art brings Williams to a world where facing death is not soulless or mechanical:

Fresco of spear-fighting Ertruscans or Greeks

or some army anyway with its marvelous armor

but some warriors despite those invulnerable plates

have sharp spears thrust into them and on through

into the painted air.

The painted air! In such lines illness is not the point. Survival of language is the point.

Williams found his gift in long-lined psychological portraits.

Cancer memoirs are so familiar now, the individual pain subsides too readily into the pain of others gone before. A poet with Bishop's quirky view or Lowell's tour-de-force style might manage; but Williams found his gift in long-lined psychological portraits and what he calls "granite memories/ of myself as thoughtless selfish self-centered/ beyond what even the term might imply." The nature of the disease and treatment makes it taxing to keep up self-reflection very long. The rare hard look takes the reader aback—"Here's my face slung on its bones like a slop/ of concrete here the eyes punched into the mortar/ hardened it seems to something like stone." Williams pays homage there to his unsparing earlier poems, the lack of self-deceit worth reams of sub-Augustinian meditation.

A lot of these poems, unfortunately, can't find their way out of the prosaic, as if the poet's world had become pure prose:

The sympathetic young woman doctor

informs me with an awkward uncharacteristic

formality that the laboratory has reported

not only on my blood but on the day's worth

of urine I'd amassed in a plastic bottle and

that I've been *diagnosed* awful word and that

I'm afflicted with a malady the name of which

I've never heard but which arrives now

in an alliterated appellation.

Leave it to Williams to notice the alliteration. The dry comedy makes the darkness darker.

Too often the poet lapses into sick-bed speculation and regret ("why is this happening you want to ask/ while knowing the answer isn't to be borne"), or long passages that offer merely the sea-floor dredging of thought:

Look at him sidling like some sub-terrestrial

some broken-down predator-prey thing fear-

bitten hate-bitten furtively drifting among others

like him though he's invisible to them he likes

to believe because so like them this spy in his time-

woven depths impotently trying to forgive

the weaknesses of his own tremulous vessel.

The weakest lines are the most "poetic," falling between pop-psych abstraction and Leonard Cohen lyrics ("*If I keep secret from you that I'm spinning/ if I don't hint to you I feel I'm falling/ if I keep hidden from you that I'm fainting*"). The vertigo he describes too easily becomes metaphorical or metaphysical. Such guff is a long way short of the precision and detachment needed.

There's little bargaining in *Falling Ill*, little of the pleading that is the occasional side-effect of belief in a merciful Creator. Auden remarked, in his introduction to Shakespeare's sonnets, that much scholarship "is an activity no different from that of reading somebody's private correspondence when he is out of the room, and it doesn't really make it morally any better if he is out of the room because he is in his grave." Reading these poems by a man about to die is unusually painful because unusually private, with an intimacy now almost lost from confessional poetry. The power to make a reader ashamed is one of the most terrifying poetry has.

The real subject of this long wrestle with mortality (one of the only times a man gets to feel like Achilles, knowing his doom and fighting on) is not death but the tedium of dying. A poet's best work is rarely about tedium. Williams will be remembered as an fbi profiler watching for the nuance of psychological weakness, the twitch that gives away guilt. His portraits show the inheritance of Browning, rare in our day—but Williams added a flair for the grotesque all his own.

Michael Longley is a member of the old school, the old Northern Irish school. He was among the young poets, sometimes called the Belfast Group (Derek Mahon and Seamus Heaney among them), who early in the Sixties gathered to discuss their work. Longley has long worked partly in miniature, the poems saying what needs to be said and no more. Many poets look down their noses at miniatures, as if a short poem must suffer want of ambition. If modesty is not always a virtue in poetry, neither is length—more poems are too long than too short. There's nothing wrong with the Lilliputian: Giacometti produced sculptures that could fit inside a matchbox, and most Elizabethan paintings larger than a playing card lie in the shadow of Nicholas Hilliard and Isaac Oliver.

Angel Hill is a field guide to a remote seacoast in County Mayo and to the Scottish peninsula of Lochalsh, across the water from the Isle of Skye.[2] Longley casts himself as a distracted, owl-eyed amateur who drags into language these fragments of the natural world.

Imagine an out-of-the-way cottage

Close to dunes, the marram grass whispering

Above technicolour snails and terns' eggs,

Intelligent choughs on the roof at dawn,

At dusk whimbrels whistling down the chimney.

The innocent is a stock figure in the literature of nature, an outsider who knows that to court your readers you cannot lord it over them. Longley stands in the long tradition after John Clare, the great English poet of weeds and ditches. What makes Clare a narrower poet, even a minor poet, compared to the Romantics of outsize reputation is just what keeps him fresh. Longley understands the tradition, and the freedom offered by restraint.

These familial, grandfatherly poems form a partial autobiography.

That time I shared a lobster with Heaney

(Boston? New York?) he took the bigger claw.

At this stove I cooked beans on toast for him

And, later, for young Muldoon, scrambled eggs

(Such a serious *dim sum* connoisseur).

Heaney's Nobel was a triumph for and blow against other Irish poets of his generation. Most of them cherish a few anecdotes that take the great man down a peg, though an Irishman's fondness, like his envy, carries a sharper blade than most. Influence is difficult to measure among poets so enamored of one other, but Longley's style sometimes seems plucked from Heaney's hip pocket:

Have the donkeys abandoned Connemara

And hobbled away on painful slippers?

We used to converse with their heavy heads

On the way to Leenane, the Famine Road.

Rosemary Garvey, blind and in her eighties,

Cared for two donkeys at Dadreen, Harriet

And Josie, patient in their bumpy field.

This could have fallen from the notebooks for *Field Work*. There's a moment, abashed but cunning, when Longley admits moving his own books in front of Heaney's—and others'—in a bookstore display.

Longley's late work flaunts his bluff character, chest thrust out, hands on hips, like those tweedy gents who stride along thrashing bushes with a stick. A quatrain for his father finds its emotion beneath the dry surface of description:

Among the treasures in her secret drawer

My mother preserved soiled underwear,

His medals, the strap from his wrist-watch

With dust and sweat beneath the buckle.

Much is preserved of love by leaving these belongings in their last state, untouched; and much feeling is gripped, not by "treasures," but by "secret" and "soiled" and "sweat." The wrist-watch is gone, but the widow keeps the strap. Nothing else is necessary for a double elegy.

Despite the haunting charms of poems that leave much unsaid, far too many say too much. Poems so rich in description are betrayed by the heavy thumb-print of sentiment:

The wrist-watch is gone, but the widow keeps the strap.

You have walked with me again and again

Up the stony path to Carrigskeewaun

And paused among the fairy rings to pick

Mushrooms for breakfast and for poetry.

I'm not sure whether that poetry should be fried with onions or just smeared on toast, like Marmite. A poet should be wary of goading poems toward vision or grace. Longley writes of a little girl who has just played the Virgin Mary, probably in a school pageant, "You . . . carry home the spongeware bowl/ Very carefully, still unbroken/ After birth-pangs and stage-fright and/ Large enough to hold the whole world." The *world* would have been bad enough; the *whole world* seems the work of a door-to-door salesman.

The most striking poems here are merely quiet observations: soldiers at a cemetery, say, "who come here on leave/ And rest against rusty railings/ Like out-of-breath pallbearers." Longley has a presence in these landscapes even when he's not center stage; and many poems would have been better had he waited in the wings, seeing more than he knows, knowing more than he says.

Simon Armitage's larkish, laddish poems have been part of the British landscape for the past three decades. Few poets have been cheeky enough to launch themselves with an exclamation point (his first book was titled Zoom!), though poetry often needs a poke in the snoot when it takes itself too seriously. Armitage's new book, The Unaccompanied, shows that sometimes the tearaway or enfant terrible grows up, and sometimes he ends up embalmed like the elderly Wordsworth.3

Armitage is now Oxford Professor of Poetry, following a long train of other poets, Matthew Arnold, W. H. Auden, Seamus Heaney, Geoffrey Hill, James Fenton, and Paul Muldoon among them. It's to the current professor's credit that, though his style has calmed down a bit, he still likes giddy ideas with a prickly edge. "The Holy Land" begins, "Christ was born under Tinsley Viaduct—/ why not?—/ the Leopold being overbooked." (The viaduct is a road bridge in Sheffield, the Leopold a boutique hotel.)

Magi brought gifts from as far away

as Carnaby

and Goole: hair straighteners,

a replica Louis Vuitton man-bag, a two-piece

snooker cue.

Herod's henchmen sought him out,

hoodies from Bethlehem, PA, but hidden

in a battered

velvet-lined guitar case our Saviour slept.

Take that, Matt and Mark. Removing the Nativity to northern England allows a witty commentary on pliant Christian myths; Yorkshire's high opinion of itself; even the belief of many nations, as well as American football teams, that they are singularly blessed by God. However irreverent, the whimsy is still a touch labored. The author seems as pleased with himself as the original author of the Garden of Eden.

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The Grand Tour for Armitage has been reduced to a stroll around Poundland, the British equivalent of Dollar Tree:

Came we then to the place abovementioned,

crossed its bristled threshold through robotic glass doors,

entered its furry heat, its flesh-toned fluorescent light.

Thus with wire-wrought baskets we voyaged,

and some with trolleys, back wheels flipping like trout tails,

cruised the narrow canyons twixt cascading shelves,

the prow of our journeying cleaving stale air.

The reader is no doubt thinking, "Oh, fudge, a Whitman pastiche." Sure enough, Walt comes stumbling onstage soon after. The tone, however, is oddly condescending—Whitman would probably have embraced Poundland as the cornucopia it is, however downmarket the commerce or ridiculous the goods.

From the beginning, Armitage's poems have suffered from hypermanic frenzy, the medical term for premature ejaculation of style. His contrived metaphors and similes often stop a poem in its tracks: larch trees are "widowed princesses in moth-eaten furs," a lamppost casts a "wigwam of light," a pole-vaulter is "speared like a speared fish," "every daffodil bulb/ was an animal skull or shrunken head," a "parking meter guzzles its supper of coins." Even the hilarious ones (a "bottle of meths/ stood corked and purple like a pickled saint") steal the spotlight from whatever the poem's trying to say. The sprezzatura of attack, part of his bullish charm, is everywhere undercut by the constant smirking and cutesy quirkiness. His bijoux never come to much, if they come to anything at all—and a few show lapses of sympathy, like his description of a suicide "coupling the lips of his car exhaust/ to the roots of his lungs/ via a garden hose."

Armitage worked as a probation officer into his forties, and the poems find some of their weight and distinctiveness in the dignity of the public services degraded by recent governments. He takes a more intimate view of the world of high-street shops and banks and post offices than most British poetry—Larkin might have liked these poems simply for what they refuse to ignore. Yet too many

are longish poems of shortish interest, too many a medium for humdrum lists, as if the only poem Armitage ever loved was "Jubilate Agno":

It's too late now to start collecting football shirts,

bringing them back from trips abroad as souvenirs:

the sun-struck God-given green and gold of Brazil;

Germany's bold no-nonsense trademark monochrome;

the loud red of "emerging nation" South Korea.

Eventually the poem gobbles up English landscape just as ploddingly; any passing cow would kill itself rather than read further. Another poem consists of a to-do list so tedious Parliament recently banned such lists for a twelvemonth.

When Heaney wrote one of his farm- implement poems, though there were surely too many, you knew the tool intimately, but also something of the man who had seen it. Armitage can make a slick and stylish portrait of some mundane object, though not one the least revealing.

The shears were a crude beast, lumpen, prewar,

rolling-pin handles on Viking swords,

an oiled rivet that rolled like a slow eye,

jaws than opened to the tips of its wings

then closed with an executioner's lisp.

The drollery comes at the expense of everything else. Even in late middle-age, honors and awards abounding, Armitage is trying to prove himself. The Jack the Lad who once filched coins from a fountain, joined a band of no great talent, and worked in a scrapyard has been reduced, here and there, to being a poet writing about being a poet.

Brenda Shaughnessy's emo-drenched poems dribble down the page like a freshman term-paper. Indeed, the longest poem in So Much Synth revisits, in the poet's middle middle-age, her angsty teen diary.4 Proust's diary might have been interesting at fourteen, or John Stuart Mill's, or Marie Curie's; but the diaries of most poets before the age of reason are probably better consigned to the flames.

Before pubescence's acrid synthesis—those 700 days—

I was a kid: all glossy grubby greatness, jumping through

sprinklers, full-tilt rollerskating, running down

the street while running my mouth, just as often

riveted to the silent endlessness

demanded by a beautiful or terrifying story.

Pubescence's acrid synthesis could win a clotted-phrase contest in a heartbeat. The skittery style (either jumped up or watered down), the perfunctory wordplay ("maybe 'laze' is just/ 'zeal' rearranged"), the description that never quite describes—the writing is more porridge than poetry. You have to think your puberty awfully special to write a puberty poem half again as long as *The Waste Land*.

Reading about someone else's adolescence requires payment in advance. Shaughnessy's is no more loaded with longing, self-loathing, and unmodulated rage than most—toward the end, the poem becomes a rant against tampons, menstruation, body hair, and idiotic young men. She's by nature a diffuse, soft-focus poet; but the occasional sardonic amusement ("tearful thinking// about my erotic awakening in the bungalow/ by really any of Duran Duran except Andy") isn't frequent or devastating enough.

Shaughnessy's occasional sardonic amusement isn't frequent or devastating enough.

Confessional poetry, in the long age after Lowell and Plath, has become so diluted that the poet's private life no longer has to be crippled, shameful, or dramatic. Shaughnessy can go on for fifteen lines about tightening a drawer knob:

To tighten it,

I must empty the drawer

of the clothes nobody's ever

worn and nobody will ever

like, find the screwdriver

I don't think I've ever used,

or even have anymore,

use it with both hands, one

outside the drawer to steady

the pull and one inside

to screw it.

This is as hilarious, in its awful way, as Longfellow's endlessly parodied lines about Hiawatha's mittens. If that's what Shaughnessy can do with a bit of hardware, given a whole fixer-upper she could write the *Odyssey*.

A more madcap passage tracks the comings and goings in a New York "dyke loft":

Anna and Jackie came by,

they were friendly to me, but

Tjet and Julie weren't. T and J

were Clit Club. A and J were

literary. Then Michelle and

Shigi secretly slept together,

a disaster, and Cynthia got

kicked out for being bi and

then bringing a guy to the loft.

You'd need a scorecard to keep track. The Keystone Cops slapstick dries up long before the eighty lines are done—beneath the sound and fury there's not nothing, just little.

Shaughnessy also attempts that Augean labor, writing poems about pop music. These "mix tapes," as she calls them, recall the heyday of the cassette with all the whispery cutesiness of a highschool teacher trying to sell students on Simon and Garfunkel (as a teacher did, painfully, in Frederick Wiseman's *High School*). Pop music remains for most the great medium of feeling and expression, but her poems for Prince or Madonna or some half-forgotten band would make poor Apollo gnash his teeth.

If words were material

and not ether, ink, rivulet

of breath in space,

they'd have a hand-stitched

quality, each a starsplat

of sleep on a plain white

tight cotton sheet that robots

wove on their industrial looms.

A starsplat of sleep! Even Garfunkel and strings couldn't rescue that. I sympathize with the life that lurks in the shadows here, but that doesn't make the poetry any better.

What I like about Shaughnessy is the dead-accurate portrait of nervous, nerve-racking insecurity—Plath lite, if you will, but not without the lostness that made Plath Plath. Shaughnessy has a sympathetic humanity, however, where Plath often seemed as cold as Philadelphia. Given all the emoting in this self-indulgent book, however, the poet's acknowledgments are difficult to read without wincing. After "Extreme Kids & Crew . . . created community and supportive space for our family," "my . . . students are astonishing and brilliant, and I'm thankful to them for making me walk my talk as a teaching poet," and "I wrote . . . hoping to put words out there to protect you, to make your girlhood and womanhood more unimpeded, unabashed, full-bodied, and empowered," well, you wonder if a K Street spin doctor could have done mealy-mouthed sanctimony any better.

The poet's publisher seems blithely unaware of the numerous copyright violations—quoting song lyrics requires permission and often a sizable fee. Though the rule of thumb is that you can print one or two lines gratis, a decade ago a British novelist was charged (in 2017 dollars) $1,300 for a line from "Jumpin' Jack Flash" and $1,900 for another from "When I'm Sixty-Four." If the music publishers ever hear about this book, Shaughnessy will owe Duran Duran and Melissa Etheridge a pretty penny.

Robert Pinsky is an agreeable, hard-working poet with a professorial air. He doesn't seem the type to traipse the moors chanting lines to himself, scribbling them down back at his peat fire. At the Foundling Hospital is earnest in all the wrong ways—however personal the poems seem, they have a polished veneer that makes them appear second- or third-hand.5 Twice-told tales are not always best-told tales; but think what Jarrell, who never saw combat, did with stories picked up from returning pilots.

The theme of Pinsky's new book is identity. Though he ranges across culture and history like a boy killing starlings with a BB gun, the poems turn repeatedly to family.

I'm tired of the gods, I'm pious about the ancestors: afloat in

The wake widening behind me in time, those restive devisers.

My father had one job from high school till he got fired at thirty.

The year was 1947 and his boss, planning to run for mayor,

Wanted to hire an Italian veteran, he explained, putting it

In plain English. I was seven years old, my sister was two.

The barbarian tribes in the woods were so savage the Empire

Had to conquer them to protect and clear its perimeter.

The potted Roman history apart, this is an awfully prosaic description of an event that nearly sent the Pinskys to the poor house. Rome, which takes up far too much of the poem, lets the former poet-laureate collapse into a few fairly uninformative lines the millennium-long formation of the Romance languages. The poem succumbs, like many another here, to a gout of etymology, never making clear what the Roman Empire has to do with Mr. Pinsky getting fired. Spoiler alert: things turn out all right for Mr. Pinsky and the little Pinskys.

The poem succumbs to a gout of etymology.

Another poem starts with the Mauna Kea submillimeter array, tossing in astrophysics, Hindu gods, Hawaiian gods, Biblical characters, Sappho, Abelard, then, well, a cast of billions. Half sounds like a ted talk, half like romantic nonsense ("Innumerable names and doings, innumerable/ Destinies, remote histories, deities and tongues"). Pinsky loves to translate things into an abstract muddle, with perfunctory gestures toward science that combine awe with, well, more awe ("traveling a filament of light// Across the nothing between the clouds of being/ Into the pinhole iris of your mortal eye").

"The Foundling Tokens" recalls a visit to the Foundling Museum in London:

A wall displaying hundreds

Of scraps, each pinned once

To some one particular infant's

Nightie, nappie or blanket,

Each with surviving particulate

Ink or graphite in studied lines

Betokening a life.

I'm not sure what's worst, the clumsy juxtaposition of "once"/"one"; the tone-deaf wordplay of "betokening," or the academic dinner of "surviving particulate/ Ink or graphite in studied lines."

The poet doesn't quite understand the Foundling Hospital's policies. In the early years, a scrap of cloth was cut from the foundling's dress, half of it filed with the baby's papers and half handed to the mother. Scraps of the mother's clothing were not pinned to the baby's clothes. Mothers in addition sometimes left tokens that make up the most affecting part of the museum collection. I've seen them—a small key, a crushed thimble, an effaced coin engraved "this is a token," each left by a woman, often no doubt distraught, so she could identify her baby if she returned. Few women ever did. The museum possesses some eighteen thousand of these pathetic *aides-mémoire*.

Alas, Pinsky wants to make a political tract of them, hauling in Africans on slave ships as well as Chinese immigrants awaiting deportation on Angel Island. Neither has any but the most distant relation to the women in London forced by poverty or shame to abandon their babies. Though the tale of the foundlings has a political edge, it cuts far deeper as a vast number of private and unendurable losses. The children never learned of their mothers' devastating sorrow, or their parting affection. The love denied is rivaled by that in the letters from condemned prisoners during the French Revolution, letters confiscated and never forwarded.

Grandiose gestures are symptomatic of the vatic strain, the hectoring inside the lecturing, that infects Pinsky's verse. Too many poems take on the issues of the day—global warming, the extinction of the bees, and the rise of . . . of robots—without a feel for the subjects or any idea what to do except turn them into deadly prose here, poetic mush there. Robots, then:

When they choose to take material form they will resemble

Dragonflies, not machines. Their wings will shimmer.

Like the chorus of Greek drama they will speak

As many, but in the first-person singular.

Their colors in the sky will canopy the surface of the earth.

In varying unison and diapason they will dance the forgotten.

They will dance the forgotten! This recalls the blowsy fantasias of Isaac Asimov. Then there are the endings inflated with a tire pump: "the ghostly other, who comes/ Between my hunger and the sweet breast of the world," "the syllables . . . echoed/ From the cold mirror of the moon," "the Sibyl knows,/ Who wrote it aright on a leaf lost in the wind." Pinsky's style, now lecture notes, now mere gush, is a specific against feeling—only through his gift for anecdote does something of the man slip through. In the exchanges with his father on life after death, the way his grandmother admits she loves him by pretending she doesn't, the kosher baseball game a rabbi invents ("To reach first base you had to chant two lines/ Of Hebrew verse correctly. Mistakes were outs"), the wry humor supplies a warmth otherwise lacking.

Many of the poems feel as if the writer had been sitting at his desk with nothing much to do. I'm the last to think that inspiration arrives on gilded wings or a breath of the pure serene, but whether the poem comes by sweat or soil it has to seem blown into being. The only remarkable poem in the book has the terrifying simplicity of Anthony Hecht's poems of the war:

He wasn't good at telling stories. He said

After we lost the outfit, meaning, they died.

He and the other survivor from their platoon

Wandered the battlefield till they lay down.

They slept. And when he woke, the other was gone,

So he walked the Battle of the Bulge alone;

Trying to use his compass, heading West,

He happened across a unit that had lost

Their radio and the radioman. They took

Him in, the SCR still strapped to his back:

The handset harnessed behind him, out of sight,

The antenna at his ear. *We slept, we ate.*

I had another outfit, somewhere to be.

They had a radioman, and that was me.

The beautiful reticence, common to veterans, and especially common to those who survived the worst of the fighting, makes the small touches more insinuating, more enduring. The ending almost conceals the quiet ambiguity—the soldier means his new outfit; but he could also mean his lost one, as if he were already a ghost among ghosts. After that, you can almost forgive Pinsky for lines elsewhere like "The primate that rose to dominate that planet/ Communicated with its peers in a code of grunts/ Exhaled from the orifice of ingestion." *The orifice of ingestion*!

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I should mention, since the poet makes a point of it, that T. S. Eliot did not "suppress" the book of what Pinsky calls the "vicious lectures/ On Culture, delivered in Virginia." The single anti-Semitic remark in *After Strange*

Gods (1934) is despicable and telling—Eliot, like the other great modernists, could not escape his prejudices. He had every reason to feel ashamed for having written, "Reasons of race and religion combine to make any large number of free-thinking Jews undesirable." It's often forgotten that the sentence, which I find unforgivable, is the only mention of Jews in the book. The lectures argued for a homogenous tradition and culture that may seem bizarre to later readers. Eliot troubled himself, not about Jews, however, but Jews without God.

It does not make things much better that in amelioration Eliot claimed a few years later that he thought undesirable a "large number of free-thinkers of any race." He was glad to be lecturing in Virginia, he announced in the first lecture, because he felt that the South had kept "at least some recollection of a 'tradition,' such as the influx of foreign populations has almost effaced in some parts of the North." Those foreign populations would have been mainly Italian and Irish, against whom there was still strong anti-Catholic prejudice, and German, thought to be freethinking atheists. Eliot, it should be recalled, had converted to the Church of England in 1927.

The performance is certainly embarrassing; but Eliot did not, in the strict sense, suppress the very short set of lectures—he at some point merely declined to reprint them after the second impression. During the ten years the book remained in print, however, he did nothing to stop its sale. Whether it haunted him for the rest of his life is unknown—what he said in 1963 was that he felt the book "rather intemperate, especially in speaking of Thomas Hardy." Perhaps that makes the whole thing worse.

On a smaller matter, it's not quite true that the chorus in Greek drama speaks, as Pinsky implies in another poem, only in first-person singular—there are exceptions in, for example, *Women of Trachis*.

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1 *Falling Ill*, by C. K. Williams; Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 54 pages, $23.

2 *Angel Hill*, by Michael Longley; Wake Forest University Press, 72 pages, $14.95.

3 *The Unaccompanied*, by Simon Armitage; Knopf, 81 pages, $27.

4 *So Much Synth*, by Brenda Shaughnessy; Copper Canyon, 98 pages, $22.

5 *At the Foundling Hospital*, by Robert Pinsky; Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 63 pages, $23.

William Logan's latest collection of criticism, *Broken Ground: Poetry and the Demon of History*, was published in spring 2021 by Columbia University Press.