

**Poly, Multi, and Ambi Converging in a Clearing:
On Burt Kimmelman's *Visible at Dusk: Selected Essays*, (Dos
Madres Press, 2021)***

By Jon Curley

Especially in the pressurized micro-space of the poetry world, whether in its production or reception, the inducement of any poet and critic is to stake claim, gain ground, and commit to a specific agenda of advocacy or rejection. Often the nudge, particularly if the writer is a practitioner of some self-described or conferred traditional or experimental form, is towards consolidating a vision of that designation. Such moving of the reader towards a recognizable set of assumptions and notions regarding the tendency and their orientation to it can be authoritative or coercive. Given the poet and kind of poetry involved, the effect can seem either a case of crucial distinction or flimsy, faulty justification, a vital new force field of consideration or a vortex of factitious assessment.

Whatever involved is typically the curation of prestige, a singular voice cultivated and equipped to demonstrate the authority of the poet's critical vision as well as, whether overtly or implicitly, the indisputable value of that poet's creative work. Rare is the poet-essayist who departs from this formula. The spirit and substance of Burt Kimmelman's *Visible at Dusk: Selected Essays* is all pondering and probing, framing yet rarely finalizing critical perspectives. This book refuses formulas, closures, resolutions, or complacency. Its foundational impulse

is relentless inquiry; its mission not to pronounce but to point to; its overall radical honesty, generosity, and humility rare and exquisite birds. This book is not one of the typical score-settling or enshrining enterprises; it's about turning perplexity and curiosity into provisional statements, showing the way of possible interpretations and statements, not hard hermeneutics or arrogant exegeses. This volume knows how to be in uncertainties with doubts and bewilderments, but also the insistent clarities of attentive sensibility.

A renowned poet and scholar for many decades, Kimmelman could have handily compiled a tome-testament to his body of work and his preferred poetics and aesthetics. To a certain extent he does—he is unafraid of asserting himself but never allows judgement to engulf openness to many other arguments, opinions, voices, and kinds of poetry and art. Alert, skeptical engagement prevails across many examples of poetry, visual arts, and architecture. While lavish focus is brought to *The New American Poetry and Objectivism*—Kimmelman claims close kinship to each—many other subjects are introduced and one gets the sense that he refuses ultimate reckonings for artful, careful, and ongoing deliberations. This approach always strikes one as just.

The many subjects, sites, and situations encompassed by this collection include Antwerp and Prague, New England in relation to Thoreau, William Bronk, and Susan Howe, flarf and conceptual poetry, poetry and philosophy, Basil King's paintings, late career poetry, African American poetry and poetics, and various art controversies and culture wars. Each topic is broached with needed context and then comes the

questioning. How should we understand and react to these models? What preconceptions do we carry into our apprehension of them? What is the cost of abiding received notions about them? The interrogatory vigilance never subdues, and the process of coming to terms with the various poets, poems, histories, and structures, architectural and otherwise, is accentuated by these essays' sifting through examples and evidence with a sense of strenuous striving towards sufficient understanding. Essays, then, in the richest, most classical sense.

“What’s the difference,” asks Kimmelman, “between concrete and words? Oppen talks of building a poem as what happens at a construction site.” The matter of structures and their representations is at the heart of the book. Over and over, *Visible at Dusk* addresses the convoluted nature of conceptualizing the relationship of materiality of text, poetic or whatever, and its physical instantiation. How do words merge, emerge, cement, dement, and run free of their contexts or get constrained by them when we try to establish marks on a page and/or screen, their concretized selves, and their connoted meanings? How does the physically marked connect with the expressively assumed? What is the occasion of the poem, Kimmelman poses again and again, when it arises as a material inscription and a mental conceit, an object to be plucked and an idea beyond picking?

The compositional field, the typographical construct, the word as shaper and misfire of meaning: these subjects are bruited with sustained meticulous treatment. What Kimmelman advances, acknowledges, and relays to the reader is the irrevocable, fraught tension between signifiers, statements, sites of

representation, poetic meanings, and philosophical containments of poetic expression. There are always thresholds and overlaps disrupting easy definitional status among these terms and subjects and inevitably boundaries blurred in categorizing any of them or securing their status entirely. The impingement of different structures always threatens the considered statement of their interrelationships. This state of instability is what *Visible at Dusk* illuminates supremely.

Kimmelman throughout these essays moves restlessly and exuberantly amid many sites, scenes, and poems. It is a form of fertile wandering. That he has a reputation as a distinguished scholar of medieval troubadour poetry is asserted here as the author becomes a troubadour, exploring themes and always sharing in his engagement the newness of his encounters: author and content are one. He is a pivoter, not a riveter, so declarations seldom blare but when they do they are true wisdom: “The wrongness of the world is healed by poetry. Yet poetry transcends it. Like defying gravity, poetry will always be ignorant of it—because of this, it will never be pulled down into it.” Amen.

Now to be superficial: this behemoth of a book is a beauty to behold, sumptuously saturated with illustrations and handsomely printed by Dos Madres Press on high-grade paper. The catholicity of the writer is matched by the striking design (designs, really) of the publisher. A preface by fellow poet Ed Foster is a primer for Kimmelman’s oeuvre, poetry and prose both, and is a crucial in-depth introduction to this work. To get even more surface level and stylish, let me refer to *Vogue Magazine*, which in December 1969 gave Samuel Beckett a

fashionable runway for the following nugget. “Every word,” he told reporter John Gruen,” is like an unnecessary stain on silence and nothingness.” So if words are to be used, then they must justify themselves accordingly. In *Visible at Dusk*, Burt Kimmelman does so remarkably and fundamentally.

* From *Talisman* 46/52 (September 2022), talisman46.com/jon-curley.html