

*In Praise of Darkness*

by Beryl Baigent

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Reviewed by Katerina Fretwell

The night, veiled in mystery, sometimes moonlit, sometimes not. A world devoid of colour, with just enough light to see the molecules dance. The illusion of safety, yet also the portal to the dimension between the worlds. Or as Beryl Baigent quotes from the *Tao Te Ching*, “Know the active, the masculine/ Yet keep to the passive, the feminine/ And you will cradle the World./ Be aware of the obvious – the light/ but keep to the mystery – the dark/ And set an example for the world” (28). In her thirteenth poetry book, *In Praise of Darkness*, Welsh-Canadian poet Beryl Baigent takes us on a nocturnal tour of mystery, enchantment and spiritual enlightenment, both Western Celtic and Eastern Taoist. Also alluded to is the not manifest, the inchoate darkness before creation.

Studying and teaching Taoist philosophy through the practice of *t'ai chi*, Baigent asserts that it has transformed her, embracing “Heaven *and* Earth,” honouring her yin/yang and rising above the Cartesian Western duality that stresses the masculine/light/day over the feminine/dark/night. The eponymous poem “In Praise Of Darkness” boldly offers that darkness “is not merely the absence of light/ in fact it may be/ the Mother of light” as pre-Creation’s dark giving birth (5). Other unions occur: “Three fifteen a.m. and drifting . . ./ the mythic Seven Sisters appeared. . . ./ Then . . ./ like a flock of blissful doves they disappear” (Appointment With The Seven Sisters 6). Thus the star constellation of the Seven Sisters is linked to the Christian holy spirit, symbolized as the dove.

Whether addressing her own healing from loss of loved ones or exploring myth and symbol, Baigent is our Virgil through night-time sacred journeys. Her tone is deliciously varied, at times humorous, hushed, awestruck, pragmatic, reverent. Our deepening pilgrimage is reflected in the section headings: Entering the Darkness, Traveling By Night, and You, Darkness.

The book, beautifully designed by David Lang, features on its cover an enlarged photo by Walter Griffiths, a wild-life photographer from North Wales, of an iconic dragonfly atop a thistle. The body of the text is set in Adobe Jensen and the poem titles in Kelt.

Feisty images portray our essential Oneness: likening cows which “will tend me on the Otherworld journey ahead” to St. Columba: “This goddess of the fiery flanks” (The Highland Healing Of Mull 10), or “where all is One and the touch/ of a leaf is the stroking of a dog’s wet nose” (Willingly Into Darkness 12).

Particularly sensual and encompassing is her, and by poetic proxy our, stroll through the enchanting Iona Abbey: “at twilight in the nave . . ./ . . . I felt/ an expansion happening inside and soon/ I was touching the curved roof with my head.” In this exquisitely sedate poem, Baigent links the “currachs in Columba’s Bay” “gentled/ against” her with the Taoist “Ten Thousand Things.” Zen mind or beginner’s (open) mind results in Baigent and other worshippers “giggling like children in a bouncy castle” secure since “The womb of the world shelters and shields us” (Quiet Time 17).

After the service, the “tar-black night” invokes “the Road/ of the Dead even the coloured cobbles/ emitted a slight incandescence at/ the threshold. . . ./ such isolation such absolution such silence” (Mystery 18).

We are at the threshold between the worlds and ready for Part II: *Traveling by Night*, which opens with a quote from William Wordsworth's "Ode: Intimations of Immortality": "But trailing clouds of glory do we come/ From God who is our home." Again, Baigent reconciles Eastern and Western belief, birth and death, under the cover of night.

Echoing the "giggling children" of the first section (17), Baigent introduces us to childhood and cultural fears and prejudices by deftly undercutting stereotypes: "in this culture of all-night street lights/ . . . I yearn for darkness.// . . . to demonstrate to our/ dark-skinned grandsons/ . . . that brown and black/ along with arrogant white come from star-dust/ and we all shine (*Sleeping With The Lights On* 30). South America's Machu Picchu and Paris's Cimetière Du Père Lachaise are invoked in Baigent's worldwide pilgrimage through continents, eras, voyages of family and friends, sacred sites and beliefs. Humour pops up in uncannily observed juxtapositions such as "A shroudy Schatov scarf waves with pizzas—" (*Isadora: 1877 – 1927 Nice* 43). A magical expansion occurs in her daughter: "She is night wind/ stirring up red earth// . . . the Urubamba over rocks// . . . and Mama Kilya swallows the light.// *And when she comes back home . . .* // . . . she will be changed for/ *the well-being of the world* (*Krista At Machu Picchu* 27). The unspecified pronouns delineate the inanimate and animate Oneness.

Out of transformation comes that love of wholeness, that feeling of completion. Baigent addresses the night as a friend in the final section: *You, Darkness*, which opens with another Western quote: "You, darkness, that I come from,/ I love you more than all the fires/ that fence in the world,// . . . I have faith in nights" (Rainer Maria Rilke).

The plethora of animals, spirits, sprites, et cetera would require a book-length treatment to do justice to Baigent's fertile imagination, syncretic ability and extensive knowledge of the sacred in all its guises. Her optimism and playfulness prevail in the rhythmic "Transience": "A dragon fly/ large in the glory/ of its encoded days/ settles on the deck.// Our cat pounces . . . // I rescue this/ finite creature . . . // This dragon fly is/ neither staying nor going . . . // when apparent will/ cease and ethereal/ will release this time/ once more" (51 – 52). What an iridescent, iconic example of spirit hovering between dimensions. Baigent's Trickster-like humour abounds in "A Coven Of Cormorants": "she perches with wings outspread like/ crib sheets on a Monday clothes line.// Here a coven of cormorants await/ a haggard and hungry colony/ in appreciation of her toil and trouble" (48), echoing the witches in *Macbeth*. The "sword-like" fisher bird stands in for "a weird sister evading *Macbeth*." Another dark denizen. The food chain soldiers on as the cormorant feeds its compatriots on the Avon in Stratford, Ontario.

Even pragmatic heirlooms evoke the dark or colourful history of Baigent's family through the generations, as in "The Revelation Of Nain's Last Will And Testament" (65 – 69). "Dear Lily Maud who sacrificed/ Through aging arthritis attitudes . . . / one-third the bed linen" and for Franklyn, "the weary collier coming/ Home to his Calvinist text hot cocoa and/ Arrowroot biscuits . . . // Only hints of the holocaust . . . // She was irrevocably bound for Salvation." World War II, family, lost dreams and loss, and humour, irrevocably bound, succinctly and skilfully weave into a darkly vivid tapestry. Baigent captures the *zeitgeist* in pithy allusions that speak volumes.

Another long poem, the closing "Vera Poems," also multi-skeined, arose from an invitation to London-area poets to honour a family's beloved aunt, Vera Hebner. In her poem cycle, Baigent thus celebrates that ultimate darkness, Death, and that ultimate form of expression, Poetry. A good example is number V: "The Vera/Irving Weave": (Irving Layton's) "*poems like angels . . .* . . . quavered above his *prickling skin*.// What was it she felt in images so alien?/ No brothels brothers bull calves/ in her conservative life style./ Perhaps that both inherently knew/ *Poetry is freedom*// . . . And they in *broad daylight* or/ when *night surrounds*/ *happiest when [composing]* poems" (76). (Layton's words are in italics.) Again, Baigent deftly intertwines light and dark.

Read these vividly rendered poems and, to paraphrase Wordsworth, prepare to reconcile your opposing forces and feel the joy of wholeness, connection, completion. Baigent's *In Praise of Darkness* is a mature, well-considered, transcendent book which will help her readers balance the complementary forces of life. ♣

Katerina Fretwell's sixth poetry collection, which includes her art, was published by Inanna Publications in 2011; her art and poetry reside in Canada, Denmark, Japan and the United States.