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**“A World of Wake-Believe”: Thoughts On Robert Podgurski’s  
*Wandering On Course***

Robert Podgurski, *Wandering On Course*, Spuyten Duyvil, 2014, ISBN 970-9661242-2-4,  
\$16.00

**1.**

According to Robert Podgurski, “The poet cannot help / but become the things / written about.” The poet, then, is a shape shifter, and understands the flux of nature around him because he is an integral part of that flux. Think of Keats’ “camelion Poet.” Transformation is at the heart of Podgurski’s poetry; it is, if you will, a sort of nature alchemy. Podgurski is fascinated by alchemy, hermeticism, and the occult, and his book is strewn with references to John Dee, Aleister Crowley, Jung, and modern poets such as Charles Olson and Robert Duncan, who were likewise fascinated. But it is also deeply rooted in the landscapes of the South and Midwest, and he is a keen observer of natural detail. Like Olson and Duncan, like Ronald Johnson in such works as *The Book of the Green Man*, and more recently, like Peter O’Leary in *Phosphorescence of Thought*, Podgurski writes with visionary intensity, practicing a type of projective verse which, at its best, enacts or embodies verbal processes which are closely knit to natural processes and to cosmic processes. All, ultimately, are part of a greater whole.

Consider Podgurski’s poem “Of Whirling Air.” We find the poet “sitting at the base / of Tierrany Wall in Obed wilderness, Tennessee” as a thunderstorm suddenly descends upon him. (Usually spelled Tieranny Wall, this sandstone formation, including a dramatic overhang, is part of a gorge through which runs the Obed River.) Knowing full well that he is about to be overwhelmed by the storm, Podgurski insists on “ignoring the obvious signs of her fury / and formation.” Here is what ensues:

Lightning and distant thunder.

Evening darkness falls in seconds.

Mounting the storm.

Hail shower, a giveaway

of dark cloud’s intent that rolled

down the gorge’s corridor

a coiling *lung mei*

and then release

Rushing to the canyon’s rim

with a sound I’ll never forget

of whirling air  
 drowning out the rapid's thunder  
 as it lost the resonance of wind and rose  
 to an inferno's cracking and popping.  
 Air, a thousand arms twirling blades  
 swiftly tore  
     timber  
         earth,  
             and time  
             to shreds  
 turned our minds  
 inside out upon the moment,  
 ecstatic voyeurs of the primeval  
 beauty and rage.

Podgurski's vigorous, sinewy language dramatizes the descent of the storm; we too are caught up in it and become "ecstatic voyeurs of the primeval / beauty and rage." But in the midst of this mostly colloquial, descriptive language, one foreign term momentarily impedes—and then enriches—the reading process: *lung mei*. In Chinese, the term means "dragon path" or "dragon current"; it refers to lines of force determined by the magical practice of geomancy, used to determine specific locations for the building of sacred edifices. The concept of the dragon current is explored by the controversial esoteric writer and New Age theorist John Michell, whose most influential book, *The New View Over Atlantis* (1969), posits an Atlantean civilization built upon sacred geometric principles, including these lines of power connecting various worldwide religious sites. According to Michell, the dragon currents, analogous to the concept of the "ley lines" discovered by the British naturalist Alfred Watkins, account for the symmetrical location of earth mounds, henges, shrines, temples, and other places of worship from England to China to Australia to Latin America. Despite its enduring influence, Michell's vision of these Earth Mysteries, with their archaic powers and the magi who could comprehend and harness them, has been widely criticized by mainstream archaeologists and scholars in related fields. Does Podgurski really accept these ideas?

In respect to poetry, perhaps it doesn't matter. Like more traditional myths, ideas of this sort constitute what Robert Duncan calls "poet-lore"; they become the *matter* of the



By the nettled sting  
 Over in a barren corner  
 Datura, a lone thornapple spreads  
 Its limbs and toothed fronds  
 Alone purveying the alien unearthliness  
 Some things possess  
 So much in contact with terrum  
 Clue at a source beyond  
 The black that nestles stars.

Like the roots, underbrush, and brambles, Podgurski's lines here are wonderfully gnarly, charged with a demonic energy that is natural but also possessed, like the Jimson weed, of an "alien unearthliness," derived from "a source beyond / The black that nestles stars." The hallucinations produced by ingesting the plant, or perhaps simply by meditating upon its properties, connect the poet sitting on his patio (where he locates himself at the poem's beginning) to both the darkest depths of the earth and the darkest depths of the cosmos.

In an interview with Tod Thilleman included in *Wandering On Course*, Podgurski mentions "Jimson's Gift" among a number of "Chthonic, Lovecraftian influenced poems," in which he finds himself "allowing my consciousness to be pulled down / apart / and travel into the deep qliphotic tunnels, learn un-control, etc." Jimson weed is an apt natural symbol, as well as a natural substance, for altering consciousness in this fashion. The poet seeks to "learn un-control," and indeed, a number of his poems present him as entering into this dark tutelage. Here, Podgurski links his "goetic" fascination with the demonic and the chthonic (which refers to the underworld and infernal deities) to H. P. Lovecraft's monstrous alien entities, which in Lovecraft's fiction are often seen in by ignorant humanity as malevolent gods. In Lurianic Kabbalah, the qlipoth are the fallen shards of the spheroth, the emanations or vessels intended to contain and shape the divine light. The shattering of the spheroth and the resulting shards constitute a theodicy, providing a mystical explanation for the existence of evil. Between each of the spheroth run pathways of divine energy; conversely, "qliphotic tunnels" are the pathways that run between the qlipoth, which taken together make up the *Sidra Achra*, the "other side" of divine being. Poetic education is thus an education in both black magic and white magic; Podgurski in this respect is a Blakean poet, seeking to understand the marriage of heaven and hell—and enact that union in the poem.

Even when he is at his most kabbalistic, however, Podgurski's understanding of the demonic, the goetic, is bound to the natural world. "To the Whore of Singing Hounds" begins with the poet declaring "My friends can be found / rooting through briars and thorns of obscure ground," which in turn prove to be "Goetic garlands of briar thorn and

bracken.” “Rebel Departure” imagines a revolution led by a “Thelemic Confederacy” (Thelema is an esoteric, antinomian spiritual philosophy developed by Aleister Crowley in the early twentieth century). In the midst of this poetic rebellion (which in some respects resembles Robert Duncan’s Passages 25, “Uprising”),

Summoned to the cause by shrieks  
 Goetic rebel howls  
 housing Gehenna  
 made of the wood of un-  
 fulfilled desires fed by the blood  
 letting confederate priest-hood  
 the old southern giants—live oaks—rise up  
 out of the terrible ground...

This reminds me of Blake’s opening to *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*: “Rintrah roars & shakes his fires in the burden'd air...” Rintrah is Blake’s symbol of outraged prophecy. Likewise, the howl of the goetic in Podgurski’s lines prophetically creates a “Gehenna / made of the wood of un- / fulfilled desires”—and is it not unfulfilled desire which eventuates in psychic, if not political rebellion? This rebellious desire magically teleports us into a wood where “the old southern giants—live oaks—rise up,” seemingly possessed by the spirits of a “confederate priest-hood.” Since we are in the South, are we therefore confronted by the ghosts of the still rebellious Confederacy? Did that “priest-hood” that emerged out of the Confederacy, perhaps the Ku Klux Klan, perform some terrible ritual here? Is the image of the live oaks some ghastly unmaking of Whitman’s “I Saw In Louisiana a Live-Oak Growing,” the great poet of the Union’s own expression of unfulfilled desire? These associations flash demonically from the “terrible ground” of Podgurski’s chthonic vision. They are fleeting specters, but they are rooted in the darkness of the soil—and of the soul.

### 3.

The power of the goetic extends into other realms as well. In the long poem “The Concealing Voice,”

P. tells me, “not good—howling all night”  
 the goetia’s meddling  
     the harsh Goddess peddling  
 wares of lust

come out in a moment     arresting

Here, Podgurski moves from the psycho-political register to the psycho-sexual. There's no indication in the poem of whom "P." might be, but I think it's fair to say that one candidate is the poet himself, reflecting on the disruptive force of eros and the lure of those "wares of lust." The "harsh Goddess" makes her presence felt often in *Wandering On Course*; like all demons, she is a blocking agent, an archon impeding the poet-soul's quest for esoteric wisdom. But she is also the darkly seductive beloved, the figure of the straight male poet's erotic fate, and she manifests herself in a variety of cultures and myths.

Podgurski's fullest exploration of this erotic power is "On the Lam(ia)" (the title is an instance of an intensely earnest poet's occasional sly wit). A lamia, as in both the title character of Keats' poem, and Geraldine in Coleridge's *Christabel*, is an serpent-woman, an eroticized female monster. In the original Greek myth, she is Zeus's mistress, transformed into a snakelike monster by the jealous Hera. Hera also slays her children, and the lamia in turn preys upon the children of others, catching and devouring them. Podgurski rightly associates the lamia with Lilith, who in Jewish tradition was Adam's first wife. Her insistence on being his sexual equal (she wanted to be on top during intercourse) led to her eternal punishment; she too becomes a demonic figure, seducing men and stealing children. Knowing how the figure of Lilith has been transvalued by modern feminists, Podgurski's poem, in a rather serpentine fashion, weaves back and forth between feelings of attraction and threat. "Do not assume / Lilith's position," he begins, but he also recognizes and acknowledges the social significance of her sexual powers:

Assuming her position  
 pounding the patriarchy  
 Jigging,  
     Gigging  
         Wriggling off its crank  
         rodent caught in her trap  
         he fights to twist and tear it off  
         and be like her  
             so that she  
         may like him  
             be unrestricted.  
 Movement becomes the curvature



spell  
 A secret code of positions  
 a psycho-sexed brand  
 in the memory hide  
 to evoke a feeling emulsion  
 names itself  
 lamen, emotion, a spike in the eye.

This is yet another instance of Podgurski's bravura wordplay, metaphoric transformation, and esoteric wisdom. From the Arabic Djinn comes the French and then the English "genie," overlapping with the Latin "genius", and in turn yielding the word "ingenuity"—which the entire passage proceeds to demonstrate. Salamanders, in legend, are indeed spirits said to live in fire, which Podgurski relates to sexual passion and the magical transformations of the Djinn into "all / the lovers that ever / cut to the quick." These "writhing bodies" (one may misread it as "writing bodies") in turn become letters, a "secret code of positions" which may be branded on the "memory hide"—a fine metaphor for the way a lover may remain in one's memory long after he or she is gone. This complex of images "names itself / lamen," a lamen being a talisman or pendant worn by a magician for protection and corresponding to the spirit he would invoke. But what protection is to be found from such emotions as these? They are "a spike in the eye."

#### 4.

For Robert Podgurski, poetry, to borrow one of his titles, is "a comforting terror." As he writes in that poem, we inhabit a "world of wake-believe," and poets like Podgurski inhabit a world of the imagination that is also a waking dream. Poetry, therefore, is *unheimlich* (uncanny); as Freud insists in his great essay, it is both strange and familiar, presenting us with the continual interchange and rediscovery of the one within the other. *Heimlich* means "homey," and the home where this haunting movement from comfort to terror takes place is the house of language. As Nicholas Royle puts it in his study of Freud and "The Uncanny," "Above all, the uncanny is intimately entwined in language, with how we conceive and represent what is happening within ourselves, to ourselves, to the world, when uncanny strangeness is at issue."<sup>1</sup> Likewise, we may turn to Emily Dickinson in her famous letter to Higginson: "Nature is a Haunted House - but Art - a House that tries to be haunted." As both a poet and a naturalist, Podgurski knows this well. As we have seen, his understanding of nature is both alchemical and chthonic; gods and demons haunt his constantly shifting landscapes. But writing itself, especially writing as richly informed by ancient esoteric traditions as Podgurski's, is equally haunted. He addresses this ghostly quality in a section of "The Concealing Voice":

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<sup>1</sup> Nicholas Royle, *The Uncanny* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2003), 2.

Apocrypha and the unverifiable.  
 What is it we must always have  
 in seeking authority out  
     a life invested in a writ?  
 Fragments especially  
     from the Dead Sea,  
         or Parmenides  
         Nag Hammadi  
             et cetera.

The crumbled away  
     intentions along  
 with the disintegrated parchment  
 somehow are filled in  
     by desire  
     a yearning for completeness  
 —the specter  
     of these departed texts  
         overshadows  
         under shadows.

I find these lines deeply moving, and I believe that many readers (and quite a few poets) may find them resonant as well. Poets seek authority. They struggle against it too, as Harold Bloom tells us, and in that struggle they confirm their own poetic authority, though like Podgurski, they are always asking what it means to live “a life invested in a writ.” Facing the literary and theosophical traditions from which he draws his strengths—that “disintegrated parchment”—Podgurski understands that his “yearning for completeness” can never be satisfied, and will always continue to drive him into the wild that is both nature and the poem. What makes “the specter / of these departed texts” uncanny—which is to say, what makes them spectral to begin with—is that they are reanimated by the living poet’s desire. As they absorb psychic energy from the poet, they come up from the shadows and overshadow him. When a poet like Robert

Podgurski yields to that desire and allows the specter to overshadow him, then, paradoxically, his words will speak from the shadows and become fully and uniquely his own. This is his accomplishment in his *Wandering On Course*.

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Read three poems from [Wandering on Course](#)