Emperor's New

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Artist's Statement

The Jungian psychoanalyst, religious thinker, and philosopher James Hillman wrote about the “new polytheism” in the early 1980s (*The New Polytheism: The Rebirth of the Gods and Goddesses*, Spring Publications, 1981). His idea was that identity could be conceived as the ancient Greeks had as under the sway of archetypal energies associated with mythological gods and goddesses. He also suggested that the idea of a single coherent identity was an illusion and proposed instead that at various points in time and under various circumstances, identity shifted under the sway of the archetypal god or goddess whose force was associated with that time and circumstance. A simple example of Hillman's view is how identity shifts when falling in love, radically changing perspectives, priorities, behaviors, and moods. Using Hillman's parlance, this change in configuring elements of identity results from falling under the archetypal forces of Aphrodite. This way of thinking is of course far from the current biological brain-based way of conceptualizing identity even if maintaining a coherent identity remains challenging in changing circumstances. Hillman suggests trying to remain coherent in this way is a fool's errand, an illusion and a misreading of what it means to be alive and engaged with all parts of oneself. This poem explores these themes.

Emperor's New

Too long in the light or out of it:
and so it is not surprising, you suppose
these ideas of how we were going to be
no longer pressed, starched, ready-to-wear.
In fact nothing fits. Nothing works on us
as it did, or we thought it did or would,
doubting that it ever did or could.

Occasional rains, but mostly clouds.
Seasons get the better of us.
Changed and mostly not
decked out in an old array.
We tire of asking those questions
and begin to look askew, treading along
in a get-up quite unforeseen,
quite unimaginable.

And yet corporeal still
we seem to float on waters of our own making
invisible supports, crystalline pulleys and emotional gears
snag us along the parade's course. In the middle
streamers are flying, fatigued crowds in the half-light,
unrecognizable, cannot touch us
as the reach of gray blue night abounds.

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