

## Preface

Our lives are, for the most part, made up of unremarkable events. Inevitably, however, the course of every life is punctuated by events that disturb and astonish in equal measure, and when we recount our lives as stories we often single out such events as turning points or moments of truth. This book is about such events. Its particular focus is on coincidences, the “remarkable concurrences of events or circumstances that have no discernible causal connection,” and the notions of luck, fate, and providence to which these events give rise. Whether coincidences are construed as fortunate or unfortunate, tragic or transformative, they always evoke wonder and, as the saying goes, “make us think.”

As I am writing, my faculty assistant, Andrea Davies, appears in the doorway of my office, and we fall into conversation. At one point, Andrea mentions that she wrote her MFA thesis on James Baldwin’s nonfiction and his use of coincidence.<sup>1</sup> When I mention that I happen to be writing a book about coincidence and ask Andrea which of Baldwin’s works I might refer to, she suggests I read the opening lines of *Notes of a Native Son*.

On the 29th of July, in 1943, my father died. On the same day, a few hours later, his last child was born. Over a month before this, while all our energies were concentrated in waiting for these events, there had been, in Detroit,

one of the bloodiest race riots of the century. A few hours after my father's funeral, while he lay in state in the undertaker's chapel, a race riot broke out in Harlem. In the morning of the 3rd of August, we drove my father to the graveyard through a wilderness of smashed plate glass.

As we drove him to the graveyard, the spoils of injustice, anarchy, discontent, and hatred were all around us. It seemed to me that God himself had devised, to mark my father's end, the most sustained and brutally dissonant of codas. And it seemed to me, too, that the violence which rose all about us as my father left the world had been devised as a corrective for the pride of his eldest son.<sup>2</sup>

This coincidence of a personal tragedy and a social calamity prompted Baldwin, "the eldest son," to ponder the connection between his father's generation and his own as well as the connection between the race riots in America and the biblical apocalypse.

Coincidences typically occasion quite different interpretations, and my ethnographic research in Aboriginal Australia and West Africa has taught me that while Western intellectuals tend to refer coincidences to that landscape of shadow that has been termed, directly or indirectly, "the unconscious," preliterate peoples tend to invoke unknown forces like witchcraft and sorcery, lying at the periphery of their social fields. As Michel Foucault observes, the unthought may be construed as deep within "like a shrivelled-up nature or a stratified history" or as something exterior to us, in the penumbra as it were, an "Other that is not only a brother but a twin, born, not of man, nor in man, but beside him and at the same time, in an identical newness, in an unavoidable duality."<sup>3</sup> Although Foucault draws a distinction between the unconscious and the unknown, the former being "an abysmal region in man's nature" and the latter "an obscure space" inhabited by unknown others, he refuses to accord greater weight to either perspective. It could be argued, however, that the dominant episteme since the late nineteenth century has centered on the intrapsychic, not the intersubjective. For Sigmund Freud, as for Claude Lévi-Strauss, delving into the depths of the unconscious mind was the royal road to understanding human thought and action, while Carl Jung interpreted synchronicity as the irruption of archetypal figures and mythological motifs into our conscious life.<sup>4</sup> Although these thinkers evince an intellectual habit that Henri Ellenberger characterizes as

“unmasking,”<sup>5</sup> it is practically impossible to sustain any hard and fast distinction between a mode of thought that focuses on the unconscious mind and a mode of thought that focuses on the dilemmas and difficulties of social relations. As Baldwin’s compelling account of the coincidence of his father’s death and the 1943 Detroit race riots indicates, theological, sociological, and psychological interpretations may all be inspired by the same event. Aboriginal people speak of the Dreaming as an ancestral yet timeless field of being that is occasionally and partially glimpsed by the living in their dreams. For many African people, the mysteries of the invisible can be penetrated by diviners gifted with second sight or assisted by spirit allies. In religions throughout the world, the invisible is a numinous realm to which one rarely gains direct access, though it can be reached by means of prayer, ordeal, and ritual. For scientists, the invisible consists in hidden laws of cause and effect that rational inquiry and sophisticated instruments can bring to light. For many anthropologists, the field of intersubjective life is the subject of their concern: the social matrices in which we are embedded and the dynamic forces that govern our interactions—love and hate, reciprocity and exchange, attachment and separation, certainty and uncertainty, power and powerlessness, war and peace.

What is common to all these interpretive traditions is the mysterious relationship between the visible and invisible dimensions of human existence, the “landscape of shadow” that lies between the known and the unknown and is at once exterior and interior to us.<sup>6</sup> Whether one approaches the phenomenon of coincidence from an intrapsychic or intersubjective point of view, the same assumption is made—that the “obscure space” between the known and the unknown, or between thought and the unthought, can be illuminated, and that the world without and the world within can thereby be seen as one. Methodologically, one therefore needs a bifocal perspective that, in the words of D. W. Winnicott, does justice to the “intermediate area of *experiencing* to which inner reality and external life both contribute.”<sup>7</sup> This dialectical approach is also suggested by Carl Jung’s comment that synchronicity involves a “peculiar interdependence of objective events among themselves as well as with subjective (psychic) states of the observer or observers.”<sup>8</sup> But Jung’s fascination with the collective unconscious leads him to downplay the dynamics of intersubjectivity—the passions that unite and divide us, coming together and mov-