

From James Hollis's  
Hauntings

PREFACE

*Spectral Presences*

This is not a book about ghosts in the usual sense of that term. There will be no Ebenezer Scrooge on these pages, no ghost of Marley dragging his lockboxes behind him to mess up the day for a miserly narcissist. But we all drag such noisy metallic boxes behind us. Can you not hear them? Can you not see them in your family? Can you not see them rippling through the pages of the daily newspaper? Henrik Ibsen did, and well before depth psychology as we know it came to be. He deeply intuited the impact of unexamined history upon the present. After all he called his 1882 play *Ghosts*, for he felt that his Oslo contemporaries were governed by invisible presences: dead ancestral influences, dead values, and deadly scripts to enact. And thus he has one of his characters say,

But I'm inclined to think that we're all ghosts . . . it's not only the things that we've inherited from our fathers and mothers that live on in us, but all sorts of old dead ideas and old dead beliefs, and things of that sort. They're not actually alive in us, but they're rooted there all the same, and we can't rid ourselves of them. I've only to pick up a newspaper, and when I read it I seem to see ghosts gliding between the lines. I should think there must be ghosts all over the country—as countless as grains of sand. And we are, all of us, so pitifully afraid of the light.

James Joyce—who spent his brilliant, wretched, fugitive life in exile, writing only about his accursed/beloved Eire—came to a similar conclusion in his 1914 story, “The Dead.” He knew that he had to leave his country, his church, and his family. What he loved most, because it was governed by the past—foreign hegemony, the oppressive church, the burden of tradition, collective

expectation, and practice—no longer truly loved him, valued him as the unique soul he was. So, when he looked around the bustle of Dublin he saw not life but death, and the gradual graying of souls by the weight of that collective burden. Thus, "One by one they were all becoming shades. Better pass boldly into that other world, in the full glory of some passion, than fade and wither dimly with age."<sup>2</sup> And thus he flung himself into a life of poverty and exile, supported only by his much put upon Nora and his own, obsessive, mythopoetic genius.

Contemporaneously, his countryman W. B. Yeats obsessively chased ghosts, joining several societies who sought direct connection with the spirit world, among them the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn. His wife, whom he first met in one of these societies, allegedly channeled the voices of this spirit world, who came, fortunately, to "bring him metaphors for poetry."<sup>3</sup> Several of his twenty-six plays, including his last, the 1938 *Purgatory*, dealt directly with the presence of the other world in the affairs of this one. During the same era—a time between the erosion of biblical literalism and the demonstrably inadequate surrogates of contemporary culture—Carl Jung discovered that his mother was a medium; he attended more than one séance and later wrote his medical school doctoral dissertation on the "voices" which came through one of those occult encounters as embodied in his equally mediumistic cousin Hélène Preiswerk. But he too was not satisfied by their answers; he searched for and, I believe, found a psychological explanation for those disembodied voices and, having ruled out fraud and chicanery, explored ways those spectral presences might be honored without being literalized.

In Jung's heuristic studies, and his mapping of the rich terrain of the human psyche, we move from fear, superstition, and projection triggered by encountering the profound mysteries of the world we inhabit to understanding that all mental events, finally, are *within* us. No matter what we encounter in the outer world, whatever its autonomous, material form, we experience it, process it, and value it through our individual and collective psychologies. So it is, and so it has been, although there are those who have been burned at the stake for saying so.

The task before us, then, is to consider more fully how we are all governed by the presence of these invisible forms which move

through us, and through history, and to understand them psychologically without "psychologizing" them. To psychologize is to reduce something to a merely mental state. Throughout most of recorded human history people have believed in ghosts and the like: dairmons who visit both poets and the mad, angels who reportedly mediate the spiritual orders, not to mention incubi and succubi, and a host of other psychic phenomena and states of possession. Our predecessors considered the contiguous boundaries between visible and invisible worlds highly fluid, highly permeable. Jung has described this pervasive phenomenon:

Among primitives . . . the imago, the psychic reverberation of the sense perception, is so strong and so seriously coloured that when it is reproduced as a spontaneous memory-image it sometimes even has the quality of an hallucination. Thus when the memory image of his dead mother suddenly reappears to a primitive, it is as if it were her ghost that he sees and hears. We only "think" of the dead, but the primitive actually perceives them because of the extraordinary seriousness of his mental images. This explains the primitive's belief in ghosts and spirits; they are what we simply call "thoughts." When the primitive "thinks," he literally has visions, whose reality is so great that he constantly mistakes the psychic for the real.<sup>4</sup>

There are mysteries, to be sure, and we will never fully understand the ineffable dimensions of our lives. Yet to understand them "psychologically" is to obtain two gifts:

- greater possible personal freedom through understanding from whence come the influences which govern our daily lives, and how we might bring consciousness to oppose them when necessary and serve them when desirable;
- and to understand that so much of what bewitches the ego into literalism and slavish service can be seen in depth for what it is—a received, inherited, culturally contrived energy system and not one rising from "the gods" or from our soul's holistic intent.