INTRODUCTION

ALLEGORY AND MODERNIST LITERATURE

That writers during the first half of the twentieth century were often, if not consistently, motivated to present their insights in systematic form is frequently suggested in the style and content of their literary works. This motivation, however, is at times combined with the recognition that it is not always possible to provide a comprehensive account of crucial life experiences. A unique combination of system and experience is perhaps what explains the twentieth-century writer’s tendency to exploit the effects of traditional allegory while withholding the key to interpreting what may not be intelligible from a traditional standpoint. At the same time, when considered in another way, this unstable mixture of outer appearance and inner purpose testifies to the specifically Modernist aspect of this historically demarcated literature. It is as if what was once new could only acquire the capacity to surprise and disturb by aligning itself with an enduring literary device that predated modernity itself. One of the main purposes of the present study is to demonstrate how Modernism as a cultural event was defined in terms of both a break with historical continuity and an unceasing effort to acknowledge the past and, in this way, foreground a divergence from modernity.

A study such as the present one also faces an additional and certainly more formidable challenge that would be theoretical since it requires an elaboration that extends beyond traditional approaches to literature. While a tendency toward allegory is often a defining feature of Modernist literature, we might ask ourselves whether or not this tendency can be located in a more extensive intellectual matrix that allows us to articulate the contradictory nature of a broadly defined subject matter. The names of Hegel and Nietzsche might be invoked in this context as referring to two poles of a single process that eventually came to embrace Modernist literature in the cultural sphere. Modernism, considered philosophically, involves a tendency toward
allegorical completion and an equally strong impulse to disrupt the spiritual unity of literary works. If Modernist literature can discover precursors in both figures, we might even consider the possibility that its intellectual moment has not yet passed and can be revisited in more recent versions of an earlier philosophical narrative. Before discussing this possibility in more precise terms, however, we should first clarify how the changing meaning of allegory can be related to a distinct group of literary works that might be called “allegorical” rather than traditional allegories.

It is perhaps no accident that literary works that were produced in the wake of Romanticism and demonstrate an antipathy to aesthetic naturalism were coeval with the birth of psychoanalysis. The early poetry of William Butler Yeats, Stéphane Mallarmé, T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound, as well as the novels of Marcel Proust, James Joyce, Franz Kafka and Thomas Mann all testify to the truths of inner experience while also strongly departing from the legacy of aesthetic naturalism. An intellectual milieu that might be described as proto-Modernist includes Freud’s contribution to trauma theory, which predates psychoanalysis but would ultimately pose a radical challenge to classical conceptions of psychic economy.\(^1\) What the artistic experiments of this transitional period have in common with Freud’s theoretical breakthrough is a sudden displacement of continuist models of human development. We can observe this sudden change in the cultural realm when aesthetic naturalism is rejected in favor of an allegorical conception of art and reality. If neither perception nor the memory of the perceived world can provide an adequate basis for

\(^1\) Freud’s exploration of trauma theory could be regarded as a defining moment in the history of psychoanalysis. His early work on hysteria is concerned with developing a basis for interpreting traumatic testimonies as psychic events rather than as accounts that refer to verifiable occurrences. Thus, Freud suspends the question of whether or not the reports of patients suffering from traumatic disorders were actually true, and suggests that “thoughts which never came about, which merely had a possibility of existing” are nonetheless the proper concern of therapy (see Sigmund Freud and Josef Breuer, *Studies on Hysteria*, New York: Avon Books, 1966, 346). Freud later develops his approach to trauma in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* precisely when the classical theory begins to undergo revision. This later approach challenges an integrated view of psychic life insofar as “becoming conscious and leaving behind a memory trace are processes incompatible with each other within the same system” (see Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 1950, 29).