Psychic Deadness in Allegory: Spenser’s House of Mammon and Attacks on Linking

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And in his lap a masse of coyne he told,
And turned vpsidowne, to feede his eye
And couetous desire with his huge threaury.

And round about him lay on euery side
   Great heapes of gold, that neuer could be spent:
   Of which some were rude owre, not purifide
   Of Mulcibers deuouring element;
   Some others were new driuen, and distent
   Into great Ingoes, and to wedges square;
   Some in round plates withouten moniment;
   But most were stampt . . .

(The Faerie Queene 2.7.4–5)

Mammon’s piles of ore, ingots, coin, and other chunks of precious metal may stand as an emblem of one problem that allegory can pose to readers. Pursuing this problem through the House of Mammon episode in The Faerie Queene II, I will suggest links among the problem of thinking allegorically, greed, and death, and argue that the whole episode – the epic descent of the book’s hero Guyon to an underworld – amounts to an attack on readerly thinking; Spenser represents and critiques the discourse of punitive moral-exemplum allegory (of the kind found in Dante or Boccaccio or Comes) as such an attack on the mobility of interpretive thought. This is so contrary to our usual assumptions about allegorical fictions inviting interpretations that I want to start by calling to mind a very different allegorical fiction about greed and a mound of gold, that in Chaucer’s Pardoner’s Tale.¹ Three young ‘riotours,’ hearing of a dangerous murderer, a ‘privee theef’ (675) called Death, swear to
find and slay this dangerous fellow. On the way they meet an old man whose time for death has not yet come, though he is ready for it; he directs the young men to Death’s place, in a grove under a tree. The Pardoner goes on:

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. . . \text{and ther they founde} \\
\text{Of floryns fyne of gold ycoyned rounde} \\
\text{Wel ny an eighte bussheles, as hem thoughte.} \\
\text{No lenger thanne after Deeth they soughte,} \\
\text{But ech of hem so glad was of that sighte,} \\
\text{For that the floryns been so faire and brighte,} \\
\text{That doun they sette hem by this precious hoord.}
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(769–75)

Of course they have set in train the process by which they will find death after all, though they have no thought that they are pursuing it any longer; their greed and reciprocal treacheries guarantee all their deaths. All these events the Pardoner tells with economy and dispatch, so that in this part of his tale there is no ambiguity about cause-and-effect relationships among death and greed. Furthermore, there is no obstruction to the thinking of the reader about the nature of the allegory. When we hear the man who first tells the youths about Death, who has killed so many in their region, we know precisely how to take it, what sorts of resistances to death will work and what sorts will not work; we know the youths mistake the allegorical nature of the personification about whom they have been told. The Pardoner’s Death has, of course, a depth and resonance that come of venerable traditions about him – Rosemond Tuve would make this kind of argument about allegorical figures of early periods, that they present us not with obscurity but with the richness of their historical lives – as well as every mortal’s mysterious relationship to the limit of death – and the old man who is ready to die greatly intensifies this resonance.² But readers of the Pardoner’s Tale and its many analogues need not twist their minds in labyrinthine ways in order to make sense of the story. The ironies of the young men’s mistakings, in interpretation and ethics alike, are spare, deep, and clear at once.

Spenser’s House of Mammon episode has nothing of this kind of allegory (although Tuve strongly argues for exactly this kind of force of tradition in the Mammon episode). Instead, like the heaps of disparate, unconnected metals that Mammon turns over and over, the various bits of the episode seem to invite close scrutiny, but frustrate this kind of