The event of death, the moment of finality and loss, cannot be represented in an allegory, as it can be in a tragedy or a novel. The death of Antigone, of Othello or of Lear, or, for that matter, of little Nell, leaves us with the feeling that the world has changed, that our common life has become thinner, has become more pinched and mean, because something vital has left it. As Donne says in Meditation XVII, ‘any man’s death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind’. Nor do we have any strong feeling, even in the context of Christian belief, that the dead person has gone anywhere in particular, to a place better or worse than the world. From where we stand the emotional focus is instead on the finality of the departure and the completeness of the loss.

In an allegory, however, the event of death is not even an event, if by ‘an event’ we mean a moment when the world is significantly changed. Death in an allegory is instead so rapid that it functions as a revelation of the truth of the allegorical character’s being – or perhaps I should say, of the allegorical character’s meaning. Death leads not to the feeling of loss but rather to a feeling of clarity gained. I mean the feeling that what an allegorical character actually is, what an allegorical character means, has at last attained its definitive form. In an oddly paradoxical way an allegorical character’s death is the moment when that character is most alive as meaning, since meaning is supposed to be that character’s essence. Considered as pure meaning, the allegorical character lives most in death.

There are of course scenes in which allegorical characters undergo something that resembles the death of a person, and I shall be examining one of these scenes shortly. But these characters do not undergo death as an existential event. (Such statements should not go entirely unqualified. I confess I find in the allegorical play Everyman, one of the
most moving representations of death as an existential event. But the intensity is the result of our being made to feel with Everyman as if he were an individual.) Death itself can be, and often is, represented in an allegory, and with terrifying intensity. But this very capacity for reifying and representing Death as an individual removes the concentrated weight of seriousness and mystery which is achieved when we see a person, such as Lear, die. For we experience death existentially not as a thing but as an event.

Yet the feeling we have when we read an allegory is that death is somehow more active in it than in any other literary form. We read an ode of Keats and are seduced with the poet into feeling half in love with easeful death. But when we read an allegory, and especially when we read Spenser, we have the uneasy suspicion that death is mysteriously, imperceptibly, disturbingly present in the working of the poetry itself. The very liveliness of the allegorical figures, their frenetic, jerky, galvanic life, makes us think of dead bodies through which an electric current is passed. The figures move with something that is less than life but also with a force, with a single-mindedness, that is greater than the living can achieve.

The effect I referred to above, where what appears to be the moment of death in an allegory is actually the moment of the revelation of meaning, is programmatically developed from the beginning of the allegorical tradition, from the *Psychomachia* of Prudentius. We see this effect of revelation in every subsequent conflict allegory, from the Old French *Tourneiment Antichrist* to Bunyan's *Holy War*. (Allegories tend to fall into one of two narrative forms: conflict or quest. Spenser's quest allegory is traversed by conflicts; but it is also directed imaginatively to a second part wherein conflict would dominate – the great war between the Fairy Queen and the Pagan King.) In the *Psychomachia* each of the vices is killed by the corresponding virtue in such a way that the death becomes a revelation of what the vice essentially is. For example, the character, Worship of the Pagan Gods, is beheaded by Faith, so that her priestly fillets are laid low; her mouth, flowing with the blood of sacrificed beasts, is crammed with dust; and her eyes – since pagan rites, and the pagan gods themselves, are aesthetically pleasing – are squeezed from her head and trampled under foot. In her reading of the *Psychomachia*, Carolynn Van Dyke remarks of the even more impressive figure of Luxury, ‘she is killed by her own physical nature, in revoltingly vivid detail’ (53). Bunyan presents contrasting scenes of death so that we may see contrary states of the soul. But the event of death is imperceptible as anything other than a revelation of what these characters are in their