appeared in 1976, as did my second contribution. He died three years later in his eightieth year.

The news of his death brought no sense of waste and little of regret to me. Like Palinurus I had just turned up. But, glancing at my shelves, I find to my surprise that in Minnesota he gave me a copy of his selected essays, *The Man of Letters in the Modern World*, and on the title page is boldly scribbled “Inscribed with best wishes and with pleasant memories of 1957-8 in the land of Sky Blue Waters: to George Watson—Allen Tate June 1, 1958.” In the text he corrected the obstinate misprint *public*, deleting the letter *l*, since the printer in his purity of mind could not believe that *pubic* was a word at all.

I feel blessed to have known Allen, and yet cannot offer any explanation for the gift of his friendship. But it needs none, and its rediscovery prompts me to write these lines. I suppose my memory failed. I suppose we did say goodbye.

**MARVELL’S FORMAL FALLACY**

BARRY TARGAN

Many decades ago, when I first taught in college, I was assigned a course in logic. Not the strictest kind of logic—the abstract and theoretical concepts of the logical positivists, the logic of such philosophers as Bertrand Russell and A. N. Whitehead and A. J. Ayer—but rather the logic we actually use in daily life. Or do not use. The aim of the course was to prepare students to be able to think more clearly, to organize their thoughts and statements effectively, and to test the validity and strength of their arguments.

In preparing the course I had to learn what I had myself never been formally taught: deductive and inductive systems. I found that I quite enjoyed learning about the mechanisms of deductive syllogisms and inductive generalizations and hypotheses. And it chastened me to realize that I had always taken for granted the rightness of my propositions and positions, my too easily assumed common sense. Now I had specific tools for examination and analysis. Now I had, for instance, the fallacy of the undistributed middle term or the false disjunctive. Now I had Ockham’s razor.

At about this same time in a literature course I taught I assigned Marvell’s “To His Coy Mistress.” I summoned up all that I had been taught about this famous poem—the carpe-diem theme and its tradition, the metrical scheme, the rich allusions, and, perhaps above all, the hypothetical syllogism that
shaped the poem. I was well prepared for my class. But then I realized that Marvell had made a logical error, a formal error!

In the hypothetical syllogism you can either affirm the antecedent proposition or deny the consequent:

If it rains, then the corn will rot.
It is raining.
The corn will rot.

Or

If it rains, then the corn will rot.
The corn did not rot.
It did not rain.

Marvell says “Had we but world enough, and time, / This coyness, Lady, were no crime.” But then he denies the antecedent: “But at my back I always hear / Time’s wingéd chariot hurrying near.” That is, there is not enough time. From this his conclusion (“Now therefore . . .”) cannot logically follow. Marvell makes what is called a formal fallacy (as distinct from a material fallacy). In deductive logic (Aristotelian logic) your conclusion must be either absolutely correct or absolutely incorrect. In this great poem Marvell’s conclusion is absolutely incorrect.

At my discovery I was elated. I would write this up and present it to the world, and my young scholarly reputation would be, if not made, then at least established. A revelation of this magnitude could not be ignored, especially when the idea that the hypothetical syllogism containing Marvell’s argument in this poem was firmly established. Was firmly established then, and remains so to the present day.

But before I wrote my little paper I did scholarly due diligence. I checked wherever I could, particularly the bibliography of the MLA. And there, alas, I found it in North Dakota Quarterly—Bruce E. Miller’s article “Logic in Marvell’s ‘To His Coy Mistress.’” Even before I read it, I knew instinctively what Miller had found, and I was right. In a succinct note Miller describes the fallacy and makes the additional important point: Marvell, educated at seventeenth-century Cambridge, would have studied Aristotelian logic “as a major part of the course of study.” His making a mistake of this kind would have been highly unlikely. Marvell must have done it on purpose. Miller concludes: “I doubt if Marvell intended the reader to be misled by the fine rhetoric and the specious logic. He intended rather to defend chastity by attacking it—in a way at once ingenious and false.” Given Marvell’s Puritan allegiances I think Miller could be right; but I don’t feel that Miller accounts for the pervasive richness of the poem.
I believe the poem is best read as a witty gambit, a flattering compliment. The speaker knows the woman he addresses, knows her to be quick enough to catch the fallacy of the argument, knows her to be educated and worldly enough to understand the allusions and be responsive to the images. He knows she is able to play the game. For what would be the point of the speaker's clever lyrical offering if she were unable to "get it"?

The tone of the poem (until the end) is not one of sexual urgency and passion, but instead of leisurely cleverness, the bantering engagement of two people who know each other well, amusing themselves in a summery garden (on the banks of the Humber indeed!). The prevailing voice of the poem is a little arch and a touch splendid, pleased with itself—the speaker's gift of an aria to his lover, who is his equal. And yet beneath the drollery there are the swelling adumbration of death and the terrifying specter of time's "slow-chapped power." The day darkens. The lovers are already on the run. The poem, then, is not one of simple carpe-diem seduction but is instead more given to a sophisticated recognition of the human predicament: we die—even such marvelous creatures as we.

But until now I never wrote my little note, and no one in the academic community these forty-five years has recognized Miller's contribution. No one to my knowledge considers the formal fallacy in the poem when "To His Coy Mistress" is discussed. As recently as, say, Camille Paglia's *Break, Blow, Burn* (2005), the traditional interpretation based upon the hypothetical syllogism is offered.

Is this a problem? Is it a problem that can be addressed? Need it be? How? Should one take out a large advertisement in the *New York Times Book Review?* Maybe get a grant to pay for sending copies of Miller's note to every college and university in this country and England at least? It's an odd dilemma. One should not, after all, ignore the formal fallacy when discussing the poem. What is wrong is wrong. But received opinion is a very hard thing to turn, even with Aristotle on your side. Nevertheless there are important implications. If perhaps the most famous poem in the English language is taught in college without recognizing the formal fallacy, if such knowledge when made available is refused, then what does that say about teaching literature itself? I don't want to go too far with this—to suggest that the edifice can be brought down. Hardly! But should we not be more careful with our certainties?
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