

## THE TRIVIUM, 2AM

### I. LOGIC

The jazz standard *Everybody Loves My Baby* was composed in 1924—the music by Spencer Williams and the lyrics by Jack Palmer. Memorable covers include Louis Armstrong, Fats Waller, and The Boswell Sisters. The rotary motor that drives this catchy composition is the titular refrain: “Everybody loves my baby, but my baby don’t love nobody but me.” This would seem, on its face, a cheering proposition. Is the singer boasting? Oh, perhaps a little. But the general mood of the song encourages the listener to sense here something closer to simple jubilation, rather than ungainly pride or vaunting taunt.

But such interpretive quibbling in fact remains wholly superficial to a proper exegesis of this compressed and ultimately shocking couplet. A formal logical analysis of this sentence reveals a great deal: the identity of the lover, the identity of the beloved, and, ultimately, the identity of the love itself. The technical notation follows:

$$\begin{aligned} & \forall xL(x, MyBaby) \\ & L(MyBaby, MyBaby) \\ & \forall y(\neg y = Me \rightarrow \neg L(MyBaby, y)) \\ \neg MyBaby = Me & \rightarrow \neg L(MyBaby, MyBaby) \\ L(MyBaby, MyBaby) & \rightarrow MyBaby = Me \\ & MyBaby = Me \\ & QED \end{aligned}$$

The key insight forwarded by propositional calculus in this case is a necessary deduction from the proposition “everybody loves baby”: to wit, baby must love baby. The rigorously logical construal of the song cracks open from there: given that baby loves only “me,” we have no choice but to acknowledge that “me” can be none other than “baby.” The song *Everybody Loves My Baby* is, therefore, a veiled paean to erotic involution, a coded anthem for narcissism. QED.

## II. GRAMMAR

Important poetic effects can be achieved through the (apparent) violation of grammatical rules. Langston Hughes’ “The Cat and the Saxophone, 2am” may be taken as exemplary:

*The Cat and the Saxophone, 2am*

EVERYBODY  
Half-pint,—  
Gin?  
No, make it a  
LOVES MY BABY  
corn. You like  
liquor,  
don’t you, honey?  
BUT MY BABY  
Sure. Kiss me,  
DON’T LOVE NOBODY  
daddy.  
BUT ME.  
Say!  
EVERYBODY  
Yes?  
WANTS MY BABY  
I’m your  
BUT MY BABY  
sweetie, ain’t I?  
DON’T WANT NOBODY  
Sure.  
BUT  
Then let’s  
ME,  
do it!  
SWEET ME.  
Charleston,  
mamma!

### III. RHETORIC

What is Rhetoric? Richard A. Lanham, the author of the venerable *A Handlist of Rhetorical Terms*, defined it informally as: “the training in expression, spoken and written, that you need to play a useful role in human society.” This is both expansive and generous. A narrower account might be the traditional understanding of the enterprise associated with Quintilian’s work on oratory: rhetoric is the linguistic art of persuasion.

So here’s the scene I puzzle over: giddy, naked, puerile, (not yet 21), I use a gold-nibbed fountain pen to inscribe, in formal notation, the logical Easter egg secreted in the belly of *Everybody Loves My Baby* on the smooth mid-section of a giggling girl with curly hair.

Me? I was trying to *persuade* my baby.

But who was “baby”? And who was “me”?

It’s confusing.

But narcissism can be funny that way.

—D. Graham Burnett