I WAS WRONG: THE MEANINGS OF APOLOGIES

Apologies pervade our news headlines and our private affairs, but how should we evaluate these often vague and deceptive rituals? Discussing numerous examples from ancient and recent history, I Was Wrong: The Meanings of Apologies argues that we suffer from considerable confusion about the moral meanings and social functions of these complex interactions. Rather than asking whether a speech act “is or is not” an apology, Smith offers a nuanced theory of apologetic meaning. Smith leads us with a clear voice through a series of rich philosophical and interdisciplinary questions, arguing that apologies have evolved from a confluence of diverse cultural and religious practices that do not translate easily into pluralistic secular discourse. After describing several varieties of apologies between individuals, Smith turns to collectives. Although apologies from corporations, governments, and other groups can be profoundly significant, Smith guides readers to appreciate the kinds of meaning that collective apologies often do not convey and warns of the dangers of collective acts of contrition that allow individual wrongdoers to obscure their personal blame.

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I Was Wrong: The Meanings of Apologies

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For Nicole and Ulysses

“over and beyond ourselves
in which our love will outlive us”
Please forgive me, sir,
for getting involved
in the music—
it’s my innate weakness
for the cello: so human.
Please forgive me
for the attention
I’ve given your wife
tonight, sir.
I was taken by her
strand of pearls,
enchanted by piano
riff in the cortex,
by a secret
anticipation. I don’t know
what came over me, sir.
After three Jack Daniel’s
you must overlook
my candor, my lack of
sequitur.
I could talk
about Odysseus
& Athena, sexual
flowers, autogamy
or Nothingness.
I got carried away
by the swing of her hips.
But take no offense
if I return to the matter
as if hormonal.
I must confess
my love for black silk, sir.
I apologize for
the eyes in my head.

Yusef Komunyakaa, “When in Rome – Apologia,” from
*Neon Vernacular*
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