

THE ORIGIN OF AN IDEA

An essay by Patrick Flanery

For the past decade I have been haunted by thoughts of complicity. Weeks after September 11, 2001, I moved from New York to Britain to start a master's program at Oxford. The aftermath of the attacks necessarily and profoundly altered the nature of that experience. Within days of my arrival, several British students in my college bar demanded to know why America was bombing Afghanistan. I had no answers, but began thinking about the degree to which I might still be complicit in the foreign policies of my country, even under a president for whom I had not voted and a government whose actions and rhetoric I often opposed.

A year later, applying for a new student visa to stay at Oxford for a doctorate, I found myself subjected to the Kafkaesque horrors of British bureaucracy. The experience underscored the precariousness of my own status, and I stayed home from London's record-breaking antiwar march in September 2002, fearing deportation should any trouble erupt. By the following spring, watching the buildup to the invasion of Iraq on television, I wished that I had found the courage to march. However little my own opposition might have mattered, I nonetheless wondered what the failure to register my dissent meant in personal, ethical, and moral terms.

When the bombs targeting London's transport network exploded in July 2005, I was in South

Africa, a country marked by its own very different history of violent conflict. I found myself thinking about terror more abstractly: how it comes to be defined, and the differences between international, national, interpersonal, and psychological forms of terror. Earlier that year I had started writing a story about an elderly novelist embarking on a series of interviews with her official biographer. The story initially had no setting, but I began sensing that the South African landscape was already latent in the background. Embracing the setting, which I came to know intimately through numerous visits, allowed the book to evolve into a story about individual complicity in different forms of terror, and the human capacity for self-censorship, self-delusion, and absolution. An elderly woman thus becomes convinced of her entanglement in crimes of the past, a young man realizes his involvement in a crime long repressed, while both are affected by the daily terror of living in something like a state of siege, reliant on electronic gates and razor wire and private security companies—a state in which the threat of terror is often the defining quality of everyday life.

Absolution was born out of all of these concerns and evolving ideas but also is rooted in my experience of feeling, as an American, complicit in the global history unfolding around me, and terrified by my own powerlessness.

ABSOLUTION

April 2012