

*Sightings* 9/22/05

Death and the Compass

-- Brian Britt

The July 7 bombings in London were made especially menacing by an Islamist website that claimed that the four sites of attack were designed to stamp a "burning cross" on the city. According to the *Guardian*, the attacks "also suggest a symbolic significance in selecting King's Cross station as the common point of departure" (July 16). The "burning cross" presents a terrifying specter of a clash between intractable foes. But behind this media image lie more ordinary realities whose careful investigation holds a key to reducing conflict.

Mass killings calculated to create patterns on the map evoke the world of imaginative literature. As millions of readers know, King's Cross Station provides the boarding point -- Platform 9 3/4 -- for the Hogwarts Express of the Harry Potter series; a plaque in the station now marks the spot. As Harry and his friends board the train in the latest volume, *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*, they see themselves as enemies of a villain so terrible that most shudder to speak his name. With a keen sense of politics and the media, J. K. Rowling depicts a wizardly world paralyzed by the discovery that He Who Must Not Be Named really has returned. But as the story unfolds, we begin to see Voldemort as a person with his own story and motives. Only by understanding him and seeing his weaknesses, Harry learns, can Voldemort be stripped of his mystique and defeated.

In Jorge Luis Borges's story "Death and the Compass," murders in the four corners of Paris are matched to the four Hebrew letters of the name of God. Like the alleged perpetrators of the London bombings, the killer in this story leaves clues indicating religious motives: a distortion of kabbalistic tradition in which murders reveal the divine name, letter by letter. The clues create a trap that captures the imagination of the detective, media, and general public. Newspapers begin publishing stories about the religious roots of the case, and bookstores begin selling popular books on the Hasidim. Unlike the mysteries of Edgar Allen Poe, in which the intellect of Dupin solves crimes, Borges's story depicts Detective Lönnrot and the public as too clever for their own good. Seeing that the first three murders form an equilateral triangle on the map and took place at regular intervals, the detective pinpoints the time and place of the final murder, only to discover he has been set up: A common outlaw has lured Lönnrot there to murder him.

Of course, the attacks in London were real, not fictional; it would trivialize the disaster to repeat the cliché that reality has become more terrible than fiction. But fiction can sometimes illuminate reality: As Rowling and Borges warn, villains who understand the psychology of fear magnify their power by manipulating the symbolism of geography, religion, and higher principles. Both authors satirize the mass media as dupes or willful creators of public hysteria. Far from a dualistic struggle with demonic forces, the burning cross of London betrays the grandiose inflation of banal evil, the sort one might expect from the disaffected children of immigrants in Leeds. Just as the burning crosses of the Ku Klux Klan were used to raise vicious and cowardly hatred to the level of a righteous cause, the London cross may signify nothing more than the desire to render blind hatred meaningful.

While the Borges story warns against the danger of speculations about evil, *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince* demonstrates how knowledge of one's adversaries -- knowledge that demystifies them -- is power. Dualistic struggles between good and evil leave little space for understanding the complex realities of life in cities like Leeds; it can be easier to demonize one's attackers than to understand them, especially when they play on familiar images of evil. When such images run in dangerous feedback loops between mass media, terrorists, and their victims, terrorists and their recruiters gather strength from the perception that the Islamic world is the victim of Western injustice and a target of anti-terror campaigns. They meet Orientalism head on with what Ian Buruma and Avishai Margalit call Occidentalism -- the stereotyping of the West as corrupt and materialistic -- and use the prestige of Islam to justify further and more grandiose attacks.

The burning cross signifies the intersection between Orientalism and Occidentalism, but underneath it lie the stories of ordinary perpetrators and victims. Simple motives, however, deserve just as much attention as terrifyingly ideological ones.

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