

**The 'perfect murder'?: Dorothy L. Sayers, Superintendent George Cornish and *Six Against the Yard* (1936)**

**Andrew Green**

**Roger Dalrymple**

<p>Andrew Green, Senior Lecturer  Brunel University London  Gaskell 051, Kingston lane  Uxbridge, Middlesex, UB8 3PH  +44 (0)1895 267157  andrew.green@brunel.ac.uk</p>	<p>Roger Dalrymple, Professor of  Education  Oxford Brookes University  Harcourt Hill Campus  Oxford OX2 9AT  rdalrymple@brookes.ac.uk</p>
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Andrew Green is Deputy Director of Research in the Global Lives Research Centre at Brunel University London. His research interests include English education, creative writing and Literature and Education. His most recent publications are *The New Newbolt Report: One Hundred Years of the Teaching of English in England* (Routledge), 'Loose Can(n)on: Literary Tradition in Daljit Nagra's British Museum' (*English in Education*), 'Death in a Literary Context' (*Clues: a Journal of Detection*) and 'Playing at Murder: The collaborative works of members of the Detection Club' (*Crime Fiction Studies*). He is General Editor of the Routledge *Literature and Education* book series.

Roger Dalrymple is Professor of Education at Oxford Brookes University where he is currently supervising doctoral projects on literary education, literacy, and writing development. His recent publications include a chapter in the collaborative volume *The New Newbolt Report* (Routledge, 2021) and the monograph *Crippen: A Crime Sensation in Memory and Modernity* (2020).

## ABSTRACT

This paper explores the rich and multifaceted interplay between retired Scotland Yard Superintendent George W. Cornish and a distinguished group of crime novelists, in the 1936 Detection Club collection of short stories, *Six Against the Yard*. Tasked with adjudicating on which of the six novelists has devised the 'perfect murder', Cornish engages in a deeper mode of dialogue than the Club appear to have anticipated. The paper shows how Cornish's contributions to the text draw on his own experiences of crime and crime writing, as made evident in his own recently published memoirs *Cornish of the Yard* (1935). Bringing these experiences, to bear on the stories with which he is presented, Cornish takes licence to unravel the novelists' pursuit of the 'perfect murder'. This close reading of *Six Against the Yard*, informed by Bakhtinian theory, reveals the striking extent to which Cornish is prepared to dispute the writers' assumptions, challenge their conclusions and ultimately refute their conception of the 'perfect murder'.

**Key Words:** Dorothy L. Sayers, Detection Club, George Cornish, the 'perfect murder', collaboration, true crime

### INTRODUCTION: CALLING IN THE YARD

Published in the early summer of 1936, the short story collection *Six Against the Yard* was the fifth joint work by members of the Detection Club, a series of collaborative ventures both creative and pragmatic (income from the sales funding the rental of the Club's premises in Soho). Helmed by Anthony Berkeley and Dorothy L. Sayers, who had been key players in the earlier collaborations, *Six Against the Yard* offered 'a new idea in detective fiction' (*Daily*

*Mirror*, 18 June 1936). This 'unorthodox collaborative book' (Edwards 285) had appeared initially that spring in serial form in the *Daily Mail* and offered not one continuous multi-authored story but six discrete tales in which each author sets out to depict the 'perfect murder'.

The intrepid premise of the text is announced on the dust jacket of the first edition. Each of the 'brilliant band of contributors' sets out to perform on paper a murder 'as perfect in its execution as they could achieve' (*Yard* n.p.). In theatrical language, the prologue promises that readers will witness the full course of each murder, from 'instigation to ... final act' (n.p.) and ranges into the dramatic juridical spaces of the gallows and the courtroom: 'Is Dorothy Sayers quite certain that she will not hang from the neck until she is dead? Is Father [Ronald] Knox convinced that the jury will acquit him?'

The contributors stepped into the role of murderer with the same alacritous spirit of competitive game-play that characterized their earlier collaborations *Behind the Screen* (1930), *The Scoop* (1930), *The Floating Admiral* (1931) and *Ask a Policeman* (1933)<sup>1</sup>. Thus, Margery Allingham and Anthony Berkeley disguise their murders as accidental deaths; Russell Thorndike does imaginative murder by the grotesque agency of poison-bearing beetles; Freeman Wills Crofts engineers (and even draws for clarity) an intricate parcel bomb; Ronald Knox introduces a lie detector test to his tale of a political murder; and Dorothy L. Sayers presents a case where, if murder is committed at all, it is by means of omission, the tale's narrator failing to speak up when witnessing the medical error that proves fatal to a resented colleague.

Requiring an external arbiter to determine their success in devising the 'perfect murder', the six 'call in' a genuine, recently retired Scotland Yard detective. In characteristically ritual manner (this was the society that would require its initiate members to

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<sup>1</sup> See Green & Dalrymple's 'Playing at Murder: The collaborative works of members of the Detection Club' for an exploration of these earlier collaborative fictions.

recite an oath over gruesome Club mascot 'Eric the skull'), the book's opening makes a formal bidding to Cornish:

*SIX AGAINST THE YARD*

*In which*

Margery Allingham

Anthony Berkeley

Freeman Wills Crofts

Father Ronald Knox

Dorothy L. Sayers

Russell Thorndike

*Commit the Crime of Murder which*

Ex-Superintendent

Cornish, C.I.D.

*is called upon to solve*

George W. Cornish would have had a high profile amongst the Club's readership in that summer of 1936, having retired two years previously from a distinguished career that began in the Metropolitan Police's H division in 1895. Promoted to Superintendent in early 1929, Cornish's had become a well-known name in the press, where he was described as 'one of the most popular of Scotland Yard's detectives' (*Sheffield Daily Telegraph*, 2 February 1929) and where the reassurance 'Superintendent Cornish of Scotland Yard has taken charge of inquiries' peppered many an account of metropolitan murder, robbery and assault<sup>2</sup>.

The detective had also recently turned writer. His memoirs, *Cornish of the Yard: His Reminiscences and Cases* had been published by Bodley Head in January 1935 and had

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<sup>2</sup> See, for example, *Daily Herald*, 27 March 1930; 2 May 1930; 7 August 1930.

been favourably reviewed: the periodical *Truth* averred that the casebooks of Yard men generally make 'good reading, but none more so than *Cornish of the Yard*' (1935). Cornish had also loosely collaborated with select Club members the previous year by contributing to a compendium of short true crime accounts, *Great Unsolved Crimes* (1935). Here, Sayers had written on the Julia Wallace murder of 1931, Berkeley (writing as Francis Iles) on the 1910 Crippen case, and Cornish on a recent West London murder, the child-killing of Vera Page; a case which also looms large in his memoirs. This initial collaboration led to a mutually approbatory interchange between Sayers and the former C.I.D. 'ace', he quoting her at length and citing her as an 'expert in detective fiction' in his memoirs (Cornish 295), and she contributing a favourable review of *Cornish of the Yard* to the *Sunday Times* (13 January 1935).

Yet when the collaborators appeared together at a lunch and book launch for *Six Against the Yard* at Foyle's in July 1936, one journalist observed that Cornish 'looked grave' as Sayers and Crofts addressed the guests on the theme of the 'perfect murder': 'Perhaps [Cornish] was reflecting what a very troublesome Public Enemy No.1 Miss Sayers would make' (*Yorkshire Post* 24 July 1936). As the present article will show, more likely this sombre countenance reflected the tension that had arisen between Cornish and Sayers during the *Mail's* serialisation of *Six Against the Yard*, as a result of the surprisingly disputatious interplay between the real detective and the novelists' fictional crimes. As we shall see, Cornish uses his significant portion of the text (53 pages in all) to parlay with the authors in ways that they cannot have wholly anticipated and which Sayers, at least, appears to have resented. In engaging with the novelists' fictional crimes, Cornish often elides the boundary between his personal experiences as a detective and fictional crimes. *Cornish of the Yard*, functions as an implicit co-text and demonstrates the ways in which he is able to use his own career experiences as a lens through which to 'read' fictional crime. The dynamic is also, at times, reversed, and we see Cornish deploying his own evidently extensive experience of crime and crime fiction as a basis for disputing with the writers on

their own ground and forcing a reconsideration of the often self-referential fictional space of detective fiction. Cornish's insightful responses to the tales in *Six Against the Yard* problematise the established patterns and *topoi* of the form in ways that Sayers in particular seems to have found challenging. The complexities this implies perhaps led to Cornish's declining in both the *Daily Mail* serialization and the completed book to nominate any of the authors' fictional homicides as the 'perfect murder', a carnivalesque subversion of the very premise of the collaboration. This paper explores the dynamics of this play-off between Cornish and the Club members, and suggests that the source for his ultimate refusal to 'play the game' to its logical end and elect a winner, lies in his own experience and interpretation of 'perfect murder'; of criminals undetected and murder cases not closed.

### **Stranger than fiction: Cornish's real world of crime**

An early sign that Cornish was liable to take up the challenge of *Yard* at a more creative level than might have been expected of a sober C.I.D. official comes in the witty titles he gives to his rejoinders to each tale. Some are exclamatory ('...And Then Come the Handcuffs!'; 'They Wouldn't Believe Him!'), some proverbial ('The Motive Shows the Man'; 'Detectives Sometimes Read'), and some pose return questions of their own ('Would the Murderess Tell?'). Indeed, his mode of engaging with the writers is evocative of Bakhtinian dialogic method (1981), where novelistic discourse is seen as embedded in a dynamic of call and response and where the lexis of a text is never bracketed off from wider context but forms part of a wider web of polyphony. Such a theoretical framing does much to illuminate, Cornish's playful and alert mode of writing in *Six Against the Yard*, where, as his witty section titles imply, he makes his claims with a keen sense of what the novelists' countering voices might proffer in debating and disputing their case for the 'perfect murder'.

Yet more than this, Cornish proves remarkably composed in the face of the outlandish imaginative landscapes the novelists present, populated as they are with theatrical murders and elaborate engines of death. In 'The Fallen Idol', 'The Policeman Only

'Taps Once' and 'The Parcel', for example, three elaborate devices are presented by Ronald Knox, Anthony Berkeley and Freeman Wills Crofts respectively. In Knox's tale, a psychometric truth machine holds out the promise of identifying the guilty party; in Berkeley's narrative, an elaborately concocted homemade explosive is employed as a wife's means of despatching a confidence trickster husband (who in turn has been plotting to kill her!); and in Crofts' story, a blackmailer is 'removed' by a parcel bomb so complexly engineered that its workings require an in-text diagram. Where the anticipated aesthetic may have been that the sober, 'real world', serious detective would pour cold water on the imaginative excesses of the writers, instead Cornish takes these elements in his stride. Far from dismissing them as fictional whimsies beyond the pale, he builds on them, even offering corresponding suggestions of his own. In his riposte to Knox's story with its use of the truth machine, for example, he speculates that a gramophone recording of the victim's voice might have been used to manufacture a false impression of the time of death; in response to Berkeley's tale of a mutually murderous marriage, Cornish supplies a hidden history for overlooked housemaid Kate, by whose agency the 'perfect murder' could be unravelled; and in response to Crofts' tale of murder by parcel bomb, Cornish suggests that it is precisely in the intricate and elaborate workings of the murderous device that the killer's undoing resides. So intricate a bomb requires the careful disposal of source materials and tools of manufacture; Cornish thus speculates that a mysterious witness, 'himself unseen, had watched the murderer at his work of destroying the evidence' (*Yard* 285).

What prompts Cornish to embrace these motifs of crime fiction and even to introduce his own invented devices, characters and episodes into the imaginative fabric of the stories in this way? The answer is implied in a further passage from his riposte to Crofts' tale, where Cornish likens the killer to real-life 'Charing Cross Trunk Murderer' John Robinson, whom Cornish had apprehended in the previous decade: 'Robinson, of the Charing Cross trunk crime, was careful to see that no trace was left in his office of the murder of Mrs. Bonati, but after all his labour a bloodstained match and a hairpin were found in his wastepaper basket



and helped to hang him' (*Yard* 285). Having recently written-up a career's worth of examples, Cornish proves familiar with episodes and escapades every bit as *outré* as anything the Club authors have contrived. As a direct equivalent to Crofts' parcel bomb murder, for example, Cornish had investigated the 1933 case of 'The Highgate Arson' in which shopkeeper Leonard Goodfellow perpetrated insurance fraud by setting fire to his own premises. Cornish's description of Goodfellow's ingenious fire-raising mechanism, by which he sought to underwrite his own alibi, was quite as ingenious as any fictional counterpart:

A piece of lead wire attached to the gas bracket was hanging loose, and there was also a length of bell wire hanging from what appeared to be a galvanised clothes line to the floor. On the left-hand side of the room was a couch on which were two matches which were tied together with a piece of fuse wire, and attached to the cover of the couch *by a pin*; a newspaper had been thrown over the matches which had been ignited ... The gas bracket had been bent round so that when it was lit the flame would be directly under the wooden frame work of the door, and on the end of the burner was a rubber connection, to which several matches were attached by fuse wire. The gas from the bracket was alight, and had burned through the door frame or lintel. (Cornish 75)

This intricate piece of engineering is a device in its imagination and complexity worthy of inclusion in any work of Golden Age detective fiction.

Likewise, Cornish's account of the retrieval of the victim's *disjecta membra* from a luggage trunk in the case of the 'Charing Cross Trunk Murder' offers a scenario as grisly as any of the fictional murders recounted in *Six Against the Yard*:

First they took out a pair of women's black shoes, size five, and a handbag which contained four pieces of chewing gum. Then came four gruesome paper parcels, the first of which contained the arms which had been severed at the shoulders.

(Cornish 173)

Finally, the character stylings presented by the novelists also find their counterparts in Cornish's concordance of experience. Where Anthony Berkeley's story presents bragging confidence trickster 'Eddie' who appears to model himself closely on the kind of depression-era American antihero depicted in James Cain's *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1935), Cornish has a true crime example to match. In 'The Murder of Lady White' he describes London hotel page boy Henry Julius Jacoby who, in perpetrating the 1922 robbery and murder of a wealthy hotel guest and in his subsequent engagements with the police seemed, like Berkeley's character, to pattern himself on a figure from detective fiction. Jacoby, Cornish tells us 'was a hero to himself living in one of the sensational stories or films which he loved' (116), and was 'to himself the hero of a sensational murder case... a person of importance, and he constantly talked and boasted about his "exploits"' (118).

Thus, while the playful aesthetic of *Six Against the Yard* looks to generate a *frisson* from the implicit disjunction between fictional and factual crime-worlds, Cornish's ripostes bridge any such gulf, and demonstrate the experiential frame of reference he shares with the novelists and the scenarios they set before him. Indeed, while in *Six Against the Yard* he does not offer up the commonplace that 'truth is stranger than fiction', he offers precisely this reflection in his memoirs. Of 'The Great Pearl Robbery Case' he observes: 'I can remember no other case which was to prove, as it moved from stage to stage, so like the detective thriller of fiction' (Cornish 35), an investigation that ultimately saw the appearance at the Old Bailey trial of 'every character from a detective story [...] with the exception of a heroine.' *Truth's* review of *Cornish of the Yard* had remarked on this propinquity between art and life, the reviewer being particularly struck by Cornish's account of the Norah Upchurch

murder trial, where suspect Frederick Field dramatically renounced his initial confession which he claimed he had only made in order to trigger the public trial which alone could dispel the longstanding suspicion surrounding him as prime suspect. The reviewer noted that this audacious defence, and Field's subsequent escape from the noose on account of it, was 'corn in Egypt to any writer of detective fiction, if only he had thought of it first' (23 January 1935).

### **'Detectives sometimes read'**

This interplay between the detective and the Club members, where the textuality of his experience and crime fiction 'interanimate one another' (*Imagination* 47) is enriched by Cornish's adoption of 'literary' conceits to meet the writers on their own ground. Harnessing his extensive knowledge of fictional crime literature as a further basis for challenging their conception of the 'perfect murder', Cornish proves a ready and imaginative participant in the text. The 'literary' nature of *Cornish of the Yard* is established from the outset as he evokes London's East End at the start of his career as still redolent 'more than a little of the bad old days of Fagin and Bill Sikes' (Foreword). His memoirs are organised under chapter titles that would not be out of place in an anthology of Golden Age detective stories: 'The Murder of Lady White', 'The Regent's Park Murder', 'The Shooting in Whistling Copse'. Indeed, in introducing some of these exploits, Cornish presents himself for all the world like the Yard Inspector of detective fiction summoned by wire from a provincial constabulary to crack the case that has stumped the bumbling (and resentful) local constabulary: 'Sergeant Mallet and I travelled down to Wales by the first available train' (151); 'Within an hour or two I and Sergeant Handyside were in the train on our way down to Bath to assist in the investigations' (207).

Our first instance of Cornish's literary sensibility and what it brings to his dialogic 'reading' of *Six Against the Yard* comes in his response to Margery Allingham's opening tale of the murder of domestic tyrant Frank by Polly Oliver, the old friend and landlady of his

long-suffering spouse Louie Lester. Polly keeps house for an array of bohemian theatricals, and herself goes by a stage name having been born as Margaret Hawkins. As she witnesses Louie's professional and personal prospects steadily decline under Frank's domineering influence, Polly resolves to free her friend from an abusive partner in an act of murder that she hopes will be taken for an accident. Frank has a taste for bravado displays of acrobatics, even venturing onto stairwells and, fatally, window ledges to exhibit his prowess. In presenting the story of how Frank is pushed to his death, Allingham playfully disavows her position as author, so that Polly can take dramatic control and ultimately make her confession: 'In the first place my name is not Margery Allingham' (7). Cornish creatively engages with this persona elision and expresses his desire upon the story's conclusion: 'to get to Maida Vale as quickly as possible and arrest Margery Allingham, alias Margaret Hawkins, alias Polly Oliver, on a charge of wilful murder' (46). This casting of the different characters' names as *aliases* of Allingham rather than as an authorial persona conveys the critical *faux-naïveté* with which Cornish chooses to read the story and its relation to 'reality':

Then I remembered:

- (a) That the address had not been given, and that it might take some little time to trace it.
- (b) That I was no longer at Scotland Yard.
- (c) That a confession alone cannot be accepted as proof of guilt.
- (d) That this was only a story anyway.

(46)

The witty list offers insights into Cornish's processes as reader, investigator and crime-writer. Point (a) evokes the 'realities' of detective work; (b) flags that as a retired detective, his capacity to engage with crime is now on the page (fictional) rather than in the flesh (real). Extending the pattern, (c) gestures at the evidentiary and judicial criteria of real-world

prosecutions; while (d) concludes with a reminder to self and to readers of the fictionality of Allingham's tale, and in so doing establishes the importance of the bi-directional interplay between factual and fictional crime-worlds. For while Cornish at one point claims 'there's a difference between art and life' (48) and finds that the former 'falls into a pattern, but life sprawls out beyond the pattern' (48), it is precisely the *shared* patterns in his experience of both real and fictional crime which provide the dynamic force in Cornish's responses.

To illustrate this, Cornish himself engages in a good many 'fictions' of his own as he approaches Allingham's tale. He observes, for example, that the location of Oliver's house being 'Maida Vale way, nearly to Kilburn' (47) means that an element of luck would be needed for the landlady's rooftop shove of victim Frank to go unobserved. This imagined good fortune, as much a fictional trapping of Cornish's reading as anything that Allingham herself has written, is used to take 'the killing out of the "perfect murder" class' (47). An even more 'fictionalised' component of Cornish's reading responds to the clever twist in Allingham's tale: the unexpected suicide of Louie once 'freed' from her domineering husband. In response to the twist, Cornish speculates that Louie might have written a suicide note raising questions about her husband's death. And if this imagined text does not confound Oliver, Cornish suggests, her own written confession (the story itself) might do so: 'In the end, whether her written account is found or not, she will probably confess' (49).

A further instance of Cornish turning his reading knowledge of crime fiction to incisive effect comes in his response to Russell Thorndike's 'The Strange Death of Major Scallion'. The tale recounts the peculiarly dark murder of the eponymous major (the possessor of a blackmailing secret) by his distant cousin, the story's narrator. Thorndike's tale is, in Bakhtinian terms (*Rabelais*), both dialogic and carnivalesque, complexly collapsing the divide between the reader and the tale. The narrator draws the inspiration for his killing from the criminological literature of which he is an avid collector — 'I made a close study of murder as an art' (153) — going back as far as the Newgate Calendar in search of a template for the 'perfect murder'. He shortlists ten exemplary homicides, refining this in turn

to two murders, one involving nicotine poisoning, and the other effected by the grotesque introduction of poison-bearing beetles into the victim's body. Thorndike's murderer uses both methods, the horrific climax coming as he lays a trail of treacle from the insects' lair to the mouth of the prone victim who has been pinned, in a bizarre moment of theatre, to the murder scene floor. The narrator claims the template for this second means of murder to be historical, having first been practised in the late eighteenth century by 'that ingenious smuggler parson Doctor Syn, sometime Vicar of Dymchurch-under-the-wall in the county of Kent' (153). Yet as Cornish observes — in the process establishing that the knowledge of crime literature is an essential component in the 'armoury' of the detective — Syn is in fact the literary creation of Thorndike himself, who first presented his anti-hero to the reading public in *Doctor Syn: A Tale of the Romney Marsh* (1915), and then in a further transformation went on to portray the character on the provincial and metropolitan stage, through the late 1920s and early 1930s.<sup>3</sup>

Indeed, the character had recently returned to print in two 1935 sequels, and a fourth volume, *The Further Adventures of Doctor Syn* (1936) was published a mere three months before the appearance of *Six Against the Yard*. It is this latter text that contains the 'beetles murder' in a chapter entitled 'The Crawling Death'. Having established this intertextual in-joke, Thorndike engages in a further piece of boundary elision by embedding Cornish within the fabric of the text: 'Doctor Syn had only to deal with the authority of the local Beadle, a man of no education. . . How would he have fared with such a man as Sir Bernard Spilsbury or that other enemy to murder, Mr. Cornish?' (*Yard* 153).<sup>4</sup>

Cornish proves fully alert and receptive to this ludic aesthetic of in-jokes and broken boundaries. 'Detectives Sometimes Read' reveals his literary capacity to engage fully in Thorndike's 'game'. Characterising Doctor Syn as 'one of the best known characters in

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<sup>3</sup> Appropriately enough given the setting of the story, Thorndike appeared in the role at the Hippodrome Margate in May 1928 (*Thanet Advertiser*, 18 May 1928).

<sup>4</sup> As *Cornish of the Yard* recounts, Cornish actually worked with Spilsbury on the unsuccessful investigation into the murder of Vera Page. One of the 25 plates within the text depicts the two men leaving the garden where her body was found.

modern fiction' (190), Cornish turns the author's literary device on its head, suggesting that investigators of Scallion's death or the coroner presiding at the inquest will likely have read the Syn stories and will smell a rat in the bizarre circumstances of the Major's death:

the stage-setting of the death recalls that of a murder in fiction, and the book describing this murder is one of those in the library of the man who, according to his own story, tied down the Major to the floor. (191)

Thus, at a textual juncture which would otherwise promise to open up the widest of gulfs between the worlds of real detection and fictional crime, Cornish most fully exercises his power and advantage as a highly informed reader, harnessing Thorndike's rhetorical textuality for his own ends.

Given that the third of the Doctor Syn sequels appeared in the same year as *Six Against the Yard*, which itself appeared only one year after Cornish's own memoirs, there was perhaps a commercial dimension to such intertextual cross-references.<sup>5</sup> However, Cornish's instinct to dispute with the Club writers on their own criminological and literary grounds takes on a more serious cast when he increasingly moves to question *Yard's* notion of the 'perfect murder' and thus the very premises of the text itself.

### **Cornish Calls 'Foul'**

As we have seen, Cornish was a thoroughly 'literary' detective in his own right, his experience of crime *fact* proving more illuminating, and his reading in crime *fiction* more extensive and subtle than the collaborating writers might have anticipated. If the Detection

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<sup>5</sup> See Green & Dalrymple, 2021. Such money-making schemes were typical in the history of the Detection Club, another example coming in the form of a sequence of six short detective plays produced for the BBC's Light Programme and broadcast between 13 January - 24 February 1948: *Butter in a Lordly Dish* (Agatha Christie), *Murder at Warbeck Hall* (Cyril Hare), *The Sympathetic Table* (Anthony Gilbert), *Sweet Death* (Christianna Brand), *Bubble. Bubble, Toil and Trouble* (E.C.R. Lorac), and *Where Do We Go from Here?* (Dorothy L. Sayers).

Club members expected Cornish simply to accede to his role as 'umpire' of the stories that make up *Six Against the Yard*, they were to discover that he was capable of using their own self-referential genre and the rules related to it for his own ends as both reader and as collaborator. This interplay is largely playful and good humoured, but develops into a source of some tension in his responses to the contributions of Ronald Knox and Dorothy L. Sayers.

Knox's contribution to the volume explicitly engages with questions of voice and dialogic that reflect Cornish's position in relation to the writers, and thus warrants a detailed summary. 'The Fallen Idol' is set in the fictional Magnolian Commonwealth, a dictatorship led by Enrique Gamba, 'The Inspirer'. Magnolian society is bombarded by propagandist radio broadcasts that drown out all other voices, ensuring a state sufficiently repressive that the capital's populace never speak above a 'whisper' (*Yard* 56). Formal channels of dissent are limited to the foreign press, principally the appositely named *Daily Shout* (57) and the oppositional figure of 'The Avenger', whose chalked graffiti messages provide a faceless voice of popular protest. When 'The Inspirer' meets his death in a locked-room style mystery, his private chapel engulfed in flames and falling from an upper window with a bullet in his back, the investigation commences. The status and the conduct of this investigation, however, are at best ambivalent. Captain Varcos, the henchman Marryat, Sanchez the Priest, reformed anarchist Gomez, and fireman Banos are subjected to the test of a psychometric truth machine 'which registers reactions while the prisoner replies to a series of word tests' (88). The machine is in fact only half of the test, for the investigation actually depends upon Colonel Weinberg's close scrutiny of each of the tested subjects, seeking for a tell-tale wincing or trembling that will betray the murderer's guilt, and thus gaining 'the witness of the man, as well as the witness of the machine' (88). Yet even when supplemented with this human factor for determining guilt, at the conclusion of the tale the murderer's identity remains unrevealed.

This evasion of traditional closure results from the political circumstances surrounding the tale's 'perfect murder'. The detectives in the story, and Knox behind them,



opt for obfuscation as expedient and the fair play traditions of Golden Age detective fiction (as famously encoded by Knox (1929) himself) become the victims of necessity. Bridling at this deviation in the fictional 'game', an outraged and perspicacious Cornish is left with no recourse other than to call Knox out, judging him by his own 'rules':

Father Ronald Knox hasn't played fair. His perfect murder is so, not because the mystery can't be solved, but because, for political reasons, the crime must go unpunished — at any rate for the time being. (92)

Faced with such egregious rule-breaking Cornish reverts to the creative telling of the potential 'other stories' — an imagined dimension of Bakhtinian dialogic (*Imagination*) — that emerge from the narrative. He rewrites events by positing the presence of the aforementioned gramophone recording used to give the impression that the Inspirer was still alive after he had already been killed, and even projects himself into Colonel Weinberg's shoes, observing that no doubt he would have 'investigated their stories very carefully. In his place, I should certainly have done so' (98). As such, Cornish overtly 'textualizes' the processes of detection. Where Knox does not play fair, Cornish will meet the author on his own ground using his own weapons.

If 'calling foul' on Ronald Knox's contribution was a bold move, Cornish's disqualification of Dorothy L. Sayers' 'perfect murder' as being no murder at all is more startling still. 'Blood Sacrifice' is carefully executed psychologically, morally and medically, Sayers having consulted fellow author Helen Simpson's surgeon husband on the precise physiological details of the death she relates. Cornish's doubts stem from the minimal premeditation of the crime and the resulting uncertainty as to whether murder has indeed been done. The guilty party (for young playwright John Scales certainly views himself as such whatever the reader decides) makes the split-second decision to remain silent when, after a road traffic accident, he donates his blood for emergency transfusion to an injured

man, firmly suspecting that their blood groups are incompatible and that there will likely be a fatal outcome — ‘Just as well give the man prussic acid at once’ warns the attending medic (228). This act of omission, together with Scales’ ill-feeling for the victim (aging actor-manager Garrick Drury), represents for Sayers a patent act of murder with both the necessary intent and the means of murder within Scales’ control. With a moral complexity reflective of Sayers’ scholarly background and theological interests, the key question is whether Scales’ failure to speak up should be deemed tantamount to murder.<sup>6</sup>

The transfusion takes place backstage at the King’s Theatre where Drury is starring in Scales’ debut play *Bitter Laurel*. Injured by a motorist outside the theatre, Drury is bundled backstage by a small party including Scales and Drury’s assistant Walter. When a doctor arrives he makes immediate preparations for transfusion and takes two small blood samples from Scales and Walter to establish compatibility with the dying patient. The compatibility test involves mingling each sample with a small quantity of Drury’s blood on either side of a china plate and observing the nature of the ensuing reactions. The brief distraction of the doctor, and the inadvertent jostling of the plate by Walter when Drury calls out for him and he dashes to check on the patient, leaves Scales with the distinct suspicion that the plate has been rotated 180 degrees. Thus when the transfusion proceeds, it is the donor with the *incompatible* blood group (Scales himself) who is called upon:

If there was the smallest doubt, one ought to draw attention to it and have the specimens tested again. ... The plate was turned round. ... No, I don’t know that. It’s the doctor’s business to make sure. .... I can’t speak now. ... He’ll wonder why I didn’t speak before. (228-9)

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<sup>6</sup> Sayers’ religious plays *The Devil to Pay* (1939), *The Just Vengeance* (1946), *He That Should Come* (1938) and *The Zeal of Thy House* (1937) (*Four Sacred Plays*, 1948) also form an interesting context for her work and development as a writer of crime fiction. In addition, it is tantalising to ponder the parallels between Sayers and the central character of ‘Blood Sacrifice’, John Scales. Was she like her hero, we might wonder, exasperated to find that her celebrity as a brilliant crime novelist drew attention away from her more high-brow literary productions.

Though an ambivalence as to precise *cause* does remain when Drury dies — we never know for sure whether the plate was indeed turned and the samples confused — for Sayers this is outweighed by the evident ill will that Scales bears towards Drury. An ambitious young playwright who aspires to stage more serious dramatic offerings, Scales has unguardedly signed away the rights to *Bitter Laurel*, enabling Drury to rewrite aspects of the play in melodramatic mould and treat it as his own star vehicle. The play's highly successful run, in full flow when the story begins, is a source of financial reward but artistic reproach to Scales. A good half of the story is devoted to sketching Scales' increasingly demoralised state, as the remuneration from the play in no way compensates for the perceived loss of his integrity and literary aspiration:

And all Mr. Scales could do was to pocket the wages of sin and curse Mr. Drury, who had (so pleasantly) ruined his work, destroyed his reputation, alienated his friends, exposed him to the contempt of the critics and forced him to betray his own soul.  
(210)

It is tempting to speculate how far Scales' situation is reflective of Sayers' own ambivalent feelings towards popular renditions and mass serialisations of her own works. In a letter to Muriel St Clare Byrne of September 1935 she remarked that if a mooted magazine serialisation of *Gaudy Night* (1935) were to fall through she would 'emerge poorer in purse though richer in honour' (*Letters* 355). Likewise it is suggestive that *Busman's Honeymoon* — a play featuring her serial detective Lord Peter Wimsey, on which she was working with Muriel St Clare Byrne — opened at the Comedy Theatre London in December 1936 and would thus have been in production when Sayers penned her tale of self-serving theatricals taking over the literary creations of others for financial gain. In its turn, this play was to provide the basis for *Busman's Honeymoon*, the last of her Wimsey novels, published in 1937. This novel itself, styled by Sayers as 'A Love Story with Detective Interruptions', in

itself signals her increasing movement away from the domain of conventional Golden Age detective fiction.

With this potential undercurrent to the maleficence of Scales, intent to murder is, Sayers suggests, firmly established. Yet for Cornish, in his riposte to the story, the murder that cannot be recognized by juridical scrutiny is no murder at all: 'I could not hope to prove either to a jury's satisfaction or to my own, that John Scales was guilty of the crime of murder ... I am afraid that I cannot admit this to be the perfect murder' (*Yard* 234, 240). Cornish adduces the further objections that Scales cannot be certain of what he has seen and that he might, indeed, have imagined it in his neurotic state. He further suggests that Scales' guilty conscience might prompt him to confess but that even in such a scenario 'They wouldn't believe him!' (as the exclamatory chapter title has it), and the statement would be dismissed as the false confession of a neurotic or attention seeker. Perhaps in an attempt to soften the tone of his rebuttal of Sayers' 'perfect murder', Cornish prefaces his response with flattery of her literary talents, and a witty invocation of Sayers' own Lord Peter, whom he regrets not having had the opportunity to consult but whom he feels sure would reach the same conclusion: 'a crime Lord Peter cannot distinguish as such can be no crime' (234).

However, these flattering gestures appear not to have had the desired effect on the imperious Sayers. We know from her published letters that ahead of the story's appearance in the *Daily Mail* in the spring of 1936, the author was advised by the editorial team of Cornish's response and was offered an opportunity to revise aspects of her story in the light of his position. Sayers wrote emphatically to her agent David Higham that she was having none of it:

No, no! I will not alter a word of 'Blood Sacrifice'; they must print it as it stands, or not at all. I was asked to commit the perfect murder; and the whole point of the story is that the only perfect murder is one in which the murderer can neither be charged nor even suspected. (*Letters* 377)

Sayers goes on to insist that 'Scales murdered the man as surely as if he had put a knife into his heart' and that even if he did seriously doubt that he had witnessed the turning of the plate, 'the failure to mention the *doubt* was as morally criminal as though he had actually *seen* the plate shifted' (377). All this builds to an emphatic conclusion, disputing Cornish's judgement:

All that Mr Cornish can do, I think, is to admit there are murders which are not crimes in the legal sense. Scales could not be charged with negligence; he could not be charged with anything; for he could not under any circumstances be suspected. This *is* the perfect murder, and the only kind of murder that can be called perfect. (378)

Sayers was sufficiently exercised by the issue to despatch a second letter to Higham later the same day, now distilling her rebuttal of Cornish: 'I am not bound to establish that the murder was committed; only that *if* it was so committed, it would be wholly undetectable' (379). Finally, a third letter from Sayers to Higham of 3rd April 1936, in response to a further communication from the *Mail*, seeks to close the matter. First, she offers one last tart authorial observation: 'Cornish, as a matter of fact, has run off upon a side-track and failed to see the obvious way in which, if Scales were foolish enough to make a confession, confirmation might be found of his guilt'. Pressing her fictional detective into service, Sayers suggests that a definitive pronouncement from Lord Peter Wimsey should appear alongside Cornish's riposte to her story when it is printed in the *Daily Mail* (Edwards 2015):

FROM LORD PETER WIMSEY

Dear Sir,

Since my name has been dragged into the discussion about the death of Garrick Drury, I am happy to offer my opinion, such as it is.

First of all, let me say plainly that I do not think it would be possible to convict John Scales of murder, provided he kept quiet about it. ... Even if it were suggested that the plate had been moved, it could not be proved that Scales had noticed it. He would only have to say, 'I saw nothing of it' and the jury would believe him, since Drury's death was so obviously to his own disadvantage.

(380)

Wimsey concludes that in the absence 'of Scales' own confession, I do not see how one could establish either the guilty intention or the vicious act which have to be established to justify a charge of murder; in fact, I do not see that it would be possible even to suspect him' (380).

This *contretemps* between Cornish and Sayers represents the point of greatest tension in the unusual collaboration that is *Six Against the Yard*. The C.I.D. man's instinct to exceed his brief and dispute not only the authors' conclusions but their very premises, lends the text an unpredictable and unstable character. Indeed, Sayers hinted darkly to Higham that she might place her story 'elsewhere' (*Letters* 378) and would later republish it, *sans* impertinent policeman's riposte, in her own anthology, *In The Teeth of the Evidence* (1939). Given this tension, what motivates Cornish to play maverick rather lugubrious foil to the authors? What lies behind his surprising refusal ultimately to award any of the stories their coveted 'perfect murder' status? While the motive force appears to lie in part in Cornish's relish for engaging with the motifs of detective fiction and the dialogic aesthetics of *Six Against the Yard* on their own terms, a deeper rationale is to be found, we suggest, in a stark philosophical difference of opinion between Cornish and the Detection Club members on the very notion of the 'perfect murder'.

### **Murder Will Not Out: The Idea of the 'perfect murder'**

While Cornish's long service had seen many detection successes, he was no stranger to

failed investigations and unsolved cases. A year before his participation in *Six Against the Yard*, he had addressed the idea of the 'perfect murder' explicitly in his memoirs, observing: 'You may have heard of people writing about and discussing the perfect crime — the crime which is so complete and so perfect that it happens in the absence of the person who commits it' (Cornish 79). Yet as a working detective, Cornish was equally aware that the 'perfect murder' was often not an act of meticulous planning and execution, but rather simply a crime that was either unsolvable or unprovable: 'In many so-called "unsolved" murders the police have the strongest suspicions as to the identity of the murderer, but they lack a vital link in the chain of evidence' (172). Cornish's memoirs report a number of such cases, including the 1933 murder of 27-year old Norah Upchurch in Shaftesbury Avenue, a case he called 'one of the most baffling which I have had to handle' (243). In his ensuing account, the messiness of real life murder investigation emerges: 'There were no clues, there was a strange conflict of evidence as to when the girl was last seen alive, and, strangest of all, a man confessed to her murder and was brought to trial and acquitted in order to silence the suspicion from which he had suffered for two years' (243).<sup>7</sup>

But perhaps the definitive case shaping Cornish's view of the 'perfect murder' was the murder of West London schoolgirl Vera Page in December 1931, a case that he described first in *Great Unsolved Crimes* (1935) as 'the most terrible case I had to deal with in my career' (106). Then in his memoirs he laments: 'I shall always regret that we could not bring her unknown murderer to the gallows' (Cornish 265). An only child, the eleven-year old girl from Notting Hill disappeared in the short interval between dusk and the lighting of the streetlamps when she ventured briefly from home to collect two swimming certificates from her aunt's house, some 200 yards away. When Vera's body was discovered the next day in a Kensington garden by a milkman making his rounds, there began a lengthy and ultimately inconclusive investigation, which was closely followed in the press throughout that winter

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<sup>7</sup> Eerily the suspect, Field, was executed for another murder, that of Beatrice Sutton, on 30 June 1936, just as *Six Against the Yard* was published.

(*West London Observer*, 18 December 1931). Cornish investigated the murder alongside Sir Bernard Spilsbury, veteran of the Crippen case. Press vignettes from the investigation include Cornish's gentle questioning of Vera's schoolmates ('One little girl held her dolly in her arms as she was questioned by the Superintendent' — *Daily Herald*, 17 December 1931) and his public appeal for information: 'The inquiries have now reached a stage when we hope for more help from persons who must have some idea of incidents connected with the terrible murder of this little schoolgirl ... There is somebody keeping something back' (*Derby Daily Telegraph* 19 December 1931).

Yet despite this momentum, Cornish's investigation proved fruitless: the murder of Vera Page was the 'perfect murder'.

By marked contrast to the stories in *Six Against the Yard*, the success of this 'perfect murder' was largely down to chance. Vera's body was found in the garden of a house in Kensington, but unlike detective fiction where every detail of the crime scene is freighted with significance, Vera's murderer 'had no reason for choosing that particular road or garden ... he made no attempt at concealment either in bringing the body there or when he left it' (109). For Cornish, it was a matter of mere bad luck that, as far as the police could ascertain 'he was completely unobserved' (109) and as such could not be identified. Likewise, in the critical period of Vera's absence, nobody happened to enter the coal cellar where it seems the murder was committed, and Cornish is obliged to ask: 'had chance again stepped in?'; When at last the apparent location of the murder was identified, the discoverer had unwittingly destroyed or adulterated most of the evidence it might have furnished.

Thus for Cornish, this 'perfect murder' is accompanied by no recognition of a murderer's intellectual triumph, only by a sense of tragedy and frustration. The 'perfection' of the murder of Vera Page is effected not by a criminal mastermind but merely by someone who manages to evade detection. In the case of Vera Page, as with other unsuccessful investigations that Cornish narrates, the detective's failure to solve the crime is the result of inconclusive forensic evidence, bad luck, public lack of awareness, or the insufficiency of



circumstantial evidence needed to make a case. In the light of such bitter experience, Cornish's view of the 'perfect murder' can only differ markedly from those of his collaborators.

The role Cornish plays in *Six Against the Yard*, then, is perhaps a role of his own devising rather than that which Sayers and her fellow Detection Club members might have had in mind. Like them, Cornish proves intent and ingenious as both a reader and a writer of crime, but ultimately with a different end in view. In debating the 'perfect murder', Cornish reads through the lens of his own experience and enacts, in his witty retorts to the novelists, a form of discursive 'closure' that cases such as those of Norah Upchurch and Vera Page had signally lacked.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> While there would be no further collaborations between Cornish and the Club, the retired Superintendent would go on to share his true crime reminiscences in other media including further press pieces and a radio interview for the BBC home service broadcast in September 1940 (*Lincolnshire Echo*, 10 September 1940).

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