Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism

TCLC 12

Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism

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1800 through 1899	***NINETEENTH-CENTURY LITERATURE CRITICISM*** for example: Fedor Dostoevski, George Sand, Gerard Manley Hopkins, Emily Dickinson
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Volume 12

Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism

Excerpts from Criticism of the Works of Novelists, Poets, Playwrights, Short Story Writers, and Other Creative Writers Who Died between 1900 and 1960, from the First Published Critical Appraisals to Current Evaluations

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PREFACE

It is impossible to overvalue the importance of literature in the intellectual, emotional, and spiritual evolution of humanity. Literature is that which both lifts us out of everyday life and helps us to better understand it. Through the fictive lives of such characters as Anna Karenin, Lambert Strether, or Leopold Bloom, our perceptions of the human condition are enlarged, and we are enriched.

Literary criticism can also give us insight into the human condition, as well as into the specific moral and intellectual atmosphere of an era, for the criteria by which a work of art is judged reflects contemporary philosophical and social attitudes. Literary criticism takes many forms: the traditional essay, the book or play review, even the parodic poem. Criticism can also be of several kinds: normative, descriptive, interpretive, textual, appreciative, generic. Collectively, the range of critical response helps us to understand a work of art, an author, an era.

The Scope of the Book

The usefulness of Gale's *Contemporary Literary Criticism (CLC),* which excerpts criticism on current writing, suggested an equivalent need among literature students and teachers interested in authors of the period 1900 to 1960. The great poets, novelists, short story writers, and playwrights of this period are by far the most popular writers for study in high school and college literature courses. Moreover, since contemporary critics continue to analyze the work of this period—both in its own right and in relation to today's tastes and standards—a vast amount of relevant critical material confronts the student.

Thus, *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism (TCLC)* presents significant passages from published criticism on authors who died between 1900 and 1960. Because of the difference in time span under consideration *(CLC* considers authors who were still living after 1959), there is no duplication between *CLC* and *TCLC.*

Each volume of *TCLC* is carefully designed to present a list of authors who represent a variety of genres and nationalities. The length of an author's section is intended to be representative of the amount of critical attention he or she has received from critics writing in English, or foreign criticism in translation. Critical articles and books that have not been translated into English are excluded. Every attempt has been made to identify and include excerpts from the seminal essays on each author's work. Additionally, as space permits, especially insightful essays of a more limited scope are included. Thus *TCLC* is designed to serve as an introduction for the student of twentieth-century literature to the authors of that period and to the most significant commentators on these authors.

Each *TCLC* author section represents the scope of critical response to that author's work: some early criticism is presented to indicate initial reactions, later criticism is selected to represent any rise or fall in an author's reputation, and current retrospective analyses provide students with a modern view. Since a *TCLC* author section is intended to be a definitive overview, the editors include between 20 and 30 authors in each 600-page volume (compared with approximately 75 authors in a *CLC* volume of similar size) in order to devote more attention to each author. An author may appear more than once because of the great quantity of critical material available, or because of a resurgence of criticism generated by events such as an author's centennial or anniversary celebration, the republication of an author's works, or publication of a newly translated work or volume of letters.

The Organization of the Book

An author section consists of the following elements: author heading, biographical and critical introduction, principal works, excerpts of criticism (each followed by a citation), and an annotated bibliography of additional reading.

- The *author heading* consists of the author's full name, followed by birth and death dates. The unbracketed portion of the name denotes the form under which the author most commonly wrote. If an author wrote consistently under a pseudonym, the pseudonym will be listed in the author heading and the real name given in parentheses on the first line of the biocritical introduction. Also located at the beginning of the biocritical introduction are any name variations under which an author wrote, including transliterated forms for authors whose languages use nonroman alphabets. Uncertainty as to a birth or death date is indicated by a question mark.
- The *biocritical introduction* contains biographical and other background information about an author that will elucidate his or her creative output. Parenthetical material following several of the biocritical introductions includes references to biographical and critical reference series published by the Gale Research Company. These include *Contemporary Authors, Dictionary of Literary Biography, Something about the Author,* and past volumes of *TCLC.*

- The *list of principal works* is chronological by date of first book publication and identifies genres. In the case of foreign authors where there are both foreign language publications and English translations, the title and date of the first English-language edition are given in brackets. Unless otherwise indicated, dramas are dated by first performance, not first publication.
- *Criticism* is arranged chronologically in each author section to provide a perspective on any changes in critical evaluation over the years. In the text of each author entry, titles by the author are printed in boldface type. This allows the reader to ascertain without difficulty the works discussed. For purposes of easier identification, the critic's name and the publication date of the essay are given at the beginning of each piece of criticism. Unsigned criticism is preceded by the title of the journal in which it appeared. For an anonymous essay later attributed to a critic, the critic's name appears in brackets in the heading and in the citation.

  Important critical essays are prefaced by *explanatory notes* as an additional aid to students using *TCLC*. The explanatory notes will provide several types of useful information, including: the reputation of a critic; the reputation of a work of criticism; the specific type of criticism (biographical, psychoanalytic, structuralist, etc.); a synopsis of the criticism; and the growth of critical controversy or changes in critical trends regarding an author's work. In many cases, these notes will cross-reference the work of critics who agree or disagree with each other.
- A complete *bibliographical citation* designed to facilitate location of the original essay or book by the interested reader accompanies each piece of criticism. An asterisk (*) at the end of a citation indicates the essay is on more than one author.
- The *annotated bibliography* appearing at the end of each author section suggests further reading on the author. In some cases it includes essays for which the editors could not obtain reprint rights. An asterisk (*) at the end of a citation indicates the essay is on more than one author.

Beginning with Volume 12, *TCLC* will include a cumulative index to authors listing all the authors who have appeared in *Contemporary Literary Criticism, Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism,* and *Nineteenth-Century Literature Criticism,* along with cross references to the Gale series *Children's Literature Review, Authors in the News, Contemporary Authors, Dictionary of Literary Biography, Something about the Author,* and *Yesterday's Authors of Books for Children.* Users will welcome this cumulated author index as a useful tool for locating an author within the various series. The index, which lists birth and death dates when available, will be particularly valuable for those authors who are identified with a certain period but whose death date causes them to be placed in another, or for those authors whose careers span two periods. For example, F. Scott Fitzgerald is found in *TCLC,* yet a writer often associated with him, Ernest Hemingway, is found in *CLC.* Each volume of *TCLC* also includes a cumulative nationality index. Author names are arranged alphabetically under their respective nationalities and followed by the volume numbers in which they appear. A cumulative index to critics is another useful feature in *TCLC.* Under each critic's name is listed the authors on whom the critic has written and the volume and page where the criticism may be found.

Acknowledgments

No work of this scope can be accomplished without the cooperation of many people. The editors especially wish to thank the copyright holders of the excerpts included in this volume, the permission managers of many book and magazine publishing companies for assisting us in locating copyright holders, and the staffs of the Detroit Public Library, University of Detroit Library, University of Michigan Library, and Wayne State University Library for making their resources available to us. We are also grateful to Jeri Yaryan for her assistance with copyright research.

Suggestions Are Welcome

Several features have been added to *TCLC* since its original publication in response to various suggestions:

- Since Volume 2—An *Appendix* listing the sources from which material in the volume is reprinted.
- Since Volume 3—An *Annotated Bibliography* for additional reading.
- Since Volume 4—*Portraits* of the authors.
- Since Volume 6—A *Nationality Index* for easy access to authors by nationality.
- Since Volume 9—*Explanatory notes* to excerpted criticism which provide important information regarding critics and their work.
- Since Volume 12—A cumulative *Author Index* listing authors in all Gale literary criticism series and providing cross references to Gale's literary biography series.

If readers wish to suggest authors they would like to have covered in future volumes, or if they have other suggestions, they are cordially invited to write the editor.

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Murry, J. Middleton 1889-1957
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Zweig, Stefan 1881-1942

Readers are cordially invited to suggest additional authors to the editors.

E(dmund) C(lerihew) Bentley

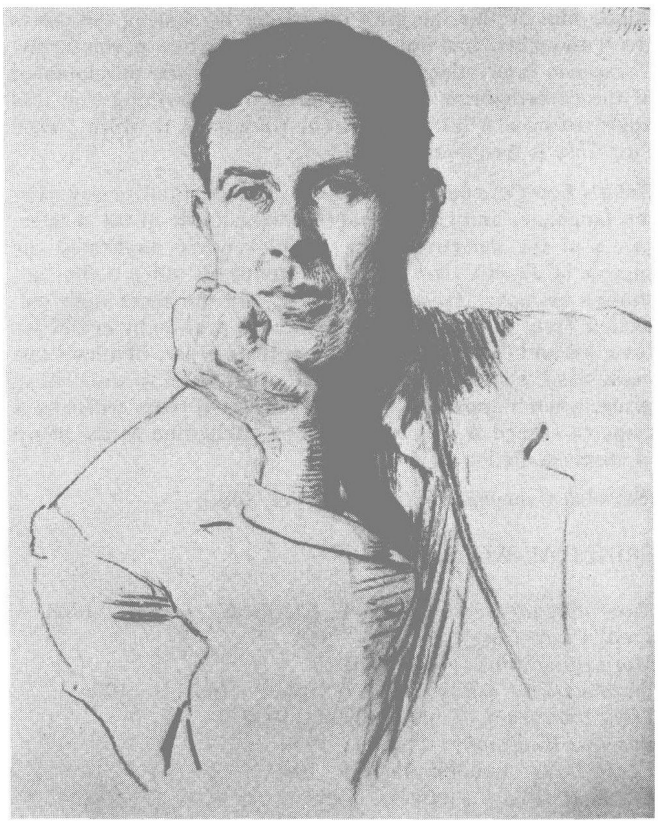
1875-1956

(Also wrote under pseudonym of E. Clerihew) English novelist, short story writer, journalist, humorist, autobiographer, and editor.

Bentley is chiefly remembered today as the father of the modern detective novel. Although he was also a successful journalist, and famous in his native England for inventing a form of humorous verse known as the "clerihew," it was as the author of the murder mystery classic *Trent's Last Case* that Bentley achieved international recognition. *Trent's Last Case* was originally devised by Bentley as "not so much a detective story as an exposure of detective stories." Mystery story writers before Bentley had adhered closely to the romantic tradition in detective fiction represented by such writers as Edgar Allan Poe and Arthur Conan Doyle. It was in reaction against this imitative tendency that Bentley wrote *Trent's Last Case*. In *Trent,* Bentley disregarded or ironically reversed many of the conventions commonly associated with the detective genre, such as the infallibility of the detective and the ultimate triumph of reason. However, in doing so, he also introduced an element of wit and realism into mystery fiction that it had previously lacked. Bentley's iconoclastic approach to his subject matter in *Trent's Last Case* paved the way for a new type of mystery novel. As Eric Routley observed, Bentley "stepped in at exactly the moment when the detective story was due either to degenerate into inbred affectation or to establish a true principal of originality."

Bentley was born in Shepherd's Bush, a suburb of London. As a young man he attended St. Paul's School, where he met G. K. Chesterton, who soon became his closest friend. Together they founded an unofficial student magazine that featured poetry in the form of "bad imitations of Swinburne," satire, and nonsense verse. Bentley wrote his first clerihew for this publication. Many years later, this same rhyme, about Sir Humphry Davy, appeared in a slightly amended version in his first book, *Biography for Beginners,* illustrated by Chesterton. Bentley graduated from Merton college at Oxford with a degree in history. Later, he studied law in London and was called to the bar in 1902. He soon abandoned his law career, however, to take a position on the editorial staff of the London *Daily News.* He was a frequent contributor of political articles to such magazines as *The Fortnightly Review,* and his light verse often appeared in the pages of *Punch.* In 1912, Bentley joined the staff of the *Daily Telegraph,* where he remained as foreign affairs editor until his retirement in 1934. During World War II he returned to the *Daily Telegraph* to fill in as chief literary critic. He died in 1956.

Bentley's clerihews, as they appeared in his *Biography for Beginners, More Biography,* and *Baseless Biography,* represented a new form of nonsense verse that quickly became popular in England and inspired many imitators. Clerihews, so-called after Bentley's middle name, are formless, four-line verses that often describe a famous person. They are typically absurd or ironic, and, when concerning specific persons, the first line nearly always consists of the subject's name. The principal challenge of the form is thus in the pursuit of suitable rhymes for unrhymable names. Although the word "clerihew"



The Granger Collection, New York

was officially added to the Oxford English Dictionary in Bentley's lifetime, his verses never enjoyed the same popularity in other countries that they did in England. Bentley's humor in his clerihews was necessarily somewhat parochial, and so did not often appeal to non-English readers.

In contrast, *Trent's Last Case* was internationally well-received at the time of its appearance in 1913, and it remains popular today. When *Trent's Last Case* was published Bentley dedicated it to Chesterton, stating that he had written it primarily for his friend's amusement. Chesterton was an avid reader of mystery stories as well as the author of the Father Brown detective stories, and, more importantly, he had urged Bentley in his ambition to write "a new sort of detective story." Although it was not recognized as such by critics, Bentley initially planned *Trent* as a parody of the traditional detective story. In *Trent* Bentley replaced the Sherlockian hero of the popular mysteries with the artist-detective Philip Trent, who, far from being a paragon of order and reserve, facetiously misquotes poetry, falls in love with the prime suspect, and abandons the case. Moreover, Trent's ingenious solution to the crime turns out to be incorrect, and the murderer goes unpunished at the end. In spite of this, the novel was not perceived as a parody, chiefly because Bentley's innovations did more to advance the detective genre than merely to satirize it. Prior to the publication of *Trent,* few artistically successful mystery novels had

been written. The manipulation of stock characters and the construction of a clever series of clues were devices more suited to the short story, and, with rare exceptions, writers had difficulty constructing a novel-length tale around them. Bentley was the first mystery writer to conceive of using the psychology of his characters as possible clues to the solution of the crime. He was also the first to utilize a narrative technique that alternated between several different points of view, thus enabling him to play fair with the reader by sharing the detective's thoughts, but not revealing the solution prematurely. These two innovations contributed more to the development of the contemporary detective novel than anything that had appeared since Wilkie Collins's *The Moonstone*, to which *Trent's Last Case* is frequently compared.

***Trent's Last Case* has been translated into virtually every written language, and critics generally rate it one of the masterpieces of the detective genre. Bentley never duplicated the success of *Trent's Last Case* with any of his other fiction, although his novel *Trent's Own Case*, and the short story collection *Trent Intervenes*, have both been praised by critics for their wit and the polished quality of their prose. Bentley's last book was *Elephant's Work*, a thriller that failed to win critical praise when it appeared. However, in recent years critics have come to regard it as a worthwhile contribution to the genre of suspense fiction.**

(See also *Contemporary Authors*, Vol. 108.)

PRINCIPAL WORKS

Biography for Beginners [as E. Clerihew] (verse) 1905
Trent's Last Case (novel) 1913
More Biography (verse) 1929
Trent's Own Case [with H. W. Allen] (novel) 1936
Trent Intervenes (short stories) 1938
Baseless Biography (verse) 1939
Those Days (autobiography) 1940
Elephant's Work (novel) 1950
Clerihews Complete (verse) 1951
The Complete Clerihews of E. Clerihew Bentley (verse) 1981
The First Clerihews [with Waldo Percy Henry d'Avigdor, Lucien Robert Frederick Oldershaw, Gilbert Keith Chesterton, Edward Chesterton, and Maurice (Grey) Solomon] (verse) 1983

***THE SPECTATOR* (essay date 1913)**

Mr. Bentley, whose name is unfamiliar to us in connexion with fiction though there is nothing of the novice in his style of writing, is to be congratulated on a decided success. Indeed, our chief ground of complaint with him is a mere detail of nomenclature. ***Trent's Last Case*** is such an excellent detective romance that we should like to hear about some of Trent's earlier achievements, and sincerely trust that Mr. Bentley will not adhere to the self-denying ordinance involved in a logical interpretation of the title. For Trent is quite a new personality in the romance of criminology: a man who leads a blameless double life; an attractive humorist with a genius for absurd quotation—"his culture was large and loose, dominated by a love of poetry"; and an unconscious power for getting himself liked. It is happily said of him that "no one felt on good behaviour with a man who seemed always to be enjoying himself." When we add that his age at the time of the story was only thirty-two, and that it is expressly stated that he had not yet passed the age of laughter and adventure, Mr. Bentley's decision to restrict his further mental activity to art—his second string—or the cultivation of his fireside becomes not only unjust but impracticable.

We have said that there is nothing of the novice in Mr. Bentley's style of writing. He has, however, the engaging optimism of youth which manifests itself in half a dozen different ways. We have been treated of late to several plays and novels, all of them aimed at pillorying the excesses and vulgarities of the modern press. But here we have Mr. Bentley describing the editor of an extremely up-to-date sheet—a man prepared on all occasions to "knock the town endways"—as inspiring the respect of his staff, without a touch of the charlatan, cordial and considerate. If there is one journalistic excrescence which more than any other has stunk in the nostrils of all decent people of late years, it is the amateur "crime investigator"—criminal's ally would be nearer the mark. Yet Mr. Bentley not only assigns this *rôle* to his hero, but shows that it can be played fairly and squarely without "queering the pitch" for Scotland Yard, or disregarding the feelings of relatives of the dead. Some day perhaps Mr. Bentley may give us a satire on the abuse of the opportunities offered to amateur detectives by lavish journalistic enterprise. After all, everything depends on your choice of instruments. Sir James Molloy, the editor of the *Record*, used Trent, not altogether because he was exceptionally clever, but also because he was a sportsman, a gentleman, and a man of independent means.

The case which *ex hypothesi* ended Trent's career as a detective is that of the mysterious and violent death of Sigsbee Manderson, an American millionaire financier. Manderson had inherited wealth, and during his father's lifetime adopted buccaneering methods, generally with success. On his father's death, he "ranged himself," and his millions grew with mechanical regularity. Still this is not to say that he was a popular or genial person. His domestic life was blameless, but he was rather an inhuman though highly efficient machine than a man. He had, it is true, a weakness for being *bien chaussé*, and had begun to dabble in diamonds. Otherwise he had no human redeeming vices, and he was incapable of making a profitable and intelligent use of leisure. A somewhat sinister figure, this American "Colossus," ruthless rather than crooked; of world-wide fame, and yet for all his power unable to inspire affection in a single human soul. . . . He is a well-conceived type of modern millionaire, interesting, formidable, but entirely unattractive. Mr. Bentley has not only drawn him clearly and firmly, but he has shown a thoroughly sound instinct in choosing such a man as the victim. The fact that he inspires no affection or regret or desire to avenge him enables the reader to approach the mystery of his death without any emotional bias in his favour. A really good "mystery" cannot be made out of the murder of a lovable or admirable person. Manderson was neither. He stood for methods which excited hatred amongst millions of working men, and was to this extent always open to assassination. Then he had married a beautiful English wife who was admittedly unhappy. There was presumptive evidence that the murder might have been a *crime passionnel*. One of his secretaries was a handsome young man, who was much in the company of his wife. These are some of the data on which Trent had to exercise his intelligence; but it would discount the joy of perusal to say more than that his task is immensely

complicated by his susceptibility to the charms of the widow, and the conflict between his duty to his employer and his chivalrous regard for the widow's feelings. Speaking for ourselves, we find it impossible to develop a lively sympathy for a woman, however attractive, who deliberately married a man such as Manderson out of mere social ambition. But this attitude has not interfered with our enjoyment and admiration of Mr. Bentley's ingenious work. We wonder how many readers will "spot" the sentence, early in the book, in which the identity of the person who fired the fatal shot is first disclosed? (pp. 409-10)

A review of "Trent's Last Case," in The Spectator *(© 1913 by* The Spectator*), Vol. 110, No. 4419, March 8, 1913, pp. 409-10.*

H. DOUGLAS THOMSON (essay date 1931)

[*Thomson's* Masters of Mystery: A Study of the Detective Story, *from which this excerpt is taken, was one of the earliest book-length studies of the mystery story. Thomson's book outlines the history of the genre, and is particularly useful as a guide to English detective story writers.*]

There have been several attempts to civilise the detective story. Realism was the pressing inducement, for the phantasia of the super-sleuth had began to grow stale. The detective story was thus obliged to become domesticated. The introduction of character study was at first not an entirely satisfactory innovation. The *dramatis personae* would behave for the major part of the book rather like W. J. Locke's characters—pleasantly evasive. Then the climax would turn Hyperion to a satyr. In a paragraph the smooth solicitor would be translated to a snarling maniac with an unprepossessing rictus. To this maladjustment, it must be confessed, the detective story is frequently subject. It is the greatest flaw in the theme of "the most unlikely person."

Mr. E. C. Bentley, however, in ***Trent's Last Case*** . . . evaded this bogey of Inconsistency. To do this he had to spirit away his villain by making him the "murdered" man, and the posthumous influence of his malignity was just sufficient and no more to take the characters out of themselves. (pp. 147-48)

In some respects the story is unique. The detective Philip Trent—who falls in love with one of the suspects—fails to solve the problem, and the solution is tendered gratis. For this violation of the rules the staggering dénouement is for once ample compensation. It is true that it also causes a second infringement. The "murder" turned out to be a less "sensational," but in the circumstances equally exciting, justifiable homicide. In fact, Mr. Bentley turned the tables very neatly. Instead of adhering rigidly to the rules and thus sacrificing his characters, he preferred the human drama and an elastic code. Otherwise the orthodox features are present. For many reasons it is the perfect detective story; and not least for its construction. Indeed, so meticulously is it pieced together, that it fails to discourage the analyst; it even invites the knife. That is at least a defence, however poor, for attempting rather callously to analyse the plot. Suppose we imagine, for the fun of it, the unfolding of the plan.

Could a detective story be worked out . . . from the idea of a man committing suicide, in order to bring to the gallows an innocent man of whom he was blindly jealous? Well, it had been done before. Planting was an old-fashioned dodge. One would have to consider at all events the motive to jealousy. Suppose the villain suspected the dupe of being in love with his wife. On the strength of these suspicions he determines either to commit suicide, or preferably for his own sake to build up a perfect case of circumstantial evidence of robbery, assault, etc., against the innocent party. A straight novel might easily be made out of that triangle. Observe how the entry of the detective complicates matters. Two alternatives at once suggest themselves:—

(1) The detective should arrive at the correct solution of the problem, or,

(2) He should solve the problem as the villain meant it to be solved—by reliance on circumstantial evidence. The second alternative would, however, mean the violation of a perfectly sound canon of detective fiction, the happy ending. Therefore, we must be content with (1).

Now, the circumstantial evidence will be based willy-nilly on an examination of the wife and the innocent "lover." These relations might be described so as to make the reader believe that an illicit love affair was responsible for the "murder" of the husband. Or again, it might be hinted that the husband was a brute and beat his wife, and thus the sympathy of modern humanitarianism be enlisted. The latter method would be the more natural one considering the husband's real character. But what was the detective to think?

Then possibly was born Mr. Bentley's great idea—that the detective should fall in love with the wife, that it should be a grand passion. There would be drama in this situation: the detective in love with the wife (or widow), tormenting himself now with the thought that his loved one was guilty of her husband's death, now with the no less agonising suspicion that the dupe had fired the shot from love of her. (One recalls in this context a less dramatic and less artistic situation in *Blackmail*.)

The opening of the story is surprising. As far as the construction goes the first chapter is superfluous. Sigsbee Manderson is dead. Plain, stark fact. No ominous thuds. No shots ringing out in the tenebral stillness. The story might have opened in the offices of the *Record*. Yet, for one reason only it is a brilliant piece of technique. Mr. Bentley, possibly underrating his power of creating the correct atmosphere, evidently determined at the outset to make in an indirect way the most of the dramatic and sensational possibilities.

We are immediately on the tiptoe of suspense. Sigsbee Manderson is dead; the great financier is dead (Sigsbee *is* such a good name for the murdered man. It is also an additional motive to murder.) The world totters at his sudden demise. The "vortices of finance" (whatever they are) are in chaos. Thus is the importance of the issues magnified, and one of De Quincey's conditions of a perfect murder ignored. (pp. 149-51)

Now we are in the offices of the *Record*. The press is on the job; the salient facts are coming in. The editor decides to put Trent on the case. It is to be observed that Fleet Street is still regarded as superior in detection to Scotland Yard. This was of course before the latter had seen the commercial prospects in writing "shop"! Curiously enough Mr. Bentley stoops to the old cliché of making Philip Trent unnecessarily reluctant to "take up the case."

The characters have now to be assembled. First comes Mr. Cupples, the genial, who conveniently supplies information about the Manderson ménage. (pp. 151-52)

Trent soon meets Inspector Murch in a spirit of friendly rivalry; and just when we are expecting the death-blow to the old antagonism and a victory for co-operation, the inspector softly and silently fades away. It is now Trent's business to show his mettle. Note-book in hand he creeps from room to room, taking finger-prints and measuring distances in splendid style. As far as the "psychological" aspect of the case goes, Trent starts by suspecting every one. Mrs. Manderson, Marlowe the secretary and intended dupe, Bunner the American, and the butler. As though aware of this, Bunner decides to simplify matters by producing so absurd a theory that he almost cries out to be suspected. All this time Mr. Bentley is working up a strong case against Marlowe and Mrs. Manderson. The first movement closes with the suspects in this order (1) Marlowe; (2) Mrs. Manderson; (3) Bunner.

Mrs. Manderson had yet to make her entrance. The description of Trent's first sight of her is beautifully persuasive. We are immediately sentimental and, like Trent, drawn to her. Then we wonder for a moment if this persuasion was not really meant to consolidate our suspicions. The inquest soon follows, and Mrs. Manderson creates the expected sensation. Trent then ceases to be sentimental and becomes logical. False teeth and a pair of shoes occupy his attention; and we return to the spade work. Trent, despite his logic, is fundamentally an intuitionalist. "Swiftly and *spontaneously* when chance or effort puts one in possession of the key fact in any system of baffling circumstances, one's ideas seem to rush to group themselves anew in relation to that fact, so that they are suddenly rearranged almost before one has consciously grasped the significance of the key fact itself."

The key fact once established, the process of inference proceeds apace. Trent's report is in many ways the most satisfying portion of the book. (Miss Sayers quotes from it at length to illustrate the shifting of the viewpoint from (1) "The Watson viewpoint" to (2) "The detective's" and to (3) "The middle viewpoint.") It is in a way all the more satisfying because, as we find later, the hypothesis was faulty; and it is cleverer in a detective story to appear in these circumstances *plausible to the reader*, than to start from a true hypothesis and delude him by the way. Why this is so, I have never quite been able to understand. The final conclusion, prompted by the circumstantial evidence, is that Marlowe must have been the murderer.

The reader sits back, but finding that there are roughly 150 more pages to the book sits up again, and naturally wonders what the devil has happened. Is Trent wrong after all? Was the deduction of pure reason all at sea? The character of the book now changes. We forget we are reading a detective story. As Trent's love for Mrs. Manderson unfolds, the plot becomes one of character. Yet not for a moment does this development seem out of place. The farrago is exquisitely composed. The third movement ends in the united happiness of the detective and the woman once suspected.

And still suspected, for we suddenly remember that the problem has not been solved. Trent's theory of Marlowe's guilt suffers shipwreck when an intimation of the latter's engagement is brought to Trent's notice; as Marlowe's motive was supposed to be his love for Mrs. Manderson. Trent has now a very good reason for getting to the bottom of the problem. He calls a council of war, and Marlowe is asked to attend. A diabolical suicide is exposed and the fourth wave is spent.

But what we supposed to be the real dénouement was merely a shadow; and Mr. Cupples, dear old Cupples, in the last chapter of all provides the surprise of the book, upsets all calculations and beats every reader on the post. Without this grand finale the story would have had a satisfactory and effective conclusion; but the last chapter raises it to the pinnacle of technique. By this stroke of genius the detective story is emancipated and claims a climax of its very own.

Even from this crude résumé it is not, I hope, impossible to recognise the sterling qualities which won that consensus of approbation. Never have the virtues of the genre been quite so elegantly displayed. The formal problem intertwined with the character problem; the sincerity of the character study; the honeyed morsels of sensationalism; the trail of the red herrings, inside and outside the plot; the naturalness of the "motivation;" the tenseness and also the humour of the situation; and over and above all, that supreme climax. It is rare that a solution hoaxes both the detective and the reader. (pp. 152-55)

H. Douglas Thomson, "The Domestic Detective Story," in his Masters of Mystery: A Study of the Detective Story *(reprinted by permission of William Collins Sons & Co Ltd), Collins, 1931, pp. 144-67.**

CHARLES WILLIAMS (essay date 1936)

[*Williams was a noted English poet and critic, as well as the author of such supernatural thrillers as* War in Heaven *and* All Hallow's Eve.]

[In ***Trent's Own Case***] I wonder anxiously if Mr. Trent is becoming a little reckless. He seems to treat words more lightly than he does wines—or at least than Mr. Warner Allen [the coauthor of the book] does wines. I may be fussy. It may be that this is a graver book than the earlier one was. There is no-one quite like our adorable Mr. Cupples. The earlier high sound is, as it were, muted. On the other hand, there is a curious sense of there being 'someone or something behind the arras.' There is an interlude in Dieppe, which has very little to do with necessities of the plot, but enters almost on a town of fantasy: as if between France and England there lay a whole country of the mind, and the roads of Abelard and Racine (and Calvin) ran through the forest of Arden and between the hills of Cumberland, into the distant places of our scepticism and our belief and our poetry. The Hotel of the Little Universe and of the Chimaera . . . I thought Mr. Bentley was going to become all marvellously allegorical and ambiguous, with the Comte d'Astalys, who was descended from the Comte Balthazar the alchemist, by whom the Chimaera was first added to the coat-of arms, and lines of the Odyssey quoted in English and in Provençal. But these things do but tail off into 'private vice and folly,' drugs and madness, and so we come back to England and honest murder.

Yet perhaps Mr. Bentley enjoyed those chapters when he read them over, as I did, . . . as well as all the rest of the book, including the admirably invented episode of the cork of the bottle of Felix Poubelle 1884, and the speech upon corks delivered by Mr. William Clerihew, wine-merchant, of Fountain Court, and the debt we all owe to the Benedictine Dom Perignon, of Hautvillers in Champagne, who rediscovered corks at the end of the seventeenth century ('the century of genius,' as it has—obviously with accuracy—been called). So what with one thing and another, you will see it is altogether a book of high invention and continual savour of good and bad, and wit and poetry, and intricacy and simplicity. (p. 178)

Charles Williams, "Letters to Peter—IV." (reproduced by kind permission of David Higham Associ-

ates), in G. K.'s Weekly, *Vol. XXIII, No. 585, May 28, 1936, pp. 178-79.*

NICHOLAS BLAKE [pseudonym of C. DAY LEWIS] (essay date 1936)

[*Nicholas Blake was the pseudonym under which C. Day Lewis, the noted British poet and critic, wrote such popular and highly entertaining detective stories as* The Beast Must Die *and* Malice in Wonderland.]

Mr. Bentley is a remarkable phenomenon. Twenty years ago he wrote ***Trent's Last Case,*** in which his urbane artistry, perfect timing and tigerish attack established him as the Ranjitsinji of crime fiction. After that one inning he retired, to pop up in ***Biography for Beginners*** disguised as the most original comic poet of his generation. And now once again Philip Trent is dragged away from his painting to investigate a murder in which two of his friends are involved. His interest in the crime soon ceases to be purely altruistic, for beside the body of the dead philanthropist he finds a razor-blade bearing his own finger-prints! In the dead man's pocket a champagne cork is discovered, with which—and several other vintage points—the learned Mr. Allen deals eruditely. Indeed, the erudition of these collaborators is so wide and effortless that it makes even Mr. Van Dine look like a small-town university professor. ***Trent's Own Case*** is perhaps not quite so well knit and perfectly rounded as its predecessor. But it has as ingenious a plot, two really wicked characters, the same leisurely Edwardian wit, the same bouquet—dry and ethereal as a very old brandy: you will find yourself sipping slowly at this book, postponing as long as possible the melancholy moment when it shall be finished. But the internal glow will remain; for ***Trent's Own Case*** is another classic of its *genre.*

Nicholas Blake [pseudonym of C. Day Lewis], "Trent and Others," in The Spectator *(© 1936 by* The Spectator; *reprinted by permission of* The Spectator*), Vol. 156, No. 5631, May 29, 1936, p. 992.**

NICHOLAS BLAKE [pseudonym of C. DAY LEWIS] (essay date 1938)

The technique of the detective short-story is a peculiarly difficult one, and only Conan Doyle and Chesterton have consistently mastered it. The main difficulty is to keep the reader guessing, to maintain suspense and create surprise within a severely limited group of characters. Mr. Bentley avoids rather than masters this problem. In his collection of short stories, ***Trent Intervenes,*** he depends for his effect upon the How, not upon the Who: they are like sums in Arithmetic, whose answer we can guess pretty accurately at the start; the interest lies in the steps towards the foregone conclusion. As we should expect from so distinguished a writer, the plots are neat, economical, and un-fussy. From the literary point of view, they are perhaps a little arid and lacking in colour, but these are to a certain extent the necessary defects of their detective merits. Here we must except the last story, **"The Ordinary Hairpins,"** which describes with great tenderness and delicacy the finding of a famous singer who has disappeared from the world that knew her. Notable also are **"The Genuine Tabard,"** a study in heraldry and deception, and **"The Clever Cockatoo,"** into which Mr. Bentley has infused that atmosphere of creeping uneasiness which made the Father Brown tales so attractive. (p. 312)

Nicholas Blake [pseudonym of C. Day Lewis], "A Dram of Poison," in The Spectator *(© 1938 by* The Spectator; *reprinted by permission of* The Spectator*), Vol. 161, No. 5747, August 19, 1938, pp. 312-13.**

E. C. BENTLEY (essay date 1940)

[*In the following excerpt from his autobiography,* Those Days, *Bentley explains how he came to write* Trent's Last Case.]

Sometime in the year 1910 it occurred to me that it would be a good idea to write a detective story of a new sort.

The idea of writing any sort of detective story did not occur to so many people in those days as it occurs now. Since the time, during my school days, when Sherlock Holmes burst upon the world there had been a large enough output of detective fiction; but there was in 1910 nothing like the volume of it that is produced to-day, nor did it occupy, I think, any talents of the order of those now engaged in it. (p. 249)

Since the first appearance of Holmes in the *Strand* in 1891 he had been in unchallenged possession of the field: his imitators had stuck faithfully to their model without any approach to its excellence. As a schoolboy, and ever after, I delighted in it as much as anyone; the originality, and the power of good, plain story-telling, were irresistible. If the nature of the detective-story, as of other things, is to be found in its complete development, that was the Holmesian saga. Its very weaknesses were endearing. (pp. 249-50)

Two things about the stories, however, did not move my admiration. One was the exaggerated unreality of the character of Holmes, the educated Victorian who did not know that the earth revolved round the sun, had never heard of Thomas Carlyle, smoked shag, engaged in pistol-practice in the sitting-room, loved music, injected cocaine when things were dull, and so forth. These things were intended to make him more interesting, and no doubt they did so. Victorian fiction abounded in "rich characters", and Holmes was the most opulent of all; there was a demand for them. But as life went on, that sort of thing came to jar upon me. It does so still: I do not care about a detective, or any character in fiction, who has been made ostentatiously unlike life, ecentric and "peculiar", with the idea of making him interesting. He kills my own interest, usually, as soon as his antics begin. This is a matter of taste, about which not many people, perhaps, feel as I do. (pp. 250-51)

All the same, I did not like those absurdities. And another thing that troubled me was the extreme seriousness of Holmes, and the equal seriousness of his imitators. It is true that they were within the limits of a period when lightness of touch in important persons was not generally tolerated—a period which I most sincerely respect and revere; which it chafes me to see held up to ridicule; but to which I do not and did not belong. Such phases of taste overlap: the one which included me was beginning to like to see great men whole, or as nearly whole as might be. It knew that most men of genius had their lighter moments; that it was, almost, a quality of greatness to have such moments, or more than moments; that even Mr. Gladstone had manifested, at rare intervals, something that could only be described as a sense of humour. So it was that I found the austerity of Holmes and the rest a little wearisome. It should be possible, I thought, to write a detective story in which the detective was recognizable as a human being, and was not quite so much the "heavy" sleuth.

Whether it was possible for me was another question. I had never written a novel, or anything narrative beyond the shortest

of "sketches" for this periodical or that. I had never wanted to write a novel. But I wanted to write this one now, because I imagined, in my innocence, it would be good fun. In addition to that, as soon as the intention was formed I told myself that it would be a good thing to have another string to one's bow, journalism being what it was. Not that I expected much of a first novel. It must, I suppose, have occurred to me as a remote possibility that the book might be successful, but I certainly had not the smallest confidence in its success—there was no motive of that sort.

So I began to cast about for a plot that had not been used before. (pp. 251-52)

One day I drew up a list of the things absolutely necessary to an up-to-date detective story: a millionaire—murdered, of course; a police detective who fails where the gifted amateur succeeds; an apparently perfect alibi; some fussing about in a motor car or cars, with at least one incident in which the law of the land and the safety of human life were treated as entirely negligible by the quite sympathetic character at the driving-wheel. (p. 253)

Besides these indispensables there had, of course, to be a crew of regulation suspects, to include the victim's widow, his secretary, his wife's maid, his butler, and a person who had quarrelled openly with him.

I decided too, that there had better be a love-interest, because there was supposed to be a demand for this in a full-length novel. I made this decision with reluctance, because to me love-interest in novels of plot was very tiresome. Then it occurred to me that the dragging-in of love-interest by the neck and heels might tend to make the story sprawl; so with an eye to economy of effect I suggested to myself that the love-affair might centre in the suspected widow, and that the amateur detective might be the other party. This wore an air of such supreme absurdity that I thought it would be interesting to see if, by dint of writing, it could be made plausible.

It was not until I had gone a long way with the plot that the most pleasing notion of all came to me: the notion of making the hero's hard-won and obviously correct solution of the mystery turn out to be completely wrong. Why not show up the infallibility of the Holmesian method? The triumphantly incriminated suspect should prove to be innocent after all, and a cleverer fellow than the hero. I was overjoyed at this idea; but I have always had a feeling that if I had mentioned my plan to anyone qualified to give advise on such a matter, he would have been strongly against it. Detective-story fans, he would have said, do not want to be told that the detective hero has made an ass of himself. I thought so myself indeed; and this was another inducement to stick to my own idea, and see if the objections to it could not be, so to speak, written out of existence. In the result, it does not seem to have been generally noticed that ***Trent's Last Case*** is not so much a detective story as an exposure of detective stories. (pp. 253-54)

E. C. Bentley, "'Trent's Last Case'," in his Those Days *(by kind permission of Curtis Brown on behalf of the estate of E. C. Bentley), Constable & Co Ltd, 1940, pp. 249-61.*

I. L. BAKER (essay date 1956)

[*Baker's* E. C. Bentley: "Trent's Last Case" *examines the plot, style, and characterization of the classic detective novel. This study is principally composed of chapter-by-chapter plot outlines of Bentley's novel, with annotations explaining literary references, place names, allusions to current events of the time, and so on.*]

[***Trent's Last Case***] is often estimated to be the one detective story seriously worth considering as literature. We [note] . . . its remarkable plot and climax, its structural compactness and its deft characterisation: but there is more than this, over and above and within all these things, that singles it out among detective fiction, and that is its style, the distinctive manner in which Bentley has chosen to express his thoughts. It is this particularly that has gained the approbation of so many writers, and combines with other merits to produce so agreeable, readable and yet important a book.

It would, of course, be inappropriate to elevate E. C. Bentley into the ranks of the major novelists of his period: ***Trent's Last Case*** has no pretensions above the light, easily-digested type of fiction to be read solely for pleasure. There is no "social message" here, or subtle interplay of character. Yet, in its characterisation and setting it maintains its reaction to the traditional, the accepted, not only within novel-writing in general, but within the limited field of detective fiction itself. There are no lumps of descriptive detail introducing the characters and the scenes, and clogging the progress of the action. The atmosphere of a person or place is given briefly, in stages, without halting-places in which detail is piled upon detail, hampering the movement of the story, and confusing the impression intended. This was as new in detective fiction as it was in the general history of the novel, at least up to the time of Thomas Hardy (1840-1928). We [note] . . . the neat economical way in which the major characters are introduced, rather as one would see them in real life, making some immediate concentrated impression (Trent bouncing in upon Cupples, Mrs. Manderson on the cliff-verge, Marlowe's tired walk in the grounds of White Gables, etc.) and then slowly unfolding and developing in action. In the same way the setting and background of the story is skilfully suggested, and left to make its own impression: there is no building up of an over-charged atmosphere by vigorous word-painting, and the setting is all the fresher and sharper in consequence. (pp. 24-5)

The absence of "verbal mountains" and digressions, and the avoidance of irrelevant statements (other than deliberate red herrings, of course), which would detract from the general accuracy of the outline of the story, help to make Bentley's style clear. . . .

There are two minor blemishes, however, with regard to clarity and avoidance of ambiguity. In Ch. IV . . . , when Martin is talking to Trent about Manderson's drinking habits, he calls his master "a remarkably abstemious man": and yet he then details "a glass or two of wine at dinner, very rarely a little at luncheon, and from time to time a whisky and soda before going to bed". This hardly qualifies Manderson as abstemious; but this is, of course, a comparative matter. Later, in the same chapter, when he is asked about Manderson's habit of sitting fully exposed to view, Martin says, "But nobody could have seen him who had any business to be there", which is unhappily worded. These are minor blemishes, however. There is, otherwise, nothing in the way of immediate understanding of what you are meant to understand. (p. 26)

From what has already been said it must be clear that Bentley, with his legal training and long years of practising journalism, coupled with deep and wide reading, betrays a sensitivity in his diction, his handling of words: there is often an elegance there which gives pleasure apart from the subject-matter. It is