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The Complete Prose of T. S. Eliot: The Critical Edition

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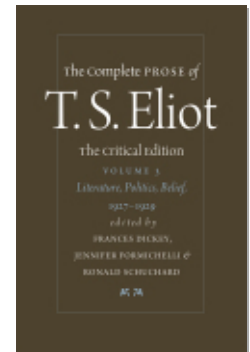
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An unsigned review of *The Greene Murder Case*,
by S. S. Van Dine

London: Benn, 1928. Pp. 319.¹

The Criterion: A Literary Review, 8 (Sept 1928) 174-75

The celebrated Mr. "Van Dine," about whose identity controversy rages in America, has produced a successor to *The Benson Murder Case* and *The Canary Murder Case*, which we have been considering for three months.² In some points of detail, Mr. Van Dine has improved. The eminent amateur detective, Philo Vance, has rubbed off a few of the rough edges of his movietone Oxford accent, though he still treats his present participle rather harshly. In this book the Bernard Berenson of the criminal world is up to his old tricks. It is a good detective novel. But – as we have already observed – Mr. Van Dine exhibits a tendency to over-elaboration which characterises American detective fiction. He is in grave danger of stereotype: his method is always to build up a strong case against half a dozen suspects at once; those who have read his two earlier books will immediately recognise the least likely suspect to be the culprit. In *The Benson Murder Case*, which we still think the best of the three, the author has an interesting thesis: namely, that when a murder is committed, it is possible to find several persons who have both motive and opportunity, so that argument from motive and opportunity is inconclusive. It is a pity that he has not found some equally interesting thesis for his later books.

The great weakness of the over-elaborate school is, that when you build up a very complicated plot, you are likely to descend to a very mechanical solution. This was particularly the fault of *The Canary Murder Case*: the crime is arranged by a piece of ingenious and improbable mechanics, rather than by human nature. On the other hand, the discovery, in that book, is done by entirely legitimate means, through the poker-game, which is perhaps Mr. Van Dine's greatest contribution to the art of detective fiction. In *The Greene Murder Case* he comes very near to surrendering to the pathological school of detective fiction. The villain of the piece just escapes the American psychopathic ward. As in the "Canary Case," and indeed in most of the American school of detective fiction following Anna Katharine

Green,³ the complication is so great that it has to be resolved by a mechanical trick. The trick in this book is much simpler than the trick in the “Canary Case,” but is equally doubtful.

Students of this type of fiction may be recommended to compare the work of Mr. Van Dine with that of Mr. Lynn Brock.⁴ To our mind, Mr. Van Dine’s hero is too clever, and Mr. Brock’s hero is too stupid; curiously enough, both authors have had, it seems, to over-complicate their plots, the one in order to justify his detective’s cleverness, and the other to justify his detective’s stupidity.

Mr. Van Dine remains, however, in the first rank of detective writers, a little lower than Mr. Freeman and Mr. Crofts, and a little higher than Mr. Brock and Mrs. Christie.⁵ Mr. Hulbert Footner’s genius is more for the Thriller than for the Detective.⁶

NOTES

1. Attributed to TSE by the editors as a continuation of his previous reviews of Van Dine’s *The Benson Murder Case* in the *Criterion* of June 1927 (3.105) and of *The Canary Murder Case* in the *Criterion* of Oct 1927 (3.270).

2. When Van Dine’s second novel featuring detective Philo Vance, *The Canary Murder Case* (1927), became an American best seller, his readers began a search for his true name and background, which was unmasked in 1928. Willard Huntington Wright was raised in California, attended Pomona College and Harvard, and became a literary journalist and editor of *The Smart Set* before he moved to New York in 1920, where he began studying and writing detective fiction.

3. Anna Katharine Green, author of *The Leavenworth Case* (1878), whose influential detective Ebenezer Gryce reappears in several of her detective novels, including *The Affair Next Door* (1897), *The Circular Study* (1900), and *The Mystery of the Hasty Arrow* (1917), before she concluded her career with *The Step on the Stair* (1923) (3.108, 3.601).

4. The detective-hero of Brock’s novels is Colonel Lysander Gore.

5. Agatha Christie (1890-1976) created the famous detective Hercule Poirot in her first detective novel, *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* (1920), followed by the creation of a detective couple, Tommy and Tuppence, in *The Secret Adversary* (1922). She returned to Poirot, who would appear in thirty-three of her sixty-six detective novels, in *Murder on the Links* (1923), and went on to become the best-selling mystery writer of her time.

6. Hulbert Footner (1879-1944), Canadian-American writer of adventure stories and crime fiction, created the female detective Rosika Storey, who appears in five of Footner’s novels, including *Madame Storey* (1926) and *The Velvet Hand* (1928).