Three Critics
Against Interpretation and Other Essays by Susan Sontag; The Hero with the Private Parts by Andrew Lytle; Time to Murder and Create: The Contemporary Novel in Crisis by John W. Aldridge
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THREE CRITICS*

It's the luck of the draw or else a review editor's rare foresight that pairs or pits against each other such well-nigh perfect foils as Susan Sontag and Andrew Lytle. Young mod femme terrible and aging and agrarian Southern gentleman, they stand incomparably polar, the radical left and the far right of contemporary criticism. Many of us uneasily pace the ground somewhere between them, alternately attracted to and repelled by each.

Luck or editorial foresight, however, carries only so far—John Aldridge refuses to be caught in this crossfire. Though his is in some respects an in-between position, we shall not find in his collection of pieces on contemporary novelists and the American novel, Time to Murder and Create, a synthesis of the dialectical extremes represented in Miss Sontag and Lytle. Aldridge sees contemporary culture and himself caught in another crossfire, on one side of which Andrew Lytle and Susan Sontag stand firmly allied. He fights a double war simultaneously, against those ancient and half-mythical antagonists, the highbrows and the middlebrows.

At least most of the time he fights them both. In refusing to be highbrow, however, he sometimes seems almost willing to be middlebrow. I see little value in these labels myself, but I will try to use them in describing his position since he does. The discipline of Aldridge's

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mind is clearly what he would call highbrow, but he has an aversion to the tone of most academic and literary-quarterly criticism, an aversion to what he sees primarily as pedantry and pretentiousness, to the calculated cultivation of the recherché, in which, he thinks, "the intellectuals" have a vested interest. On the whole he refuses to be drawn into close reading, and when he does, in a fine essay called "The Life of Gatsby," he half apologizes for it, fearful, apparently, that he is going to sound too highbrow.

He makes a speciality of what might be called the sociology of American literature. Ten years ago in his In Search of Heresy Aldridge pointed out (before it was generally understood) the great shift in the power structure of American literature that had taken place in the 'forties and early 'fifties, notably the movement of writers and critics into the colleges and universities, the rapid spread of modern critical orthodoxy among critics and professors, the conversion of scholarly journals into organs of criticism, the increasing control of literary reviews by academics. Fortified by David Riesman, Aldridge read the highbrow conformity he discerned in literature as a reflection of the fear of heresy rampant in the whole society in the era of McCarthy.

In Search of Heresy was a more important book than Time to Murder and Create, which relies on essentially the same analysis of contemporary culture. The highbrows, even more powerful than in the 'fifties, are almost as much of a blight, according to Aldridge; the American novel is only slightly less moribund than ten years ago. Aware that high claims are being made for a younger generation or two of American writers, he nonetheless makes only slight gestures towards demolishing certain growing reputations. On the whole he evades the issue by saying next to nothing about a number of critically significant "highbrow" writers. Sooner or later he must turn and take a long look at some of them.

Aldridge would probably see in both Susan Sontag and Andrew Lytle types of highbrow conformity. But the fact that they are such radically opposed types should console anyone fearful of cultural uniformitarianism in America. One of the few things they have in common is a passion for being systematic, and in this way they differ sharply from Aldridge, whose intellectual independence partly masks the fact that he has no strongly fortified critical position. Both Miss Sontag and Lytle in the collections of essays under consideration here let us know in no uncertain terms how literature (and art generally) for them relates to the fundamental questions—the nature of man,
history, society, the source of human values. The fact that Aldridge is largely silent on such matters does not make his feeling for literature more pure, only less serious. Where Miss Sontag and Lytle give us an aesthetic or a philosophy of literature, Aldridge gives us little more than the memories of his youthful responses to certain novels as the vague touchstones of good fiction.

Time to Murder and Create often deteriorates into a lament for the good old days of American fiction, the days of Fitzgerald, Hemingway and Faulkner. In his mid-forties now, Aldridge can’t forget the “shock of recognition” (he can’t forget Melville’s phrase either) that American novels gave him in his youth when, all unconscious, they loomed about him as archetypal summations of “collective cultural experience.” Reading them initiated him into the awareness of what it means to be living in the twentieth century. But today, he maintains, we know all too well what it means: our modernness is a cliché which the novelist can avoid or overcome, if at all, only through a hyper-sophistication which automatically limits his appeal, if not his vitality. The need to win the approval of the highbrow critics who are now the “official” custodians of culture is a further inhibition. The novelist before the Second World War, Aldridge believes, was luckier, because official culture in America was then middlebrow. This is not to imply, I assume, that there were not highbrows in the good old days, only that they were not numerous enough to distract the novelist from the general public. I take it also that Aldridge is not, though he sometimes seems to be, making the desire for a wide audience the criterion of middlebrow aspiration. And he is not in general labeling Hemingway, Fitzgerald or Faulkner—whatever he might do with Sinclair Lewis—middlebrow, though he sometimes seems to be.

A great weakness in Aldridge’s explanation appears as soon as one notices that allegedly highbrow novelists—Bellow, Nabokov, Baldwin, Malamud, Barth—are increasingly winning sizable audiences. But for Aldridge, the middlebrow reader’s acceptance today of a highbrow novel is a sign of supersalesmanship in the literary market place, of the middlebrow’s having been duped by the official culture into reading something that is not fundamentally relevant to his experience. It “is clearly one thing for a critic to write an essay extolling the virtues of, say, Saul Bellow or Bernard Malamud, and quite another for him to convince the reader that Bellow and Malamud really matter, that they speak really deeply to him. . . .” Such an attitude seems to underlie Aldridge’s brusque dismissal of Herzog
and his virtual or total silence on, to name the most obvious, Malamud, Baldwin, Ellison, Flannery O'Connor, Barth, Purdy, Hawkes, Donleavy, Pynchon, and Heller. Nor does he look abroad, to Nabokov, say (if we refuse him status as an American), or to the new French novelists.

The ground on which Aldridge stands tends to wash away. One has the suspicion that he simply dignifies what is illuminating to him personally by saying it speaks to collective experience. What is the collective cultural experience? He is not interested in social psychology or the political implications of literature, in the possibility of men and women being sufficiently liberated by discovering who they are through fiction that it will make some difference in their private or public behavior. And his failure to discuss so many writers leaves one with the feeling that in spite of certain disclaimers he is not willing to consider seriously the possibility that the current stage of our modern awareness demands a new shape and substance for the novel. He tends to settle for chances to run down writers who don't make it in the old way, who attempt to carry on, without major efforts at innovation, the tradition of the American novel established between 1900 and 1940 and who do not measure up to their distinguished predecessors. John O'Hara (the out-and-out middlebrow), William Styron, Mary McCarthy, John Updike are the choice victims. Aldridge is often perceptive about these writers; at the same time he is apt to be petulant, even spiteful, and reckless in making undocumented charges.

In his virtual despair, however, he does claim to see one bright hope—in Norman Mailer's reemergence as a novelist. But since he again refuses to go into detail, his fondness for An American Dream seems as arbitrary as the cold shoulder he gives Herzog. He pontificates briefly on the "seismographic sensitivity" of Mailer's style. He claims to find the novel enormously funny, but without showing in what the humor consists. One can as easily imagine Aldridge, consistent with a strategy he uses elsewhere, particularly on Styron, branding Mailer's athletic posturing a ludicrous aping of Hemingway. Instead he claims at last to feel the "shock of recognition," and he registers it in a prose full of high-voltage paradox, a prose which outdoes anything in the highbrow reviews that give him the heebie-jeebies. Mailer, he says, has tried to dramatize

the various ways a man may sin in order to be saved, consort with Satan in order to attain to God, become holy as well as whole by restoring the
primitive psychic circuits that enable him to live in harmony with himself and find his courage, . . . whether he ends by becoming saint or psychopath. He wrote, in short, a radically moral book about radically immoral subjects, a religious book that transcends the conventional limits of blasphemy to expose the struggle toward psychic redemption that is the daily warfare of our secret outlaw selves.

If that passage reveals anything, it is Aldridge himself thrashing about in the cliché into which his awareness of his modernity has trapped him. Susan Sontag never thrashes. She is outwardly composed, cool, tough-minded. It is inwardly that she looks to be turned on. Her modernness, not a lament for lost innocence, as Aldridge's is, takes experience for granted—and exploits it, seeks to extend it aesthetically. The "new sensibility" which she cultivates should probably be called post-modern, space-aged, psychedelic.

Against Interpretation is essentially a book on style, our need, especially at present, to feel style, to respond to works of art as style rather than as statement. The controversial "Notes on Camp," which appeared originally in Partisan Review, shows her interest in style screwed to the highest pitch—style for style's sake. Camp is a throwback to fin de siècle aestheticism. The "Notes" themselves "are for Oscar Wilde." Random examples of Camp include Zuleika Dobson, Tiffany lamps, drawings by Beardsley, Art Nouveau looked at in a certain way. Camp is "the modern dandyism," sole sanctuary for an aristocratic sensibility "in an age of mass culture"—not likely to appeal to John Aldridge.

Of contemporary culture in general Miss Sontag says, "Jewish moral seriousness and homosexual aestheticism and irony" are the "pioneering forces." And within this framework Camp taste aligns itself with the latter. A fondness for extravagance, theatricality, for art as sheer play, Camp is an effort to "dethrone the serious." Yet the serious is precisely what Miss Sontag cannot dethrone. She is serious about Camp, and as soon as her definition reaches the "anti-serious," she is forced to retreat into partial contradiction: "More precisely, Camp involves a new, more complex relation to 'the serious.' One can be serious about the frivolous, frivolous about the serious."

As the sense of Camp accrues significance and develops into an aesthetic concept, what started out as little more than a fad for certain old movies or a coterie amusement at outlandish styles becomes a logical or natural response to whatever is, to the way things are. "Camp proposes a comic vision of the world"—that is, apparently,
an ironic detachment which transforms the dissonances, heterogeneity and self-contradictoriness of experience into a spectacle of clashing styles. Miss Sontag wants this comedy “not bitter or polemical.” But can she have it that way? Can detachment get beyond the urge to interpret and the interest in “content” without ceasing to be ironic and becoming hysterical?

By her own admission Camp is a function of boredom and the “psychopathology of affluence.” Indeed one suspects a certain desperation behind the Camp attitude at any level, a sense of obvious traditional meanings being hard to come by. The close association, though not identification, between Camp and homosexuality adds to the suspicion. At any rate, the dependence of Camp on the awareness of flaw and failure, on disproportion between means and intention, makes it in part at least a sensitivity to the absence of meaning—which seems finally an inversion of the need for meaning itself. That Miss Sontag tends in “Notes on Camp” to obscure a bit more through contradiction than she illuminates through paradox may be a consequence of her own style, in which gravity, not buoyancy, is dominant. Elsewhere she gets into logical difficulty also, trying to insist on the value of style or form without reference to content. But this is not to say that one can’t sympathize with her effort to revitalize our sense of style.

Much of her book is a polemic “against interpretation,” that is against the compulsion in contemporary criticism to pin down, or perhaps more accurately to abstract, meaning from works of art. Though critics mouth the dogma of the inseparability of form and content, she says, their zeal for meaning, their eagerness to universalize tends to make them insensitive to style, form, structure, to the sensuous texture of a work. Too often a critic fixes the symbolic appropriateness of a detail before fully feeling a particular impression; the great danger of “interpretation” is the obliteration of the thing in itself as one tries to convert it into a sign of something larger or beyond. In reporting how Elia Kazan conceived of A Streetcar Named Desire she illustrates a reductionism towards which far too much contemporary criticism veers. To Kazan, “Stanley Kowalski represented the sensual and vengeful barbarism . . . engulfing our culture, while Blanche Du Bois was Western civilization, poetry. . . .” Miss Sontag comments, “Apparently were it to go on being a play about a handsome brute . . . and a faded mangy belle . . . it would not be manageable.”

Against Interpretation is not an outright rejection of meaning.
in art but a summons to an opening up of the senses and an expansion of consciousness. Her particular bête noire is anything that smacks of traditional realism in fiction, film or drama. Not that realism, as her essay on Georg Lukács shows, was not important in its day; but that day has passed. And what was perhaps the finest thing to come out of that tradition, the ability to present and probe character and consciousness deeply, is for her now the greatest obstacle to innovation. Psychological analysis she sees as an overabundance of obvious content. It provides an intensity of focus that makes identification with character too easy for the audience.

Miss Sontag insists on the need now for an art that fragments rather than integrates experience, that dares leave action and character in some sense partial, incomplete, unexplained, that detaches the audience from the subject, frustrates the flow of stock emotions and the desire to leap from pat comprehension of the particular to a sense of universal significance. Such is the rationale behind her interest in the new novel in France and the new wave in the French film. She obviously feels that the strategy of this kind of art, instead of giving a ready-made understanding of the parts of experience in relation to an idea of the whole, forces the audience into a sharper response to the feel of particulars. "What a work of art does is to make us see or comprehend something singular, not judge or generalize."

We do not get in her work simply an echo of D. H. Lawrence's fear of the hypertrophy of emotion. She is no enemy of mind. Lawrence she would probably find somewhat sentimental, moralistic, limiting. Her aesthetic is directed more toward sensation than emotion—witness her fondness for the theater of Artaud and for happenings, in which, she contends, it is the sight, touch, smell, sound of things that one is forced to notice. Her tough-mindedness is a relief and a challenge. But one wants constantly to fight her tendency to inflate her view. There is nothing fundamentally new in anything she says—except when she overstates. What most commands respect is the comprehensiveness of her mind, the ease with which she moves among the arts and from philosophy and religion to psychology and anthropology. But her tone is too presumptuously pioneering at times, as though no one before her had seen the limitations of realism or the shallowness of C. P. Snow's essay on the "two cultures." She does not, though she sometimes implies she does, offer a new critical method. She is at her best in an essay on Jean-Luc Godard's Vivre sa vie, where she not only talks extensively about how the film is put together but interprets, gives a meaning to the life which Godard
has, in her terminology, shown, proved, not analyzed. And she is most disappointing when, after discussing Peter Brook’s use of techniques derived from Artaud in directing *Marat/Sade*, she backs away from interpreting the play on the trumped-up excuse that Peter Weiss has used ideas in a new way—“as décor, props, sensuous material.” What she sometimes seems to be urging is that we turn off half our mind or our experience when we read a novel or see a play or a film, in order to concentrate on it with the other half.

It is not altogether unreluctantly then that one turns to the unabashed interpretations in many of the essays in Andrew Lytle’s *The Hero with the Private Parts*. Here are repeated instances of modern academic criticism at its best, patient, respectful, precise, intricate and yet dramatic analyses which show how, through the working of the vital principles of a piece of fiction, usually the controlling image or point of view, “meaning” radiates through its whole system. There is an engaging intelligence working at every level in the book, from the deliberately chosen phrase that lights up a work under scrutiny without creating a distracting glare to the articulation of the moral and religious framework which reinforces Lytle’s critical sensibility.

He is surely one of the most deft expositors of the James-Lubbock approach to fiction. He also brings to bear on the novel a large historical awareness, which seeks out connections between central and enveloping actions, private conflict and social stress. The war in *War and Peace*, he reminds us, is ultimately one between two social attitudes, and, alive in Pierre Bezuhov, it gives agonized shape to his thought and action throughout the book. In *Madame Bovary* Lytle makes Emma’s undoing an inevitable consequence of a society in which, since traditional institutions have eroded, parents, priests, noblemen and others presumed to be in authority have only blurred conceptions of their proper social roles.

Note, however, how close we are already to the sort of reading of which Susan Sontag complains in instancing Kazan on Kowalski and Blanche. Lytle earns his right to see that big lumbering bear Bezuhov as a personification of Russia by giving a detailed demonstration of his symbolic function that does not do great violence to his individuality. But one cannot read far in Lytle without being confirmed in the sense that the point Miss Sontag is making against interpretation has a good deal of validity. His essay on Crane’s “The Open Boat,” for instance, is hardly launched before each of its four characters turns into “an intrinsic part of man”: the captain is “sovereignty”; “the man of appetite is a cook”; the oiler is man in action,
the doer; the correspondent is the knower. Somehow also the four aspects of man relate to earth, air, fire and water. The ingenuity of this interpretation betrays the simplicity of Crane's story. The oiler's heroism is given a stress that grates against the indistinguishability of character that one feels to be deliberate in certain parts of the story. While it is surely a service to rescue "The Open Boat" from crude deterministic readings, the suggestion that the knowledge of life and death achieved by the end of what Lytle calls "A Pagan Tale" is virtually an initiation into the Christian mystery stretches meaning close to the breaking point.

A pallid sameness settles over Lytle's criticism. He is fond of saying that a writer has only one story to tell, and what he may mean is that all writers have nothing more than versions of one story to tell. In his interpretations societies are always, if not inwardly deteriorating, at least facing hostile, subversive pressure from the outside. Authority is weakening, identity for the individual is hard to come by, man's natural growth is being stunted or perverted. This vision is close enough to that frequently projected in fiction in the last century or so—in the novels which so impressed the young John Aldridge, for instance—that much of the time one is almost unaware of what may in fact be minor distortions developing in Lytle's interpretations. Perhaps, after all, he is right in lifting responsibility for her fate so completely off the shoulders of Emma Bovary herself or in seeing freemasonry as a corrupting alien influence that Bezuhov must entirely live down by the end, when he is reconciled to the spirit of Mother Russia. But one comes to feel that Lytle's anti-liberal, Christian bias controls his sense of what the novel is or should be, that its very form, particularly in its post-Jamesian complexity, is, for him, an almost divinely instituted vehicle for conveying a standardized view of the human condition.

Lytle of course was one of the contributors in 1930 to the manifesto of Southern agrarianism, I'll Take My Stand, and his pessimistic theory of history makes the well-known connection between the new criticism and conservatism in politics seem almost inevitable. He starts with our temptation in the holocaust of the twentieth century to think the worst of ourselves. He sees us as not fit to govern ourselves. Our only salvation, he insists, lies in submission to a social order which derives its authority from God. Man was much better off seven or eight centuries ago, before the concept of station gave way. His present plight is a consequence of the dispersion of what Henry Adams called medieval unity or, in the Spenglerianism favored
by Lytle, of the advent of Faustian man. Liberal political ideas, science, the machine, industry are all instruments of destruction. We live in a wasteland of moral relativism. And always it is worse in the city than in the country.

Lytle maintains his theory of history with such dogged consistency that I confess to having wondered momentarily in the most reactionary passages of The Hero with the Private Parts whether my own radical political hope had not got everything fantastically reversed. I was almost ready to accept the harmony of the middle ages as actuality rather than as largely a myth concealing exploitation and oppression. "Freedom," Lytle argues, with an almost diabolical persuasiveness, is something "history has shown no man can stand." But somehow I could never quite rid myself of the naive idea that it is the assumption that he can regulate the lives of other human beings that history shows no man can stand.

The suspicion will not down that Lytle's elaborate theory of history exists fundamentally to justify a radically unreconstructed view of the Southern past. The South, not surprisingly, looms large in the book. He writes not only of several Southern novelists, including himself, but also of John C. Calhoun and Robert E. Lee, and pays brief birthday tributes to Allen Tate and John Crowe Ransom. It is all very touching. The old South emerges apotheosized as one of the last traditional God-fearing societies of Western civilization, destroyed by Northern commercial and industrial encroachment. The view harks back to old John Taylor's ranting against John Adams and to Calhoun's and George Fitzhugh's glowing justifications of slavery as not simply a necessary evil but as the sure foundation of a benevolent, humane and civilized society. What is completely missing in Lytle is any recognition of the South's responsibility for its own tragic history. Even the corroding puritanism in Southern religion is seen as an alien force, foreign to what was essentially a semi-feudal hierarchy. Within the system each, to parody Faulkner, had his ordered place, under the Christian plantation-owner, who fulfilled his obligation to God and his subordinates through a code of noblesse oblige—and doubtless read the novels of Walter Scott. Difficulty came solely from the outside, as it did later in Reconstruction (until, happily, the Ku Klux Klan organized), and still later in the racial tensions of the South in the twentieth century, which are seen to stem from the North's having made the Southern white man uneasy about the Negro, "overly sensitive to his racial distinction."

But another Southerner, Mark Twain, claimed that Walter Scott...
caused the Civil War. One thinks of the trigger-happy Grangerfords, Shepherdsons and Sherburns in *Huckleberry Finn*. And one remembers the effect of Cavalier pride on Thomas Sutpen in *Absalom!* *Absalom!* What is the truth about the old South? Are fictional representations of it as a powder keg of violence any more distorted than Lytle’s pastoral vision? Faulkner comes through in Lytle as more of a Southern agrarian than I believe he was, even in the latter half of his career. Lytle’s discussion of strengths and weaknesses in *A Fable*, *The Town* and *Intruder in the Dust* is always provocative, especially since his own Christian belief makes him sensitive to the religious implications in the Nobel Prize Speech doctrine of man’s endurance and prevalence. But is it sound interpretation, or special pleading, to say that *Intruder in the Dust* has nothing to do with freedom? Not that we should quarrel with Lytle’s making the theme manhood, except insofar as he implies that becoming a man is not somehow a liberation. In manhood, in the courage and humility of “The Man,” he claims to see “the realizable image for society.” But is the exercise of manly authority according to a traditional code, for all the list of chivalrous virtues which Lytle, like Faulkner, likes to attach to it, something we can afford to realize—given the tendency of power to corrupt? Faulkner, I think, was not so sure as Lytle, else Ike McCaslin might not have repudiated an ancestral inheritance in “The Bear”—“Sam Fathers set me free.”

One recoils again “against interpretation” and moves back towards Susan Sontag, if only out of a desire to avoid an aesthetic which condemns us eternally to the same old story in all high art. It is time, as she says, for serious efforts to work out the “consequences of atheism for reflective thought and personal morality.” There may be a good deal of “in” faddism in Miss Sontag. She is not convincing when she argues that Camp is a sensibility with democratic implications because it leads to a certain appreciation of popular culture. Norman O. Brown, whom she respects, may not lead us to a more viable and satisfying concept of manhood than Lytle’s, or Marshall McLuhan finally give us more than another cliché of what it is to be modern—rather than medieval. But Miss Sontag’s interest in Brown and McLuhan is a commitment to the open mind, to the possibility of art and science consorting with each other without the former’s being destroyed.

It would be easy, for John Aldridge perhaps, to say a plague on the houses of both Susan Sontag and Andrew Lytle. But in the end, I think, we must hold on to two opposed ideas simultaneously. Most
of us will say yes to interpretation, because without it we can do no more, whatever we call it, than wallow in sensation and emotion. And some will know when to say no to it lest we trap ourselves in the stereotypes of thought, emotion and feeling that our greatest art, literature, and criticism have bequeathed us.

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