

JML: I want to begin by talking about saints. In most religions, they play a tremendous role. They intercede for lesser humans, they give witness to God's greatness, they are models for humanity through their ability to withstand suffering. Indeed, some of their suffering is self-imposed. Do you see saints in the same way as the traditional religions do?

NM: You reach me on my weak point. I don't know that I have much to say on the subject. It does make sense to me that there would be certain people whom God would feel close to.

Obviously, the subtext to such a remark is that God does not feel equally near to each one of us. I would doubt that He does. After all, the devil is always doing his best to obfuscate the divine venture, to muddy God's vision of us. Most human beings are by now a complex mixture of good and evil. They're devil-infested, they're God-illuminated. Most of us are both and so it's not easy to

reach us. What characterizes humanity today is that very few of us ever get a message directly from God or the devil. (Of course, many hysterics receive several messages a day.) Most of us, however, exist with a subtle smudge on our senses. We live in a complex and contradictory environment—sensually speaking, theologically speaking, spiritually speaking, we're not as near to ultimates as we may have been a few centuries ago.

Now there are people who succeed, one way or another, of divesting themselves of most of the devil. It's hard for me to believe, however, that a saint can exist with nothing of the Satanic still residing in him or her. I have to assume that saints are relatively pure (at least after they have scourged themselves). The notion that they are absolutely pure—well, given my temperament, I find that concept near to offensive. It begs too many questions. It makes everything too easy at first, and then it makes theistic reasoning impossible. Because if a saint is perfect, why the hell do they fail so often? Does the devil overtake them? Or—let me

advance an essentially medieval argument—is the saint so good that the devil has to use extraordinary and exhausting efforts to defeat him or her, and so the saint serves God's purpose by tiring the devil? Thereby, the saint is happy too.

JML: But all saints are not defeated.

NM: Give me an example of some triumphant ones.

JML: Saint Peter.

NM: Saint Peter was a mess! He deserted Christ three times.

JML: But then he redeemed himself and started Christianity.

NM: Yes, and Christianity may still be laboring under the fact that it was Peter—a three-time betrayer—who commenced it. I won't say that people can't repent, that they can't restore their spirit back to something finer, but nonetheless renegades have to remain under suspicion.

JML: That, in a way, brings me to my next question. Your god and your devil are limited, I assume—

NM: Not limited but finite. Certainly not infinite.

JML: I assume that human perfection is truly impossible for you, as you just said. If there were a human being who was all-good, she or he would be better than God. And if we found an absolutely perfect human being, your theology would be hard-pressed to account for that person.

NM: I don't think I'm in any danger of having my theology, such as it is, overthrown by that premise. Of course, there will never be a perfect human being. It's not in the range of our thinking. I'm going so far as to say there's no such thing as a perfect divinity. The nature of the universe is provisional, existential, certainly not finally determined. That is at the core of everything I present here. The divine future is as open as our own.

JML: Ergo, there can never be a perfect human being.

NM: We don't need reasoning to justify that conclusion.

JML: I can admit that Saint Peter was not perfect. But think of St. Francis of Assisi. . .

NM: Yes, he's perfect in a beautiful way that took care of a great many animals, and thereby brought us a little more into sympathy with creatures who often feel more life than ourselves, but I don't know that he improved human nature particularly, not even by his fine example. I'm asking, rather, about the kind of saints who are trying to change human nature, and almost always end up as martyrs. Indeed, the way they become saints is that they were martyrs first.

JML: The one way we know a saint is a saint, at least in Christianity, is that they were martyred. St. Steven was martyred, St. Sebastian was martyred. . .

But you mentioned animals. To shift for a moment: how far down does the chain of being—or, if you will—the war between god and the devil manifest itself?

NM: I have no idea.

JML: You said that dogs have souls.

NM: Yes.

JML: Then I assume both sides have enlisted them. What about the other animals? Are you ready to say that some are on God's side? Are the eagles and the doves? The vultures and the snakes?

NM: For me to speak with authority on these matters is comic. I would rely rather on the sort of instinctive verdicts that humans come up with after centuries of dealing with certain problems. For instance, my belief in the existence of God and the devil comes to a good extent from the fact that the majority of people, through all of recorded time, have believed in both evil spirits and good ones and, finally, in a god and a devil as well as their angels and demons. If the majority believe that, one has to pay a certain attention. One can't get so puffed up with our modern egotism that we scorn all prevailing human sentiments.

All right then. By that rule of thumb, I might say dogs tend to be closer to God than cats. Dogs have loyalty, they have affection, they exhibit the need to love, whereas cats strike me often as creatures of the devil. Now, mind you—they were all

created by God. It's just that the devil may have preempted some of those creations more successfully than others.

JML: Snakes and crocodiles and. . .

NM: It's beyond me. I'm an ignorant man concerning animals. If I knew more about their positive functions, I could talk about snakes and crocodiles, but I confess to my incompetence when it comes to delineating the positive functions of toads, rats, cockroaches, lice, or what-have-you.

JML: Are there parts of existence in your view that are unclaimed by either side? I'm thinking of microbes, uninhabited planets, the bottom of the Pacific Ocean, neutral territory, so to speak, that God and the devil have not contested. Or is everything polarized?

NM: I'd say it's more a matter of divine investment in part and in full. In other words, I keep going back to the notion that God is not all-powerful but the Creator. So in the course of evolving certain creatures, their future possibilities were directly interesting to God, were pursued further. Other elements may have been tried

as interesting possibilities for the future. And so, very often, they live relatively unchanged for millennia, for aeons. When we come to such matters as bacteria, where my knowledge is close to a blank slate, I would venture the guess that these may have been virtually passive experiments by God. Yes, I made it, they are Mine, but they do not arouse My first interest! Or, does the devil dip his toe into the water to churn up some particularly evil bacteria? Counter to that, I have to add that I hardly subscribe to the modern notion that all disease is evil, and is to be eradicated at all cost, so that we can all live for centuries, populate the globe with ten trillion people, and set up shuttles to more cities on Mars, Venus, et al. Life and death, I will repeat, do have an intimate relation to each other. Death may be as great a test and as great an adventure as life. Just as we cannot bear to think of an existence where there is always daylight and never night, so I can't comprehend life without death and consequent rebirth for some of us. I do think that all, or most of us, or some of us, do come back again, go in and come out.

I will say that I don't have the remotest clue what we may become in our next existence. It's possible, it's perfectly possible, that some or all of us have to descend to the bacteriological level and return from there. My guess is it's not that elaborate a chain of reincarnation for that would require a vastly more complex universe in the after-life than in our own. I would rather assume there's a purpose to everything, including the agents that tend to infect us and kill us. Not a perfect purpose, mind you, but an ongoing one. It may be there are agents of death with which God experiments as fully (for their effects on spirit) as with the development of human and animal life. In that sense, life and death are counterparts of the same ongoing existence.

JML: You've talked a lot about the moment of death and the state of mind one is in at the moment of death—this follows, I think from what you just said. Peace of mind, I think, is important to many religions—peace of mind at death, none more so than Catholicism. Which actually has a sacrament called Extreme

Unction, now called "Sacrament of the Sick," which was created by the Church to give to people at the moment of death.

NM: How did the Church arrive at this confidence in its power?

JML: Well, over millennia, the Church created seven sacraments.

And the last one is Extreme Unction. I can't tell you which Father of the Church came up with the theology of it, but there is a sense of the Church reaching out to the individual at the moment of death and applying all of its powers to giving that person peace of mind as they passed over.

NM: Or, at least, giving them a belief in peace of mind. . .

JML: From the Church's point of view, Extreme Unction works—and I've seen people receive it—and you know, it does give them tremendous peace of mind.

NM: I can believe it's effective for many. Certainly for devout Catholics, it would be. Let me tell you a small story about a dear friend of mine, Eddie Bonetti, who was dying of cancer. I spoke to

him a day before he went. He was a marvelous fellow and you'll see from the conversation what I thought about him.

We were talking on the phone and he knew death was very close. At a given moment, I said to him, "Eddie, are you scared?" He said, "Yeah, Norman, I am."

I said, "Eddie, it seems to me you have less reason to be afraid than anyone I know. Because you're the loyalest guy I've ever met. You never turned your back on a friend, no matter how much it cost you. I really can't believe that something bad is waiting for you."

He said, "You really believe that, Norman?"

I said, "I think so, I really do." It was true. Some of his friends were pretty sorry guys, but he never deserted them.

The woman he was living with at the time told me he did die later that day with a smile. Which cheered me, because I loved the guy and if I was any use to him then, well, I'm tempted, naturally, to hope that my words had a little to do with his peace.

So, yes, I can believe that Extreme Unction might be all-soothing for some. I will say I would think it's a human creation rather than a divine fact. There were no miracles announcing it, no revelation from God. This was a human attempt, if you will, to understand how God's mind works. Now it was brought into being as a sacrament, which is to say it had powerful backing, huge culture, much tradition, many decisions, synods debating over it, coming up with their sacraments one by one, developing them, using them, keeping the ones that worked best.

So, all right, yes, I can believe Extreme Unction is there for a devout Catholic. It might not work for someone like myself. If someone came in and said, "You're going to die in peace," I'd probably say, "Let me go. If you don't mind, I'll fine-tune my own end—you don't need to do it for me."

Certain theologians would say, "Well, this is vanity. This is precisely why you're not going to have a good end." And my feeling is, "Hey, pal, it's open. None of us know. It doesn't matter

how much tradition is behind it. Tradition suggests there may well be something powerful behind it, but can hardly assert it. Certainly not for every human case."

JML: Why is the state of mind at death so very important to you?

Everybody has a bad day. You could happen to have a bad day on the day you die.

NM: No, no—whenever you have a bad day, there's a lot of reason for the bad day. I can give you 20 causes for an ugly hour. Some are serious, some are passing. But, no, I won't let you hide behind the notion of a bad day.

JML: But there are also days when we have false euphoria. We can feel good for no accountable reason and then the next day, say, "Why did I feel so good? I still have all these problems!"

NM: Whenever we have an emotion we can't account for, good or bad, I expect that the root is karmic. That may be the only visitation we receive from previous lives. By the laws of the game, which may well be basic and necessary, we can't know who we

were and where we were in previous lives. Nonetheless, intense and unaccountable emotions can come from one's karmic past.

But I'm not answering your question. I think at the moment we die, we are the sum of all the good and bad we've done, all the courage and cowardice we've exercised. And so, for example, if we die with a desire to be reborn, I think it means a great deal to God. If you will, it's almost like we reach into a litter to select a pup, and the one who catches our eye, we choose to take home. Using that crude analogy, I think if we die—Eliot's wonderful line, "not with a bang but a whimper"—which parenthetically obsessed Eliot. Eliot's writing is so often based on how we meet our death. If you approach his poetry with that in mind, *The Wasteland* becomes a study of people who don't have a clue how to perish. And yet it is so important to be ready. After all, that is the one situation we can't simulate, can't preempt. We can pretend to a huge number of emotions in our lives, we may well spend three-quarters of our lives acting, being what we are not. I would go so far as to say that

one of the reasons people get married is so they can be themselves just a bit. They don't have to present a face to the world. People who live alone are always so obliged once they leave their room. They have to depend so much upon the opinion of others.

So, I would say that at the moment when one is close to death, that is, if one knows one's going to die, there can be a desire for another life, or a yearning toward peace or—and this is the worst condition—a wish to pass away in stupor. The largest urge of the soul becomes, "I don't want to feel pain, let me feel nothing. I will accept nothingness." These are all choices, I would say.

And really, suppose you're on high, looking people over, wondering which ones you'll refashion. Suppose there's a particular human being God is most interested in, but at the last moment that person is pleading for stupor. God says, "Do I really want to go through this again? This person is, finally, a great disappointment."

You see, I believe our final judgment in this life is given by the form of our rebirth. I believe we've spoken of this before. The only divine judgment we receive is our placement in the next life. Often the decision may be, "No. No need for that one to be reborn. Off the board." True death. End of existence. So if you have no desire to live again, that could be determinative.

JML: I want to explore this more. A nurse told me this recently, a nurse who was a hospice nurse, who cared for the dying, three times a week she went through this, and she had great experience—told me that the end, often, because people were taking drugs, they'd be on morphine to cut the pain, and their personality, as she put it, "dissolves." That they were live, they were functioning, but their soul was already gone. And so, for them, the death was before they died—the body was still breathing, the automatic systems were working but—but indeed, the people I have seen die, they revert to powerful impulses, powerful atavistic impulses. The desire to keep oneself clean—they get on the toilet

when they're dying. The desire to remember one's mother or grandmother. Or when someone touches you, the desire to reach out—afraid you're going to be violated when you're lying on your bed. And I've seen that, the few deaths I've seen.

So people don't ordinarily die in moments of clarity like Eddie Bonetti, presumably thinking happy thoughts, ready to die and ready to choose a new life. A lot of time when they die, they don't know who they are.

NM: I can't answer that. The real question is when do you die spiritually? You can pass away spiritually an hour, a day, a month or five years before your death. That may be when the question of rebirth is considered and decided. I think as a harsh, practical matter, the closer your soul can remain intact up to the extinction of your body, the finer candidate you are for reincarnation. That's just my notion.

JML: So risky. . . You mean someone who really wants to be reborn but goes into a coma loses their shot?

NM: Look, the soul can fight the body right down to the very end. The soul can say, "all right, I don't feel anything in my legs any more. Nothing in my fingers. I can't find my thoughts, but I know what I want. That way is more life. I want to be reborn." Or, to the contrary, the soul can feel it isn't worth it. "Let the body have its day. I've abused this body all my life, it's now demanding a cruel payment and I'm bankrupt. . ."

But I do think that the soul—taking this intelligence from your lady at the hospice—if the soul leaves a week or two before the body, I think, speaking in terms of the transmigration of souls, it could make for a complex travel schedule. You know, I have this feeling—so many talk about death as a vision: There's this wonderful white light, and relatives come out to meet you. I'm a touch dubious about that. For some people, yes. They were close to their relatives and their relatives do come out.

But there's an awful lot of spirit travel involved. The logistics of the hereafter interest me because God's energies, as I

see it, are immense but, to repeat, not infinite. So there are all sorts of procedures to be followed after you die. Economic procedures, if you will, involving the energies available to the Hereafter. It may be much more complex and less adaptable than we assume. The more flaming religions, the ones that promise everything in the afterworld, bring out my cynicism (which I consider my shield against wishful thinking). Often, I expect, in the immediate hours or days after our death there can be long waits. You may hang around in a vast hall—somewhat like the first day in the Army, when nobody knew what to do with you and you were waiting to get assigned to some sort of temporary training platoon. We can talk about limbo a little later on if you wish. Limbo may be an absolutely realistic station for most people when they die. That is, they hang around for quite a while.

JML: Limbo can be for years.

NM: Well, I don't know. In the Catholic religion, there could be an eternity to limbo, but I think it could also be a matter of divine

bureaucratic—dare I say it?—mismanagement. Because bureaucratic mismanagement on earth—I don't know that we have to assume all that these wasteful circles are gone in the Hereafter. I don't think angels are perfect any more than I believe demons are totally evil. I think the rarest condition in existence is absolute purity.

If God is a Creator, then God cannot be absolutely pure because creation consists in part of improving upon one's errors, and offering less purchase to one's vices.

JML: What about people—we've all heard about people who die after living lives of greed and misery, they're rotten people, detestable in every way, but at the last minute, the last few weeks, they call in the priest, they get a seraphic smile on their face, they have money, perhaps, they're surrounded by servants, and they go off into the Hereafter feeling very good about themselves.

Deluded, perhaps, about their ultimate worth, but nonetheless,

smiling, saying their prayers. They haven't gone to a church or done anything decent—

NM: Well, you're creating an imaginary person. . .

JML: There are people like that who die happy after living a miserable life.

NM: Who says they died happy? They could be acting right until the end.

JML: That's the moment you said you don't act.

NM: No. No. I said people who are serious about their death don't act. They may be acting for others, but not before eternity.

I'll give you an explanation why a truly rotten person can die happy, which is they were so rotten in their previous existence, the life before this one, that this life, bad as it was, proved to be a spiritual improvement over the previous one. They die happy because they feel, everything considered, considering how bad were their beginnings, and how absolutely loathesome the initial impulses they were born with, that they have gotten better under

the circumstances. We all know people who were total pricks for most of their lives but mellow a little at the end.

JML: But you said all the good and evil in one's life is summed up in death. I'm thinking of those who are miserable people for the first 95% of their lives and then they're sweet old people at the end—doesn't seem very just that they should have a happy death. You'd think somehow they should have a miserable death. Where's the fairness in things?

NM: I think you're speaking too hypothetically. Speculations of the sort I go in for make me most uneasy when others indulge themselves. I mean, this person you're talking about—as a novelist I find him impossible to conceive in my head. People who are rotten all their lives rarely end up sweet at the end. If they do—there is such a thing as truly evil and ugly impulses wearing out and burning out. Just as good people sour, ugly people can die in a more benign state. They've used up the ugliness in themselves.

They've been horrible, and maybe they feel a bit of contrition at the end. Your religion is based on that.

JML: Absolutely.

NM: Between the stirrup and the ground. I've always found it excessively sentimental and too easy: be evil all your life and as you're falling from the horse, before your head is knocked off your body—

JML: Say a perfect Act of Contrition!

NM: Yes! I've always found that extreme. And a little convenient. The Catholic Church is not only a study in immense human wisdom, but a compendium of applied skill at maneuvering uncomfortable thoughts around the tightest corners.

JML: It's thought of almost everything. It has an answer for almost everything, every issue.

You spoke a little bit about limbo but I don't recall that you said much about purgatory—as an idea, as a place, as a metaphor.

Of course, it's a wonderful metaphor, we all use it. What is your idea of purgatory as a metaphor?

NM: Well, as a metaphor—tell me, purgatory is a temporary station?

JML: It may last for a millennia, but it's temporary.

NM: I confess I don't begin to know these concepts well. Does limbo have any relation to purgatory?

JML: No. Limbo is the place for those people on whom God can't make a judgment. They died before they were baptized.

NM: Absolutely meaningless and silly. When you get into that. . .

JML: I agree. The Church doesn't even talk about limbo any more. They've almost dropped it as a concept. But purgatory. . .

NM: Now purgatory. . .yes.

JML: Purgatory is not endless. There is an end to your suffering. The amount of time you're there and what kind of suffering you have, according to the Catholic Church, would depend on what your crimes were.

NM: I see purgatory in altogether different terms. The notion that if you suffer long enough you'll purge yourself—I don't see any reason to have that in the Hereafter. I would suggest instead that being reborn takes care of purgatory. For some people, life is, indeed, purgatory. For a few people, life is heaven—they're happy 90% of the time. For some people, life is hell. I don't think we need these other structures. I think we pay our debts through our reincarnations. That makes much more sense to me than these immensely wasteful places called heaven and hell where nobody does anything, where nothing's brought back into the divine economy, people are just marking time.

I see God, if you will, as being Faustian, aiming to go further. God is not satisfied with His or Her creation, God wants it all to become better. Therefore, wasteful procedure is anathema to God. So, I do see heaven, purgatory and hell, therefore, as wasteful procedures. Who can speak interestingly of heaven, after all? Shaw made the best single attempt and decided heaven was boring.

And there is always the uneasy little feeling that people s have that it could be like Club Med, or a gated community in Florida.

Whereas on earth, we do experience heaven. Maybe it is only for three, or four times in a long life, maybe for a minute, no more, but we know what heaven is. There's a kind of luminousness to the joy. Most of us, unfortunately, come closest to heaven through drugs. But, all right—we know what it is.

We know what hell is. Hell can be as simple as having a bad case of gout. Or a screamer of a drug trip.

JML: There's conscience. . .

NM: Purgatory, for me, is a sense of temporary but immense living conflict between one's temptations and one's responsibility. When we feel dread, we're not that far from purgatory. We feel something very important could be taking place in our soul but we don't know what, and we're full of fear of taking the step we now believe is demanded of us. Most men meet purgatory in terms of their personal courage. If they're afraid—if they're afraid of

playing football, putting on the pads and going out to play can be purgatory. Boxing can be purgatory. Skiing, if the trail is steep and narrow, and the mogals are formidable, can certainly reduce you. Bungee-jumping can be purgatory—brief but intense. Men—now women, are beginning to search for that purgatory as well. It used to be that women's purgatory was related to the terrors of childbirth. After all, in the Middle Ages, there was one chance in ten a woman would die in childbirth. That was a true terror. One had to face ultimates to have a child.

JML: Limbo and purgatory came about, if I'm remembering correctly, with notions of heaven and hell borrowed from other religions. Then the structure of the church became more complex and people asked questions. What if you've been bad but not so bad you should be condemned to eternal hellfire—you've only been sort of bad—and the Church said, "you're right, we have a place for those people where they have modest suffering." Then people said, "what about people outside the Church? We've been

told they're condemned but what if they haven't done anything evil? They died at 3 years old—a wonderful little child but never baptized. . . ." The Church said, "we have a place for them too." So the Church was trying to create—I'm sure they would have created another place if they'd had to. But ultimately, the Church began to see the folly of limbo—what a ridiculous idea for people to live in a big empty space forever and no positive pain but no positive joy even if the Baltimore Catechism did say "perfect natural happiness." No beatific vision but otherwise highly endurable.

We talked about saints but I never got to my question about demons. I remember you told me some time ago you had an encounter with a demon. Or a succubus or—whatever you want to call it, right here in a room you rented for a week one winter on Commercial Street in Provincetown. Would it be worthwhile to say anything about that experience?

NM: I don't know, Mike, it takes too long to tell and there's no real point. I can speak of succubi and incubi in the abstract sense.

I think they would be instruments of the devil, and most useful. I only felt such a presence once in my life and it seemed to come out of nowhere, which is why I don't rush to talk about it because I don't understand why it was there. But I really did feel through part of a night as if there were some intangible creature fastened to my chest. I do have a better story about a poetess named Mina Loy. Something like seventy or seventy-five years ago, she was in a small hotel on the Left Bank in Paris and one night in her room, she felt this hideous oppression, this monstrous, intangible creature which yet seemed most alive and hideously fastened to her chest. She lived in horror through the night and was wholly wretched in the morning; she went downstairs to drink some coffee on the terrace of this little hotel she was staying at, just across the street from the Seine. Alastair Crowley, the famous and notorious magician, was there, a table or two away, and was talking about a man he detested who was also staying at the hotel. And Crowley said, "You know, last night I sent an incubus to invade him, yet I

saw him this morning and he looked perfectly all right. I don't understand it." Mina Loy's comment was, "Let no one say Alastair Crowley has no powers. It's just that they're misdirected."

The story is amusing but it also uses up my capacity to talk intelligently about incubi and succubi. I would just assume they're tools of the devils and used rarely. It's possible God might employ them also to scare the very life out of certain people whom God feels can use some shaking-up.

If you're sailing through seas you hardly comprehend, you tend to hold to the few things you know about sailing. So, here, I'm ready to drop my sails. These are confusing and uncharted waters for me.

JML: Let me shift then to talk about wealth and poverty. I've listened to the last interview we did and you never addressed this at all.

NM: Wealth and poverty?

JML: Wealth and poverty. Are they predetermined by God as karmic agents? How much of wealth and poverty is a result of what God gives you when you're born and how much comes from the accidents of the economic jungle?

NM: The poor believe they're going to be rewarded in the next life. The wealthy also believe—a good many of them at any rate—that they're going to be rewarded in the next life. The Egyptians, for example, believed you had no chance whatsoever in the hereafter unless you were truly wealthy. You had to be buried in such a way that you were well-equipped to travel through the Underworld. The Egyptians believed that when you died you had to pass through the Underworld in order to reach their heaven, the Elysian fields. And for that you needed all sorts of protection. Priests had to pray for you, amulets were sewn onto your burial garments, you also needed daily prayers said by your relatives, you needed a tomb that would protect you from evil spirits when you needed rest—you would go out to explore the Underworld, and

then you'd come back to your tomb where your spirit entered again into your embalmed mummy which rested, of course, in your highly decorated casket. After some rest, you'd travel out into the Underworld again. Finally, you made it through. Past lakes of fire and horrible monsters. Sometimes! Sometimes, you didn't. Rich Egyptians used to have a prayer: "Oh, Amon, do not let me die a second time in the Land of the Dead." The Egyptians believed that the second death was final. The first was provisional. If you were able to pass through the Underworld into the Elysian fields, you could live forever. So, for them, wealth was crucial. A poor man without the protection of priests, amulets, and a tomb had no chance at all.

I think that belief carries over. People who are abstemious might look with horror on rich people who eat dinner with gold plates under fine china. But some of the rich obviously believe that the afterworld is structured to give certain people like themselves more of a purchase on eternity. Not all rich people.

Some rich people feel guilty. Late in life, they pursue philanthropy—they're terrified of the hereafter. They know what they did to get that wealth and they are in terror.

Then the poor—some of whom are just bitter and furious—feel they were absolutely denied any kind of chance at any existence at all. They are very angry at God. You also have the poor who believe that it's all right. I've lived a clean life, a good life, I've raised my children, done my best, I've never despaired and I'm going to go to a good place.

So, we have an ongoing question for those who believe in a continuation after death. At a guess—my guess—I would think there's an ongoing negotiation between God and the devil over who travels where. I'm assuming that not only is God not all-powerful but the devil is not all-conquering either. The two systems are in deep contest with one another. The devil, therefore, would not wish to be excluded completely from the possibility of rebirth. The devil might desire to have some of his rich people

taken care of. Of course, there are rich people who are close to saintly, who manage to live with their wealth in such a way that it hasn't corrupted them. I think that's rare—but it does occur, we've all known a few. They are lovely people sometimes. Not all rich people are awful, but a great many rich people are certainly in no shape to look at the eye of the needle. Nonetheless, you can find a lively energy in some of the rich. Some of them made their money, after all, through their own huge energy. Not all people who gain power arrive just through foul means.

So, the Hereafter is a complex matter as seen by and for the rich. I expect God to be perfectly willing to discriminate. Certain of the rich, yes, absolutely, let's send them out to be born again. They're interesting.

JML: Are you saying that God will endow some to be born again into great wealth? Or into poverty?

NM: Yes. Why not? It's a species of testing. People who were born in rich and favorable circumstances in one life and grew

spoiled and had lives that were disappointing might be reborn as poor people. Others who were poor never got it through their heads that they were deprived. They have a touch of aristocracy innate in them. And there are rich people who have the modesty of poor people. I think you find that all the time—these are not only spiritual tests but can be your spiritual hereafter. One function of reincarnation is to give God further insights into the people He or She is dealing with. I go back to the fundamental premise: God does not understand us completely any more than we understand our children. We can know them quite well in terms of their habits and attitudes, but we certainly don't understand them in all ways. So God wants to know more about His Creation, and the devil, many times, is attempting precisely to muck up such clarity.

JML: I don't have any disputes on the individual level, but when I think of that phrase of Adam Smith's, "the wealth of nations," there are some peoples, some nations, who have lived in terrible, terrible misery. Take one nation I know a little about, the Irish. For 500,

600 years they lived under British wealth and power and now it seems almost just that the Irish are richer than the English.

NM: Are they? I didn't know that.

JML: Yes. They have surpassed them. In per capita income now, the Irish passed the British—they're the wealthiest nation in the European Union.

NM: I'll give you another example. For a thousand years and more, the Jews lived in the ghetto. They weren't allowed to hunt or fish or farm in most parts, they were allowed to be money-lenders or inn-keepers or own shops in their own communities. So what did they do? They gave everything they had to their religious schools. I would say that the results got into the gene stream—those ghetto Jews put their emphasis on learning and finer intelligence because their own books, particularly the Talmud, were still open to them.

JML: If you look at all the plusses and minuses of all the nations—great wealth in some and great poverty in others—how

does that mesh in with the individual decisions God and the devil express with reincarnation? It seems God may have to give up a whole country or a whole nation or whole race of people for long periods.

NM: I don't want to get carried away with understanding God's motives. I'm looking to find a few general principles. . .

JML: You're looking at individuals. I'm asking you to look at it from a national point of view.

NM: That means first, you have to believe in races. I do, to a certain extent. It's completely incorrect these days to talk about such matters, but I think no, the very mixture of climate and language through many centuries does produce one kind of person as opposed to another. That may now be part of God's interest in us as individuals. "Will this particular man or woman turn out better or worse than I think he or she will?" God's also interested in races—how will they turn out?

JML: In nations.

NM: Yes. And also in nations—which, obviously, are not races.

Far more complicated.

JML: God must be thinking a lot about China, with one billion people. . .

NM: God must be wondering if China is going to take over the world. God learns from that. I keep coming back to my fundamental mnemonic—God learns. This is why I'm so opposed to those religions which assume that God knows everything, so get down on your knees as fast as you can.

JML: Last time we spoke of evolution, you said that God was learning about it as He went along.

NM: Yes. God learns.

JML: Then in those early periods of time, with slime covering the oceans when land had just been created, you indicated that God was in the slime of early creation, yes, in there evolving with everything else. Yet you also said with great assurance that God is

the creator of the world and the solar system. I was having trouble reconciling God in the slime and God as the creator—

NM: I lean to the notion that God is the Creator—or, what's the word I'm looking for—the factotum of the solar system. The notion that God is something we can conceive in unified form is—I don't necessarily adhere to that. Suppose God is the lord of the solar system but at the same time, had to learn how to develop the system from the slime on up. Most people, myself included, have no great trouble believing Jesus was the son of God—but God was many things and looked to become more and He searched and He learned. God learned.

JML: Yes, but when did God put the souls into creation?

NM: Why would I know? Our understanding has to become lame at this point. How much of God is in every house fly? Something, perhaps. Something.

JML: The soul is special. . .

NM: You have to conceive of God as being . . . How to put it? Immensely differentiated. So that the life we see in a fly, those wonderful moves, yes, that came from the Creator. He gave that to the fly. Did He give the fly a conscience? Did He give the fly a sense of proportion? Probably not. The key to the notion is that it's all been a huge experiment, an ongoing, developing experiment with countless results, good and bad, but most of them were good enough so that evolution continued despite its failures. God learns, God learns. And so God invests Himself or Herself in all sorts of creatures en route. Not only animals but flora as well.

JML: So the creation of the soul was not an historic event?

NM: Who knows? It could have been a moment in time. The Bible seems to think so. Now, I do believe in the existence of the soul but I don't subscribe to the iron authenticity of the Old Testament and the New Testament. Both were written by committee. The Old Testament was put together over a long period by a series of very talented committees, much more talented

than the latter-day Bible-builders who composed the New Testament. On the other hand, the people who wrote the New Testament were also familiar with the best remarks that had been made up to that point in the Old Testament and by many a sage, prophet, and mystic, and they used them. They were also attached to a concept that may or may not be true. Which is that Jesus was the son of God. They were serious about that, but they were still a committee. So, as literary works, the Old Testament has some faults, and the New Testament a good many. To accept them, therefore, as the absolute map of our spiritual universe is comparable to using the kind of charts Christopher Columbus had before him when he set out for the West. Why, even our idea of the Beginning as presented in the first three sentences of Genesis is a false concept.

In fact, I studied Classical Hebrew at one time and the first sentence of Genesis—have we discussed that?

JML: No.

NM: Well, as you know: "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth." Or so it goes in English. Actually, the first word of the Old Testament—in Hebrew—is singular. The only place it exists in all of the language is in that first word of the Old Testament, "barashith," and the second word is "bora." There are many interpretations of "barashith" but I came up with "out of the pits. . ." or "out of the depths. . ." "Bora" is "being" or "creating" So the first two words say, "being becoming," or "being coming out of the pits." The next words are not "the heavens and the earth," but "the firmament above" and "the firmament below," as if to declare that there are two species of higher existence (good and bad) from the commencement. And then the next sentence? "The breath of God moved upon the waters. . ."

JML: "The breath of God was upon the waters. . ."

NM: It's not quite "breath of God." The word used here is "ruach." In Classical Hebrew there are three varieties of breath to signify God's presence. There's "ruach," "nefesh," and

"neshamah." "Neshamah," if I recall correctly, is the gentle breath. And "nefesh" is a normal wind. "Ruach" is the fierce breath, the angry breath, God's rage. So the line really says, "and the rage of God roared over the waters." So to go back, the first two sentences can well be translated as, "Out of the pits God created the firmament above and the firmament below. And God's fierce breath roared over the waters."

JML: Much different.

NM: Altogether different. I'm suspicious of committees. I always assume they are looking to cook up sedatives for people from the word go.

JML: We've spoken a bit about technology. I'd like to go back to a basic level. Most of humanity sees it as a way to free us from drudgery, and give us leisure time to read and think and travel, so forth. Why shouldn't it be seen on balance—on balance—I understand all the bad things about it—but why shouldn't technology be seen as largely salutary? Is technology inherently

evil or is it just misused? Misused by the devil or misused by God? Is it inherently evil or is it something God lost control of? Or the devil appropriated?

NM: I think God lost control of it. I have four words to describe technology which I've used several times now: More power, less pleasure. I think there's no getting around it: we can't pretend more pleasure comes to us from technology. It tends to crimp our senses and reduce us to people who are able to live in a closed environment. My notion—it's a sentimental notion, doubtless, is that God would have preferred us to be able to do the things we can do through technology by means of our spirit. In other words, instead of having television, we could reach into our dreamlife and enjoy organized and marvelous dramas that we could create for ourselves or send by telepathy to our friends. The ultimate aim was for every human being to be immensely creative. And sufficiently psychic not to have needed electronic communications. If I wanted to talk to you, I would have been able to have my mind

reach yours. We have small intimations of that. It seems to me such mental powers become more reduced with every advance in technology.

As a specific example, I now use hearing aids and I can't hear without them, most of the time, not with most people. But my remaining ability to hear gets more and more reduced by using my hearing aids. So I think technology tends to curtail our sensuous possibilities and accelerate our dependencies on technology.

After all, the great strides that have been made in technology have a great, even conclusive debt to previous generations. Maxwell discovered some of the differences between electricity and magnetism. And Faraday—some of the great scientists of the 19th century took imaginative, metaphorical leaps to produce the beginnings of technology. Abraham Lincoln and Winston Churchill didn't have to study previous speeches to come up with the Gettysburg Address or "I have nothing to offer you but blood, sweat, toil, and tears—" They came out of a past that depended on

independent human beings rising up to marvelous solutions at incredible moments. They were not dependent on curious machines they did not really understand

As a small example, I don't know anyone with a computer who doesn't talk about the glitches.

JML: Look, the first person to use a wheel after the drudgery of dragging things—they must have felt great pleasure. I don't see—

NM: Wait a moment, there are crucial turning points in the advent of modern technology. The center of all that now is electronics.

Whereas the first wheel was made of wood, and sharp stones were used to shape it. These were things people could comprehend, they came out of the earth. Then people began to learn how to smelt ore. Dangerous business, tricky, but they found the means to get fire to melt the ore and so could separate the slag from the molten metal. The Iron Age began.

I say there's a profound difference between early and later technology. Early technology, lasting through to the 19th century,

consisted of dealing with very powerful and explosive elements in nature and mastering them, so there was awe and excitement to it. Huge excitement for the railroad when it was developed—people loved to travel on them. They might be cramped and often smell bad, but they were exciting. Now, traveling on airplanes is disagreeable. Everyone thought it'd be immensely exciting but it isn't. It's reductive. You don't feel like a voyager so much as a piece of packaged goods. Electronics is the great divide—the watershed between what I would call good technology and bad. Because no one knows what electronics is. I defy a physicist to reach my mind with an explanation I can comprehend. For that matter, we don't even know what electricity is. A current of electrons, yes, but do we know anything about the real inner makeup of an electron? Does it possess any consciousness or not?

JML: So that's the pivot point, then? That's when technology becomes a miserable activity? But when you were a boy, the radio—you must remember the radio—the crystal set and all that.

NM: You had to do solder, make wire connections, yes. Even then, you had to buy your vacuum tubes. People assemble computers today out of factory parts. I did model airplanes when they were made of balsa with glue. Then plastic came along. In my childhood, plastic was not common. Bakelite was the nearest you got to it. Now plastic is omnipresent. And it's inert. It doesn't bring on any sense of the uncanny. It offers an inkling of non-existence. I'm just paranoid enough to believe it's the devil who loves plastic because it's going to deaden God's sensibilities before it's all over. God won't be able to get to us through shields of plastic. About the time, oh, thirty years ago when women began to wear plastic clothing—the stuff stank, you remember, the awful smell of plastic clothes? I began to think that may be the point where the ballgame was lost. If women with their finer sensibilities were adopting plastic.

JML: Very good. My last question: Great religious ideas have great followings and they last for millennia—some do fade, some

die, but the greatest last for millennia. And I'm assuming there's a reason for that. Your faith in the theological and intellectual efficacy of your system is very strong, very powerful. I've observed it for many years and it's deep-rooted inside you. But you have also said your system is not going to be adopted by many other people.

NM: Not in a hurry. No. There's no immediate solace for our fears. Only an appeal to our human pride that we can live without profound uncertainties

JML: Does this bother you?

NM: No. I suppose that if I had developed these ideas when I was 30 or 40, I might have dreamed of becoming a religious leader. But that is not in my capacity. If there's any validity to any of these thoughts, if they take root in people to some extent, then, yes, some of these notions may yet be adopted by many. Because I do believe that there are two elements now on the horizon that can yet destroy the world as we know it. One of them is technology and

the other is organized religion. The second drives people into stupidity. It can take intelligent children and deprive them of their ability to look at existence. They're obliged to force their thought to fit a mold that may never have existed. And certainly doesn't exist now. That drives people to extremes. So I do feel that my existential sense of God as a Being who needs us as much as we need Him could yet reach many. But I feel no inner directive to get this out right away to convince people. I'm content to see these interviews published eventually. But that's down the road. If you wish, we could do the next interview on the theme, "How do you see this religion functioning in a future society?" That might be interesting. It's uncharted ground for you and me—we might have fun with it.

JML: This might be a good way to finish the interview. I think we've moved through most of the areas you wanted to talk about.

NM: Yes. We could call the book "Theological Hubris."

JML: I think what you said before—God learns. That encompasses the previous conversations. Everything you say relates back to that.

NM: God learns.

JML: I like that.

Questions and comments from first interview:

1. You said: "What does stimulate my thought is the war between God and the Devil.

That makes sense to me—that war between the gods."

You prefaced this by calling speculation on the mechanics of creation, and of a possible expansion and final implosion of the universe as "too speculative, windy, and open." Yet further along in these interviews, you're willing to speculate considerably on the existence of the devil, the mechanics of reincarnation, and quite a bit else. Why the difference?

Size - the human measure as a standard

2. About Nazism and blood-consciousness, you say "The extermination camps were an absolute violation of such a venture. They were cheating people of their deaths. They informed the camp inmates they were going to have a shower. In they all marched, took off their clothes, happy to have a shower with all those lice on them, hoping the shower would be hot, went in, and were gassed. Their last reaction in life had to be, "you cheated me!" They die in a panic. That's not going back to the blood, to instinct, to preparing oneself to enter the next world."

Actually, I think you mis-read Nazi intentions. The victims in the extermination camps, from a Nazi point of view, were not people in the same way the Nazi ubermensch were people, and so didn't necessarily need a conscious, prepared-for death.

However, the passage leads to an interesting question: Since you call the gas chambers an abuse of instinct, are you implying that a true connection with instinct would make racism or racial superiority theories impossible? How would this work? After all,

looking at human groups, one sees a bewildering diversity of languages, skin colors, body types, talents, and so forth.

And leading from this, if, as you say, the Creator is an artist, and not all creative works are equally successful, wouldn't this lead quite easily to racism—i.e., the "inferior race"—however one's defining it, whether the non-Aryans scapegoated by the Nazis, or the "ice people" of the Afro-centric extremists, wouldn't that "inferior" group simply be one of God's early, inferior drafts? (after all, as one feminist joke goes: God looked at Adam, said, 'I'm sure I can do better,' and created Eve.)

3. "Technology is the Devil's invention." This is so fuzzy and skewed and selective in argument. If people lose their hearing with age, does it somehow bring a person closer to God to bellow "speak up!" at people instead of using state-of-the-art high-tech hearing aids? Should people with glaucoma just go blind rather than saving their vision (and their independence and the pleasures of reading, etc) via very high-tech laser surgery? Yes, certainly, technology increases power, and can also be a nuisance, but I would advance the argument it can also advance pleasure considerably. Where, exactly, do you draw the line between "good" and "bad" technology, and why?.

4. Your conception of God as artist assumes that God is both vastly-but not all-good, and vastly—but not all-powerful. But why couldn't God be not very compassionate at all and instead immensely curious? In other words, He is fascinated by, but not especially compassionate toward creation, much like a child who winds up toys and watches them slam into each other and chortles at the smashup. You say, "In other words, why are there

volcanoes? Because God was not a perfect engineer" Or because like a two-year-old, God found the noise and fury fascinating and amusing. Maybe even the shrieks of the dying fascinating and amusing. You keep assuming God is a nice person, so to speak, but that seems a bit arbitrary. Your reaction?

And if God may be maturing and evolving, might not the devil be doing the same? And becoming compassionate?

5. That leads us to the "age of the world" speculation. Some traditions see cosmology as cyclical—the Hindus, for instance, see "great ages" of hundreds of thousands of years where universes are born, peak, and die, succeeded by a new universal cycle of birth, growth, maturity and death—correlating with the idea of an expanding and eventually contracting universe. Others, like de Chardin, the Jesuit philosopher, see cosmology as linear, with an "Omega point" of union of everything with God eventually being reached. How do you see it?

And would you see the present world-age as young, mature, old, or senescent?

6. All your ideas have an underlying assumption that God has a continuing, even a profound interest in at least some individuals, and certainly in the ultimate fate of the human species and the rest of His creation. This is completely at odds with some of the earliest recorded religious expression, namely from the Sumerians, whose prayers were always begging the gods to "Remember!" Prayer and ritual were a constant attempt to engage the attention of forgetful and indifferent gods who had created and abandoned

humanity. This, by the way, wasn't a notion emerging from disasters and dislocations but could be found even as their civilization flourished. Can you comment?

7. You say: "there are no answers, there are only questions, profound questions, and that that is ennobling." Clarify, please—if we take your statement literally, then you're a Buddhist. If there are NO—that is no answers anywhere, on any plane, then everything is in the thinking—whether it is human thinking, the inchoate dreams of trees and rocks, or perhaps some thought of a Universal Mind—that's straight Buddhism. Do you mean, perhaps, there are no answers we can find in our limited state of embodied humanity? (Although there are, indeed, answers "out there," even if we never discover them.) If the latter, do you foresee a time/method of discovery?

8. You say: "I believe the soul is a gift, a great gift. Of course, you can abuse any gift to the point where it does not survive." But couldn't the soul, the human soul, actually be an achievement, obtained by all kinds of experience and learning as a spark of life progresses from protozoa to insect (that fast cockroach!) to donkey, to dog and finally to human being—and its growth be earned by lifetimes of mainly decent behavior?

Second interview

1. You say: "We are tainted, warped, even treacherous to the divine projects offered us. We are torn between God and the Devil and our own vanity." So, then, does that mean

you believe in original sin? And a need for some kind of divine redemption to keep human beings growing in a positive direction?

2. You say about Gandhi and pacifism: "But there are a few [oxymorons] that are vital and immensely valuable. One of them is "heroic passivity." That's where one's wisdom becomes the arbiter. There can be heroic passivity, or quasi- heroic passivity. The latter might be a disaster."

Along that same line, what would you say about any possible value of the contemplative life? By that I mean the cloistered orders who don't run hospitals or schools, just pray for the world. This is a strong Christian tradition, ditto for the Buddhists and some Hindus (and probably others I'm not aware of.) Do you see this as "passivity" or as tying in to your notion of our possible telepathic future (i.e., the Catholic notion of "the communion of saints.")

3. You say, about the possible end of the world: "So why not extend that to the frightful cost of divine desire, where the loss is greater? God might have had an earlier conception of human existence more beautiful, much more beautiful than the one He's left with now." Could you expand on this notion of God as a tragic hero? Or at least a tragic figure?

4. You say: "But generally speaking, I think, most souls don't die that easily, although I do have this notion that the soul's not around for endless reincarnations. A cat has nine

lives—what does a human soul have? Three or four lives? It's boundlessly speculative."

OK, then, but when the soul is finished with incarnations, then what? (FYI, The Buddhists see it as you do, but say after a soul no longer needs to reincarnate—he has learned all, done all that's necessary for enlightenment, he moves into nirvana, union with the universal mind.)

5. Further, what's your take on the Buddhist notion of the bodhisatva vow? Reaching nirvana is a catch-22—if you have achieved a level of deep compassion, enough to reach nirvana, you can't go happily off into it while other sentient beings are still here struggling and suffering. So, even though you personally have a free-pass out of this far from perfect world, you VOLUNTARILY reincarnate as a "bodhisatva"—a helper, a teacher, a way-shower—and KEEP reincarnating until everyone has achieved nirvana. Devout Buddhists of many persuasions—and all the monks and nuns, take the "bodhisatva vow" at an advanced stage of their training.

Third interview:

1. You say about the authority of the senses: " St. Thomas Aquinas said that, and Hemingway, in his way: "If it feels good, it is good." Well, but what about short-term gains versus longer-term gains? For instance, the fashion model who lives for months on a semi-starvation diet, or the athlete who goes through plenty of aches and pains in practice, for the long-term gain of the prestige and income of a modeling career, or an Olympic medal—in other words, give up one material pleasure for a more valued material pleasure (i.e., the money and what it can do) and the spiritual pleasure of being a

For this interview, I was told that the Buddhist monks and nuns, take the "bodhisatva vow" at an advanced stage of their training.

champion or a world-famous model. Even a sensualist might ration his sex life with a much-desired partner to bring a sharper edge of desire to their encounters. Can you comment?

2. You say: "Blake did have an apocalyptic mind that he served manfully. Full-time. It's one of the reasons his remarks inspire the highest flights of fancy. But on the other hand, he is seen by our modern spirit as impractical."

Just FYI, Blake COULD be rather practical. Here's a story—sorry, I can't source it beyond the fact that the professor told it to us aeons ago in his class on Blake. Seems Blake was devoted to his wife but also espoused free love and open marriage. So one fine day he introduced a young woman to his wife, saying she was a former prostitute whom they would take in, educate, and she'd become the "second wife." Blake's wife, fully aware of his theories, didn't argue, just burst into tears. Blake put the young lady he was about to rescue on the next train out of town—an instance, I'd say, where practicality trumped theory.

3. You say: "Or, will we destroy ourselves? In that sense, directly, there's no security. No spiritual security whatsoever." If so, just how and where does anyone find any comfort or respite? In a world of hopes and hypotheses, but no certainty, no final judgment or end of days when "it will all work out," how does anyone find any spiritual peace? [As opposed to simple exhaustion!]

4. You say: "then what we speak of as original sin—God's obligatory collaboration with the Devil—we were born good and evil." FYI, "original sin" is unique to the Christian tradition and has a very particular meaning—when Adam and Eve disobeyed God and were thrown out of paradise, every human born thereafter was in a state of "original sin" by inheritance. It took the death of Christ on the cross to redeem all of humanity and give them (if baptized!) a chance at heaven. If you mis-use the term, when it is so specifically defined, you'll confuse people. The Moslems, by the way, while they have something very similar to the Xian Adam and Eve story, (Adam is revered as a prophet, so obviously he got his act together eventually despite a rocky beginning) feel nothing is inherited by the descendants thereof—children are born innocent and end up in heaven or hell as a result of their own good and bad deeds. No Christly redemption needed. People save or damn themselves. Just FYI. Satan's sin was rebellion and disobedience. Adam's sin was disobedience. And are you saying, perhaps, God's sin was permitting Satan to live instead of destroying him and his rebellious colleagues? Or moving ahead with human creation while he still had an ongoing mess with satan? (God committing the sin of hubris and overextending himself?) Just some ideas—comment on any that catch your fancy.

5. An FYI about incarnation of Jesus—this is not a new idea. Greek myths are full of incidents where the gods took human form, or animal form. Apart from the well-known stories of Zeus turning up as this or that to impregnate some human woman, there are also stories of Zeus turning up as a beggar. In one story, peasants take in a wretched beggar overnight, share their far-from abundant meal with him, treat him very well, and next

morning, find his bed empty and a sack of gold in his place—Zeus came calling—and rewarded them for their kindness to the poor! God showing up on earth is an idea embraced long before Christian theology.

Fourth interview

1. About Francis of Assisi you say: "Yes, he's perfect in a beautiful way that took care of a great many animals, and thereby brought us a little more into sympathy with creatures who often feel more life than ourselves." Actually, the folktales about his preaching to songbirds and wolves are just that—lovely legends. His hymns to "brother sun and sister moon" are the real deal, his own writings. But Francis was ahead of his time in founding an order of nuns, of accepting women on a basis of equality in religious life, of ministering to lepers—a true rebel who frequently embarrassed the local church establishment. His service to the "untouchables" of the day and his egalitarian attitudes are in a way far more interesting than the nice story of wild animals coming to hear his sermons.

2. You say: "whereas cats strike me often as creatures of the devil. Now, mind you—they were all created by God." Cats are independent existentialists, grownups in fur who pick and choose their loyalties. Dogs have a pack instinct and often consider their human owners the alpha-dog and themselves as loyal second-in-command—also, dogs are miserable if the hierarchy of the group and their place is unclear, be the group a pack of dogs or a human family. They are—well, fundamentalists about that. Cats have far more

intellectual independence, and "make their living" by exploiting their opportunities in whatever situation they find themselves in.

3. You say: "So, I would say that at the moment when one is close to death, that is, if one knows one's going to die, there can be a desire for another life, or a yearning toward peace or—and this is the worst condition—a wish to pass away in stupor." What about the completely unexpected death—the healthy person felled by an aneurism who never feels a thing, the person (not living in a war zone) who's picked off for no discernible reason by a sniper? What happens to that person? Have you any comment on the many spiritual traditions who advise people to prepare for death? How would anyone not embroiled in terminal illness go about living so as to be ready for death?

4. You say: "The logistics of the hereafter interest me because God's energies, as I see it, are immense but, to repeat, not infinite." You seem to see the afterlife as only a sort of Grand Central Station where people change trains—i.e., make their way from one life to the next. Many spiritual traditions see the afterlife not as a permanent destination but as an extended layover—there are classrooms, hospitals and spas, so to speak, connected to the train station. That is, many souls get a chance to regroup, learn, heal and collaborate in the choice of their next life. Granted, since this is speculative, your vision can be as true or false as theirs but why see a delay in reincarnation as a bureaucratic bungle? Couldn't we be creatures of two worlds, meant to spend roughly equal time in the timeless "over there" as living in bodies "over here?"

5. Do you think there's meant to be communion between the afterlife and here? Any thoughts on the huge number of fictional and fairly well documented stories of the dead coming back to their relatives?

6. You say: "The notion that if you suffer long enough you'll purge yourself—I don't see any reason to have that in the Hereafter. I would suggest instead that being reborn takes care of purgatory. For some people, life is, indeed, purgatory. For a few people, life is heaven—they're happy 90% of the time. For some people, life is hell. I don't think we need these other structures." But, Norman, YOU didn't design the Cosmos—the Creator in which you believe so completely did!! Your metaphysics puts earthly life at the center of things, with the spiritual realm as an add-on, a way-station between incarnations. Why couldn't it be more 50/50? Or even earth as a backward slum where those who flunked out of angel school have to take remedial courses? You do seem to have a prejudice against spending time in the other realm—why?

7. You say: "Now, traveling on airplanes is disagreeable. Everyone thought it'd be immensely exciting but it isn't. It's reductive. You don't feel like a voyager so much as a piece of packaged goods." I agree modern airports and check-ins are no fun BUT watching the sun turn clouds molten, and the fantastic cloudscapes at 40,000 feet, or seeing the far-north ice lit up from a jet doing the polar route—not to mention the rush of takeoffs and landings—flying is FUN. In other words, this is all very individual.

8. Following from this, if people miss the fun of flying, it's because they're too tired from overwork—or working on their laptops in First Class. Again, the problem isn't the laptop, it's the skewed bosses who overwork their people—the fault, dear Norman, lies not in our technology but in ourselves that we are underlings. The horror of "living in a closed environment" is not that it's closed, but somebody got the idea that working 80-hour weeks was a good thing.

9. You're always saying that work is a blessing—but I'd say our present developed First World is creating an unhealthy singular focus on paid work. Where is the balance and what separates "good work" from mindless drudgery or the pursuit of greed?

*as Leon Trotsky once said:
Certain quantities cannot
themselves be being added*