

NORMAN MAILER

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INTERVIEW

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JML: We have not spoken of ritual as part of religion. Recently my wife and I went to the ordination of an Episcopal priest. It was an extraordinary event. Thirty or forty priests and bishops and deacons stood over the kneeling aspirant, touching a shoulder or back or, if they could not reach the person, they touched the shoulder of someone who could. All the while, a chorus in the background was chanting "Veine, Spirite Sante!, Viene Spirite Sante!" (Come, Holy Ghost). While another singer, the lead singer, was singing A Capella verses about the glories of being a priest, of the holy responsibilities and obligations, the special status that they had among believers ending with the ancient pronouncement from the ordaining bishop, "Thou art a priest forever." It was a very moving, a very powerful experience. It made me think of one of our earlier conversations in which

you noted that fundamentalists believe that if they keep their nose clean and observe ritual, they had a ticket to heaven. Does ritual have any significant merit for you or do you reject it completely?

NM: I've thought about it. Put it this way: I have high suspicions about ritual. It seems to me that it's a mixed blessing. As you know, one of my favorite remarks is that repetition kills the soul. Well, obviously that is a remark which ought to be explored before we go further. Many kinds of repetition are crucial to the human venture. Obviously, one of the ways in which we learn is through repetition. There certainly is such an act as creative repetition—every time you do it, you are growing a little better, a little deeper. You are getting on to something more. I grant all that. Nonetheless, I'm immensely suspicious of ritual. If you get down to it, where does my theology start? What occasions it? What stimulates it? What gives me the confidence to go on with it? I am not really a theologian. I know little, technically, on the subject. But if you work as a novelist all your life, you are dealing in a funny way—and I don't want this to be misunderstood!—but you are dealing with God's problems, with morality and judgment. It doesn't mean that you have God's power in any way, nor God's goodness, assuming that God is All Good which I don't believe is

absolutely true. What I wish to say is that if you are any good at all as a novelist, and you've spent your life thinking about characters and human nature, you do end up with some sense of what the universe might be like. And by extension—at least a little bit—what God might be like. You begin to posit the need for a Devil. Even the best novels usually need some kind of villain. He can be a most rarefied or unconscious sort of villain—an E.M. Forster unfeeling fellow, for example, but nonetheless the moment you begin to contemplate such a being, you are, of course, living with some notion of Evil. From there, a novelist can arrive at the next idea, the Devil. I will add that writing novels does tend to push you away from repetition. A good novel does not keep repeating itself. That is *exactly* the hallmark of a bad novel. And so most good writers are wary of mediocre rote. Indeed, I find that most people I don't like in life tend to be masters and monsters of mediocre repetition. The politicians we despise the most do tend to keep repeating the same platitude. So, I do have a premise that repetition is dangerous when used as a power tool by mediocre people. Adjurations that are endlessly repetitive can wreck families, tyrannical parents—or even unimaginative ones who know nothing better than to repeat. That probably has some relation to my suspicions of ritual. Because ritual tends to set human nature into a form. I think it's a basic question whether human

nature should ever be cast into a pre-arranged shape. Obviously, I'm thinking of fundamentalists. I distrust them viscerally. I feel that their notion of God is inspired by the Devil. They cleave and cling to repetition and the voice they hear does not come from Jesus Christ. I can add that as a child I heard them all the time. On Saturdays, when I wanted to play ball, I'd be sent to the Synagogue. There, of course, it was all praise and repetition, very much so...

JML: For thousands of years.

NM: No matter. I was a child. I was bored stiff. Once in awhile I'd be slightly affected, but most of it washed over me. I was ensconced in the same shell at the end of the service as at the beginning. Year after year. I had no relation to that set of rituals. There was another ritual, altogether, back in the early Seventies, that I did find kind of interesting. It was Transcendental Meditation—TM—which was much in fashion thirty five years ago. I remember I had to bring a flower to the instructor on the day I was inducted into TM. He was just a gawky young man, but absolutely inflamed with the concept of Transcendental Meditation. In turn, I found it slightly odd and certainly boring. You were told to keep your head as empty

as possible for twenty minutes. Send away all the passing thoughts that came through, even if they were interesting. I said to myself, "Why am I doing this? I've spent my life as a writer waiting for interesting ideas." And to do that, to get ready to work, the first thing is to empty your head. I'd been doing Transcendental Meditation without giving it a title for years. I saw it as no more than passing through a half hour of boredom before you could get going. Nonetheless, the instructor said a few words in Hindi, or whatever, and they gave me a sound to repeat which I was to use to brush away any errant thought. I forget what mine was. Something like OM. Alan Ginsberg's old OMMM. I think they sprinkled a little water into the air and there was some perfume...It was a very small ritual, but I did feel a trace of effect. Something modest did take place inside me. I did not feel shrived so much as altered some miniscule bit. Obviously, in a deep and powerful ritual more takes place.

Let me move forward, however, to make my next point. Which is, given my fundamental notion that God and the Devil are at war all the time, I would go so far as to posit that ritual may well have been conceived first by the Devil and God, recognizing its efficacy and determined not to lose any soul He or She did not wish to lose (if they could help it!) entered ritual as well. I think therefore, ritual did become an intense and fascinating

mixture of the combined presence of God and the Devil. There is a sturdy power to the repetitions; the music, the chanting, the ceremony, the intense consciousness of everyone present that They—one Elemental, at least, or Two are indeed present. One of my favorite notions is that when major events occur, the Lord and Satan are both there. I once wrote that a general, on the eve of a great battle, may think as he gets out of bed that it is very important to him whether or not he puts his left boot on first or the right.

JML: A ritual.

NM: I'd say not so much a ritual, as a sense that the Powers are there. They are around one. This goes back after all, to Homer. Anyone who looks into *The Iliad* will find nothing strange about this. So, I can answer your question by saying that I don't scoff at ritual, but I don't trust it. I might be happier if we could live without it. All the same, I have to recognize the extent of my ignorance, my circumscribed upbringing, my early rejection of ritual and my taste. I have to agree, however, that if you wish to speculate, as I do, on the nature of God and the Devil then ritual is not a poor place to start. Because there they are cooperating. One of the notions about this holy-unholy contest is that there are any number of occasions when God and

the Devil have to cooperate Willy-nilly. Not only because each divinity is trying to outwit the other but because like rival legislators, they also have to keep close contact, like it or not, in order to put together temporary but necessary working agreements.

JML: Continuing just a little bit more on ritual—I'm sure professional heavy weight boxers decide which glove is going to be laced on first and how many minutes they want to be alone before the fight and which jock strap they wear and the same with soldiers. I know professional baseball players have certain things that they have to do. The center fielder has to step on second base when he runs by after a home run or, you know, the forces will be against him. Athletes are particularly superstitious, I would say, and they go through various rituals and preparations before and during the game. Soldiers do the same thing. When I was in the Navy, knew sailors who were tremendously ritualistic about how they tied a knot. It was a very bad omen if you did it the wrong way. So many things had to be done in the right way on the ship. Otherwise, you could be calling down evil things upon you. These aren't religious rituals but they are often done by athletes, soldiers and sailors with the knowledge that there's something around.

NM: Yes. I was very susceptible to that when I was younger. I do know what you are talking about. And that period in San Francisco back—what was the year?

JML: 1964

NM: Yes, the early sixties. There was a week or two when I would walk parapets in San Francisco. All the time. I used to dread getting up in the morning because I knew before the day was over, I'd be walking the parapets. These parapets varied in width between eight inches all the way to a foot and a half wide so there was no great risk unless you lost your head or got dizzy. I would suspect that God and the Devil, plus their various angels, affiliates, cohorts, coworkers, what have you, the entire spirit-world if you will, I would say, yes, they do pay more attention to people who are engaged in unusual events. If we started out by talking about ritual, we are now involved with rote. Whenever people engage in rote, that is, act out their superstitions, go in for repetitive or customary moves at a time when a great deal is at stake for them, (or so, at least they see it,) well, why wouldn't that attract the attention of the Gods? One of my prime notions is that whenever

major events are occurring, coincidences multiply. Athletes, for example, who are going to play in games that they see as very important can feel that they have a great influence on many other people and that the spirit world is going to pay attention. There is a feeling that one is not alone, but surrounded, at the best, by spirits. I would argue that can be a legitimate or semi-legitimate notion rather than madness.

JML: When I was writing my Doctorial thesis on you back in { Date?}, I had a chapter on your theology, your cosmology. I had two or three English professors on the committee and a philosophy professor. He argued with me about that chapter. Wrote me long letters.

NM: Let me get this straight. This is while you were formulating the thesis and he was asking you to shift it?

ML: Yea, he was reading a draft. He said that your system, as far as he could understand it, was terribly incomplete.

(Mailer Laughs)

He said he could not find in it how the universe came into being or ends.

How the cosmic war would end at the end of time or even if there would be an end of time.

NM: He sounds like a major league Ass.

ML: Well, no, he was gentle with me but he thought that anybody who was a philosopher, who had a philosophical system, ought to have—let me finish—

NM: Let me just stress one point: I never heard of that before. Why do you have to have a beginning and an end to your philosophy? What about Logical Positivists? They live without a beginning or an end.

ML: Well he was an Aristotelian. That explains a lot probably. But he also felt that the chief thing was that you had no clear definition—and what he believed and what a lot of philosophers believe—is the central question of philosophy: Being. What is being? What is the ultimate nature of Man? What is the ultimate nature of God? What is being? When he confronted me, I kept saying, existentialism, existentialism. As much as I knew about it

and I knew a little but not a great deal. One of my English professors on the committee said, "Look, Mailer is a literary man. He's not a systematic philosopher. He has ideas, he has feelings that may or may not be profound, but he isn't out to create a philosophical system." And that's what finally got the philosopher to back down. He goes, "You're right. This is a literature PHD, not a philosophy PHD." But I've thought about it for many, many years, this debate that we had. It kind of slowed things down, although it didn't hurt me in the end. Now, you did write about Marx, Freud, Kierkegaard, Sartre, Schopenhauer—it wasn't that you weren't familiar with some philosophy, you were clearly interested—but finally, I guess, any philosopher who won't propose ultimates is a very unusual philosopher. As I read it, there is no ultimate nature of God, no ultimate answer to any of these questions. In so reading over everything that we have done so far I keep coming to the thing, we don't know, we can't be certain. And from most philosophical points of view there's usually one rock somewhere.

NM: The rock? What if the rock is in transit? What if eternity is in chassis? I'm using that old famous phrase of William Saroyan's "The foundation is in chassis." In other words, eternity may be moving, and so may not be necessarily eternal. The simplest riposte I could give is that no

philosopher has ever come up with an answer to these questions that is satisfactory. No human, not ever, and I won't be the first either. But what I will say is this. I do have certain basic beliefs. You make me ask what we've been talking about through these five interviews. I thought I'd said it. God is not all powerful and not all good. God is like a Greek god if you will. Like Zeus. If we need some model. I don't feel I need one. I see God as a warrior engaged in trying to shape some very large part of existence. How large, is absolutely out of our cognizance. I have no notion whether God is a deity for the solar system, or for a few of the galaxies, or for half the galaxies. I have no notion whether God is in command of black holes in space, or is terrified of them. My fundamental notion is that the cosmos as a whole is at war within itself, and here we are all created by a divinity who is an Artist, not an Emperor, not a law-giver, but an Artist. This is my most basic notion of God. I see God as doing the best that He or She or They (it could be a marriage!) can do to extend God's notion of existence further out into the cosmos. I believe there are other notions in existence out there—counter notions, other concepts of how the cosmos should be. But we humans are God's venture, God's artwork. We humans also are God's soldiers, working even militant living premise. We may even be God's ability to change the given in the cosmos. So to insist on wanting to know

where we are going, asking, “What is the end?” can be philosophically misleading. When I say that I’m an existentialist, I mean it in the firmest sense of that word by its root, its sound. By its nature, existence is not predetermined. It is open. God has a vision of existence and what it can become, and we not only work to fulfill that notion but we also deny it. Lest we forget, there is that implacable war between God and the Devil and that keeps God from expressing His or Her clear notion of how things ought to be. God can not always lead us. Not only did He give us free-will but we are not necessarily loyal. The Devil is also in us. So God must live in states of compromise and frustration. That makes more sense to me than envisioning God as always knowing exactly what He or She is doing and telling us how to do it, as if He is always the Supreme Theatre Director and we are minor actors in a huge opera. I’ve said this over and over. The end is open. Existence is open. This notion that there is a predetermined place that we all will reach, a union, a single point to existence which we will get to only by obeying God’s instructions totally, is, if you stop to think of it—I repeat—a vision of God as an opera director who is perfectly happy because the score is entirely in hand. I say existence is more complex, more difficult and more conceivably ennobling for us. For we are not just serfs. Nor are we children drawn in off the street to partake in the children’s chorus,

although before we even go on, we are told not to open our mouths, not to sing. So I argue that to pretend to be able to say where we are going, is a most pretentious outrageous philosophical stance. All we can know is where we are at present to the degree we can even know that. Everything in our existence fortifies this concept for me. Within reason, I know where I am at this moment. Within reason! Do I know where I will be in a year? Do I know if I will be alive? No. Do I have any concept of where society will be in a hundred years? No. We live in the present. That's all we are given. And we do have instincts. I would go so far to say I would go along with Goethe on this: That these powerful instincts are God-given. We are embodying God's plans, but even God's design is subject to change because of the nature of existence. Not all the storms of the cosmos may have been anticipated by God. God is an Artist who is not in full command of the ship of the universe. Most certainly he is not a wholly successful engineer. God never did solve the problem of how to keep tectonic plates from roiling the globe and outraging the ocean.

JML: The moment of death carries great weight in your theological thinking but I don't see any consideration of what happens to the 20% of all people who die—I believe that's the number—who die of strokes, heart attacks,

aneurisms, sudden death. I have a friend whom the doctor said was dead before he hit the ground—you know, there is no time for such people to prepare themselves, no time to reflect, project, anything. Are they just unlucky, is this just a flaw in the way God did things? I refer to your concept of the importance of our state of mind when we go into eternity? These people have no chance.

NM: To begin with, the answer is nobody dies without a moment. You know, the famous Catholic notion that Graham Green was obsessed with—the moment of remorse, the affirmation of faith—that can take place, or so he believed, or wondered, in the instant between the stirrup and the ground. Time, after all, to anyone who has had experience with even minor drugs like marijuana knows that time is extendable; time telescopes, time compresses. One can have a tenth of a second that feels like five minutes in a dream. Or, so I am told. The notion that you propose, that you die without warning—I disagree. Even if you have no more than a nano-second before your death, that is not where all of it takes place. The moment of death is anticipated as we live our lives. It is exactly where morality enters everyone's consciousness. The question, "Am I a good man, or a bad man?" is with us from a very early age. It's with us certainly as children. "Am I a

good boy or a bad one?" As you get older, and begin to think more about death, so you brood more about judgment. Of course not everyone believes in judgment. Very often you will hear rather fine people say "Oh, there is nothing after this. All I want is a little peace." It is a sad remark, particularly sad to me because, given my notion that many of us are reborn, many of us, at least, perhaps most of us, I see it as sad if one does not want to be reincarnated. That suggests a deep sense of defeat. As I've said earlier, we humans can have a purpose that can even align itself with God's purpose. So, such despair, in a very deep sense turning, can be against God as well.

JML: I guess I'm not making myself sufficiently clear. We had a long discussion in which you emphasized how critical the final moments of one's life was. That was the time you could prepare yourself for the journey into death. You used the example of the people in the gas chambers who were cheated out of such preparation by being told they were going to get a shower at last. Instead, without warning, they were gassed. You know, if you have a brain aneurism, you don't have a tenth of a second. You have nothing. Your brain stops. No thought. You put all this emphasis on the end of it and I'm wondering....

NM: Let's say that 99% of the people who are alive have a reasonable amount of time to think before they die. So, you are talking about the one percent. And if I can't contain them in my argument then I can't.

Everything that I attempt here, if I can honor it with the word "philosophical" would insist that we don't have one-hundred percent for anything. I'm opposed to the notion that any philosophical thought can be complete. It's one of the reasons that I detest fundamentalism. I don't like one hundred percent theories. So, let's say that what I have to say is valid for 9/10ths of people, or 99% of people, or 80% of people, but I do believe that, yes, our preparation for death is most important. And for those of us who have the opportunity to think about it and mind you, we do think about it more and more as we come nearer, yes if you have just a few minutes at the end, it isn't as if you are suddenly facing death for the first time. You've been living with its conundrums it all your life. But now you are truly refining it. You are handing in your final submission, your own comprehension of the mystery, large or small.

JML: And if God is limited in His powers, then it occurs to me that God didn't work this out. He created a human being who dies in a variety of ways. One of these ways didn't allow for this.

NM: How can I refute such logic. I have to agree. But, look, I don't believe death is the same for all of us—the great equalizer. I don't think that at all. I see reincarnation as a species of reward. That's why I find it depressing when people say, "Oh, I want some peace." And mean it. They want to be off the board. Whereas others do want to come back. Life was interesting for them. Life was challenging enough. With all the bad and the ugly that one experienced, there was enough good to form the desire to want another chance at doing more with a life. And of course I do go back to my basic notion: God is an artist. No good artist is ever satisfied with what he or she has created. The artist usually wants another chance to do it better. But as a practical matter, we can't afford to redo many of our works. In terms of humans, however, men and women are more interesting than the greatest art works. The dullest human is a work of art beyond our measure if only we can perceive him or her in full. So there is every reason to want to redo it. If I believe that God is our Father, God is our parent, I can add that parents do not control their children altogether. They are never in whole knowledge

of who their offspring are. Parents can do their best with their children, but they still remain in part a mystery. I would even say that God is fascinated with the mystery we present to Him. God wants to know more about many of us. Of course, it is not all full of white light and New Age sweets. Reincarnation can go wrong. One can do worse than one did the first time. After all, we are also here to serve. God is engaged in an heroic adventure. Which is to take His or Her notion of existence and carry it across the stars. For that, God needs humans to become more and more extraordinary. More wonderful. For that, we've got to develop. And this development comes out of rebirth. Out of being put in situations curiously parallel to those you failed in one life. I'll give a very crude example. If one was a coward, physically speaking, in certain ways, if one was, for example, terrified of heights, well then possibly in the next existence you are placed in a family of mountain climbers. As a child you may go through horrors because of this. But now you've got guides. Human guides who can carry you to a place you couldn't get to on your own in your previous life. If we go back to the initial question "why is one's death so important?"—it may be that one has a better sense at the end of what one did or didn't do in one's life and what one would like to be in one's next life. Maybe, that provides coloration for the soul. And does it at the last moment. Maybe that even guides all those poor

overworked monitors in all those immense bureaucratic halls of Karmic Reassignment.

JML: What happens to the souls of individuals if the person becomes a successful mountain climber and is no longer afraid of heights? If you have a long run of successful reincarnations and keep improving, what happens then? If you get as good as you are going to get?

NM: Forgive me, but I think that's a lame proposition. To begin with, the best mountain climbers remain afraid of heights. But they have learned how to live on such heights. As humans, we are still so far from being anywhere near any remote kind of perfection. Most of us are so underdeveloped, so frustrated, so minor in relation to what we could have been, every one of us, even those of us who are successful, that there's no need to speak of a superfluity of perfection. Besides, as I've just said, not every reincarnation is a success. God is trying to learn more about us. That is my basic point. God learns even as we do. Think of God as a protagonist rather than a mega-autocrat. A divine protagonist in the cosmos. And so, some of his artworks do well. But some don't. Besides, one's desire to be reincarnated is not necessarily well grounded. We don't know, we don't know. Some

incarnations improve one's spiritual situation. Some don't. Our souls can also become less because we tried again and failed more severely. The hope is that reincarnation as a general overall, near-universal system, works more often than it fails.

JML: As far as we know, our ancestors seem to go back three or four million years. Is it possible that there are souls from the earliest human beings who have been reincarnated?

NM: I'm going to get your professor very annoyed now, because I don't have a clue. *(NM laughs)* If you want me to guess, I can guess. One expedition to the side of this notion is that Karma itself may be embattled. Think of one of the great horrors of war, when too many people die at once, like Hiroshima. Or a Tsunami. When one hundred thousand souls are incinerated in one atomic blast, or a Tsunami hits, that may wreak great carnage in Karma as well. Karma may not be equipped to deal with so many deaths at once. That may well be one of the Devil's most profound urges. To mess up Karma. Destroy the main centers of reincarnation. As I've argued, reincarnation is God's Venus, God's means of repairing earlier

misconceptions. I'm sure God has interest in all of us, but in varying degrees. God may well be like an overworked parent. So, God might feel, after someone particular has died that that man or woman did not receive enough attention from Him. So God would look to improve that person's chances in the next incarnation. So, the divine judgment we may get is not heaven nor hell, but whether we are given a better or poorer chance the next time out. If we were one hell of a son-of-a bitch in one life, then we may be born again under hideous circumstances in the next. That, it seems to me, is a more appropriate way to be punished for our sins than to suffer eternity in Hell.

JML: Given everything we've said I don't see any reason why reincarnations can't go on for a couple of million years. Why not? No problem. Where is the rush?

NM: The real question may be: How much time does God have? If existence comes down to a race to convince the cosmos of God's special purpose, there may not be endless time. Other visions of existence, alien to us, may be seeking to over-take us. In which case, God could be in a great hurry. God might have less patience now than He had three hundred

thousand years ago. That, of course, once again, is beyond me. I'm amazed by that professor. I keep coming back to him. The notion that philosophy should have an answer for everything is anathema to me. It is the rock on which Fundamentalism will finally founder if the fundamentalists, that is, don't destroy us first.

ML: Well, there is usually some teleological sense among philosophers. How is it going to turn out in the end?

NM: All right. I'll offer a provisional end. God has a vision of existence and God feels that his vision is more creative, more useful to the future of existence than other visions out in the cosmos.

JML: What is that vision?

NM: That life becomes more and more creative, diverse, splendid and incredible.

JML: OK. You have stated it at any rate.

NM: I can give you another vision of existence. It is not mine. It is that we are to sit in heavenly fold and listen to hymns which are beautiful because God has put us in Heaven. Tell me, what is more final about that? This Heaven which is the same every day, where we do nothing because we have been good in the past?

JML: There is the vision in many religions that you merge with the universal mind. You merge with the mind of God, you become part and parcel of God. And you do not just exist in some amusement park or Club Med, but in pure intellectual bliss having been completely purged of all weaknesses and corruptions. Many religions have that.

NM: It assumes that we're all here to get to a certain pre-determined place. If we keep our spirits clean enough, we will reach heavenly bliss. But I'm saying that heavenly bliss is not guaranteed. Everything we know about the nature of existence is that it is cruel, paradoxical, glorious, disappointing, tremendous, and often more modest than we expected. What we can hope for is to be part of a great creative process that is attempting to go forward into a better existence without knowing what the end is, or whether it will even be favorable. The only end that we know is that we are going to die.

What we don't know is our end after death. Will there be one, will there not be? That's one question we do not know the answer to. We live without a final certainty. Given that every one of our understandings comes down to a lack of knowledge about the end, why assume that God knows the end? That, too, is a very large assumption. Just because God created us, doesn't mean that God has every answer.

ML: American historians have debated the concept of what they call American Exceptionalism. The idea that the United States has a special role in history, perhaps even a divine role. Divine destiny. It goes back to the Puritans, back to Governor Bradford, to the City on the Hill. Does this notion mean anything to you? Does America have a special place in the divine project?

NM: I've written about American Exceptionalism, lately. I'm opposed to the disaster of what we're doing in Iraq, and I do blame American Exceptionalism. My feeling is that all humans belong to exceptionalism. Not just Americans. All of the globe is part of God's exceptionalism. To translate, it isn't that any particular country represents God's basic notion of how to do it, it is, rather, the human creature. I would even say that I see all

of evolution as God's attempt to experiment with higher and higher forms in His animals. Doing so, God made errors along the way. The dinosaurs were probably a large error. I would be hard-put to defend the horse-fly, or the octopus. Or the hippo, the alligator, the ant-eater. Bold experiments, but did they really succeed?

JML: All the same, why couldn't some humans be more successful in certain countries at certain times?

NM: All right, certain people in certain countries could be very important to God. But there could be one person in Thailand who is more important to God at this moment than all of America put together. Who knows? That's not the point. It's the implicit ugliness of vainglory to assume that America is the closest embodiment of God's desire? How can God put up, for god sakes, with suburbs and malls and superhighways and plastic? Not to mention the folly of assuming that democracy is a magic serum to be injected into the veins of ugly tyrannical brutalized lands.

JML: Well, maybe we've blown it. You know, in the beginning, the idea of American Exceptionalism came from the notion that they had it in Europe,

and lost it. Blew it. There were endless wars and too much corruption. And we were a new start.

NM: I won't argue that. The Lord may have had certain hopes. Even one hundred and fifty years ago. But I don't think God has had much hope since the Second World War. We've blown it badly since then. And we've cheapened the very surface of life. We've ruined the freshness of the air, the cleanliness of the rivers. I don't want to rant. But at this point I have to say that America is not a country whose own spiritual goodness as a nation stands up to any kind of examination.

JML: I know when Kennedy was assassinated somebody said, and you quoted it, that God has withdrawn his blessing from America.

NM: I believe it was John Updike.

JML: That remark moved you. You thought he might be on to something there.

NM: Yes.

JML: Several times in conversations I've had with you, and in your writings, you've mentioned the possibility that God might have intended human beings to develop their telepathic powers.

NM: Yes.

JML: And in your novel *Ancient Evenings* some of the characters actually employ telepathic powers. I must add that modern novelists can, in a sense, read minds. Because they're always exploring what people are thinking. One of the great advances came, I suppose, when the novel moved into the human mind.

NM: When? In which century?

JML: Well, it started around a hundred years ago.

NM: No more? Dickens enters people's minds.

JML: Not like Joyce. Or Virginia Woolf.

NM: All right.

JML: Do your speculations about telepathy have anything to do with using this novelistic tool? I mean you certainly explore the consciousness of virtually all of your heroes. You rarely see characters from just the outside.

NM: Yes, but I don't think that I would lay claim to any more telepathy than is average. I'd say rather that novelists try to study society in various ways. Some novelists, at any rate. We try to understand how the social machine works. We also try to understand how characters who are different from ourselves seem to be put together. There is this notion that there's a little bit of ourselves in someone else. We can if we've done enough of the work over the years, we can yes, project out a notion of other lives that is complex and real. Sometimes the character comes alive even if he or she is most different from one's self. The best novelists can do that. They can go very far away from themselves. Parenthetically, I have always respected novelists who try for that as opposed to novelists who write about things that they know very well. They can be superb, but they don't venture out. I will

say that telepathy is a very small part of all this. There might be writers who have telepathic powers, but I wouldn't lay such claim for myself.

JML: I do get a sense that you believe that years ago, perhaps ten thousand years ago, people might have been developing their powers of telepathy but since then it's atrophied.

NM: Absolutely. That's certain for me. I do believe that the divinity wanted us to be telepathic. God may not have been counting on electronics to do the job for us. Electronics may be the Devil's purview. God just assumed we would become more and more telepathic and in the course of that we'd develop more and there would be less need for technology which—my assumption—stifles God's Creation. Smog is no good for God's good air. Static is not good for our ears or His. I don't want to go through the old litany of all that's wrong with modern civilization. Since technology is here, I'd say we have to look upon our present history as God's attempt to deal with the Devil. In other words if the Devil succeeds in establishing technological shoots and outbursts and venues and avenues all through society, God has to deal with technology as well. But He comes in second. The devil is the pioneer in technology. So, I would assert.

JML: Right. Still, I wonder. One of the new phenomena that is sweeping not just the US but the world—in fact, the United States I understand, is behind many parts of the world, certainly Europe and Asia—is cell phones. Only half the people in the States use cell phones, but in Asia and in Europe it's sixty or seventy percent. Is it the opportunity to call up people all the time, any where in the world when you want to confirm some thing or get some information or call your mother? Or call your lover? It's creating a whole new set of communications in the world that never existed before. How would you say that God and the Devil deal with this? Does it benefit either of them?

NM: Well, it could obviously benefit both of them. But given that I am an old curmudgeon, my feeling is that it's more of a mess than a help. Because I'm not all sure that instant communication with everyone alive is the *beau ideal*. Not at all. Often, the hunt for information is what enriches the use of it. Once the difficulty becomes part of the intellectual process, we tend to do more with it if we are truly serious. Everybody is talking these days about information glut. We're all buried under tremendous and usually superfluous amounts of information. That could be stultifying to

imagination. But I can't speak with authority. If I were younger and were using a cell phone all the time, I would say this thing is heinous, or, I love it. I would then be prepared to argue either way. Now, I'm just pleased that I can get a goddamn call through on a cell phone without losing the signal.

JML: I remember you were there at the birth of television. You pondered it, you had many theories about it and you've written about it. It seems to me that in many ways the cell phone is almost equal in its power.

NM: Well let me just say I was never a great enthusiast about television...But I thought maybe there would be some good, new forms, and a rise in intelligence in the population. Only thing, I left the commercials out of it! I didn't anticipate the terrible impost that commercials would levy against our minds. The interruption of concentration. The blasting of concentration. But the cell phone has come too late for me to have strong feelings. I do know there is one bit of dialogue in almost every cell phone conversation. "I'm not hearing you very well." "OK, I'll shift to my land line."

JML: You've sometimes suggested that pure intellect may be closer to the Devil than the Lord. Which made me think, what about language? It is perhaps the most complex and subtle creation of intellect. Where does language fit in to this discussion?

NM: Language does not come just from intellect. Language is the marriage of intellect and the senses. That's a huge difference. Technology, for example, tends to be divorced from the senses. Plastic is divorced from the senses. Most electronic machines are not agreeable to employ. You know, think of the old fashioned iron vise in a man's workshop. It makes cranking sounds as you tighten it up, and you get a sense of whether the wood is being held properly. Not being crushed and not too loose. You have very little of that sensuous cognition with technological machines. At best, you're reading dials, and your eyes can have a little play with the subtlety of the dials. But you can't ask technology to enrich your senses. On the other hand, language comes out of the senses. Half of language is onomatopoeia. We love different languages for their qualities, their separate characteristics as sounds. I love German for its guttural richness. French for the emphasis it offers the base of my nose and throat. I love English for the postures possible in English, the manners one can employ in speaking it, Spanish for

the fire in your heart. The intensity of emotion, the irony. Ditto for Italian in its way. For its sense of bravura. All these reactions come from our senses. There is one rule of thumb about language. If you're in a new country and you want to learn the tongue you get a girlfriend of that nationality who doesn't speak your language and you'll learn much more quickly. So no, I reject the question.

JML: Well it did occur to me that I've never heard you speak philosophically about language.

NM: I had all sorts of theories years ago. But I never got down to grips with it. I do have these notions still. I think particular consonants in language have, for example, specific qualities. I think "R" almost always has to do with anger, rage, ire, fury, redness, roar. "L" has to do with love—lassitude, leisure, likelihood; "L" is tender... "S" is sibilant. "S" suggests hissing, displeasure, sinuosity, snakes. I tried to make up a rule for all the consonants, but it gets hard after a while. R, L and S are the easiest. "B" is almost always impact. "B", "K" you know. Break. Sounds that implode upon your ear tend to have relations to B, K. F....

JML: Well what is the relationship between God and the Devil to language?

NM: That's absolutely beyond me. Look, look! Animals come close to speaking. I had a dog fifty years ago, a standard poodle. Immensely bright. I always felt that his greatest pain, his true soul-suffering—because dogs in my opinion do have souls—and in fact parenthetically there is one very large but unascertainable notion, it may be that in Karma we go back into the animal chain again. In any event, this dog was extraordinary. He made sounds, truly tortured un-dog-like sounds in his throat. He was trying to speak English to me. Sounds you couldn't begin to spell out. I could make them for the tape recorder but you could never transcribe them. That dog wanted to speak. Dog to man just as equal to man to man. So, I could propose that all through the stages of evolution, God, too, was developing—God was discovering language. There may have been a point where the insects were chirping and humming, making all these needle-like sounds and God said, "There's got to be something better than this." God may well have been discovering higher possibilities to his universe. God, in that sense, rose from the slime along with us. This notion is more heartening to me than any belief that the divinity plays games with us, lays down the law for us, delivers us a complete manual on how to live. And that's the end of it. Just

keep your nose clean. Cling to the Ten Commandments, Buster, and keep those nostrils immaculate. Hell, why not look rather upon the Ten Commandments as a moral essence that humans extracted from human experience good and ill before the earliest script-writers sat down to write up the myth of Moses coming down from the mount with the tablets.

JML: Change of subject. You have little regard for Dante.

NM: Well, I've only read him in English translation. I'm sure in Italian he's much better. But in English I can't say I was impressed.

JML: You called him Johnny One Note.

NM: Yes. He's got nine circles of hell. That's a fascinating concept. Nine worsening circles of degradation, of defoliation of the leaves of one's soul. Yet, reading Dante in English, I can't tell one circle from another. They all stink. Everybody keeps suffering in very much the same way.

JML: No, no no

NM: That's what I got from my reading. I'm sorry.

JML: You didn't see the diversity of suffering?

NM: Not compared with what could have been done. I felt he was settling a lot of personal scores. Every author, sooner or later, will show his bad, ugly, mean, small side. But Dante abused the privilege. So many citizens of Florence were skewered. Too much of that. Compare him to Homer...Dante in my mind is...What's the word I'm looking for?

JML: Petty?

NM: At the least. Small. Much smaller. Now, in Italian I might have to change my mind to a certain extent. But not in English.

JML: That's what T.S. Eliot said. You have to be able to read the Italian to do it... And then it's fantastic. It's a fantastic language.

NM: Well, Dante probably had an insight into sounds. It isn't just because Eliot said it. T.S. Eliot can be a bore just like any of us. No, it's more that I

recognize that it's very hard for me to believe (on the basis of reading Dante in English and deciding that he's overrated) that I know more than all the people who read him in Italian and love him. On the other hand, I'm most suspicious of Literature Courses. From the word go, the student is told that this or that is most important.

JML: Exactly. But you admire Milton.

NM: Milton was not settling a lot of private scores. I have the feeling Milton was grappling with the same questions I'm wrestling with. Yes, I have a lot of respect for Milton. But not for Dante. Maybe you can show me sometime where the suffering intensifies. I couldn't see where. By the way, a thought in passing: Who came up with the nine innings of Baseball? Was it somebody who had read Dante? In a really exciting baseball game each inning becomes more and more like a deeper circle of hell. If everything is at stake and it's the last game of the World Series and the game is close all the way, by the ninth inning, everybody is in the ninth circle.

JML: I don't know where the nine innings came from. All right, here's my last question. Have recent geopolitical events reaffirmed or undercut your

theological beliefs? I mean, has the reelection of George Bush confirmed your belief system?

NM: I can answer that. Perhaps too simply. For four years I've felt that George Bush is one of the Devil's creatures. And I don't mean this in any large paranoid sense. You see, I believe that God and the Devil are in all of us. And it's very easy to find varying portions in oneself of one side or the other. But I suspect that George W. Bush is drenched with the Devil. Every time he feels that Jesus is speaking to him, I would bet it is the Devil doing a first-rate impersonation of the Son. One of the Devil's greatest talents is to talk like Jesus. And visit us in our dreams. And tell us how to do it, "Jesus loves you, Jesus is with you. Jesus is telling you to do this." Our war in Iraq has been so hideous and stupid and needless that it could only have been begun for the lowest reason. Which was that America needed a war to begin to unify our own country. But if a country can't be unified, without political subterfuges, then I say let it go down hill until it finds its honest unity. Don't give it a hypodermic. This is like using steroids. The war in Iraq has been steroidal for America. So in that sense, I think the Devil is wining right now in America, yes. And it's no small concern. I think people are beginning to feel this all over the world. Obviously, all too many feel

that way in France, in large parts of England, in Germany, and to a great extent in Italy and Spain. Certainly in the Middle East. You can't even begin to get into that. In Israel, being Jewish myself, I have to wonder how the hell they feel at this point. I remember many years ago at Norman Podhoretz's house, at a time when we were still friends, Rabin was there. He was a general at the time. And I remember saying to him—this was 45 years ago—“You know, if you get into a deep military relationship with America, it's going to screw you.” And he looked at me, as if I was such an innocent, and he said in effect, “What kind of choices do you think we have?” And, yes, I think we both were probably right. Depending on America for its military strength has done something to Israel that is irreparable. On the other hand, they had no alternative. The Arab nations gave them none. So I don't sit in judgment on Israel, but I do inveigh against America for going into war with Iraq.

Final word count: 8874

5
#5
^{holy}
(sp) (Come, ~~Holy~~ Ghost). While another singer, the lead singer, was

singing

^{holy}
(~~sp~~) a capella ^{holy} verses about the glories of being a priest, of the ~~holy~~

responsibilities and obligations, the special status that they had among
believers ending with the ancient pronouncement from the ordaining bishop,
“Thou art a priest forever.” It was a very moving, a very powerful
experience. It made me think of one of our earlier conversations in which
you noted that fundamentalists believe that if they keep their nose clean and
observe ritual, they had a ticket to heaven. Does ritual have any significant
merit for you or do you reject it completely?

NM: Neither. I’ve thought about it a great deal. ~~And~~, put it this way: I
≡

have high suspicions about ritual. It seems to me that ^{at best} it's a mixed blessing.

~~at best. And the reason for that is~~ you know one of my favorite remarks is

that repetition kills the soul. Well, obviously ^{that remark has} ~~this has~~ that is a remark that has to be

explored before we go ~~any~~ further. Any number of kinds of repetition are, I

^{well admit,} ~~(crucial to the human adventure and one of the ways in which we learn and~~ ^{venture, it is, after all,} ~~and~~ ^{so)}

^{And} we could not dispense with it is we learn through repetition. There is such a

thing as creative repetition where every time you do it you are getting a little

~~each time. You do get on to~~ ^{each time.} ~~better and a little deeper and you are getting on to something more. All of~~

~~that. So I grab at all that.~~ Nonetheless, I'm immensely suspicious of ritual,

^{where, after all} ~~because if you get down to it,~~ where does my theology start? What

occasions it? What stimulates it? ~~What gives me the confidence to go on~~

^{I would answer that it is} ~~with it.~~ Since I am not really a theologian in any way I know so little,

technically about the subject. And I think it's because I have worked as a

novelist all my life. If you work as a novelist, you're dealing in a funny,

~~way~~ and I don't want this to be misunderstood ^{but in a certain sense} ~~that you're dealing with~~

you are dealing with a few of ~~God's problems.~~ *(Judgements, particularly)* It doesn't mean that you have God's power in any way at

all, not even a smidgeon of it, it doesn't mean that you have ~~God's~~ ^{OK}

goodness, assuming that God is all good which I don't agree with anyway, ~~but~~

~~and all it means is that you end up,~~ *at your work,* If you're any good at all and you've

spent your life thinking about fiction and novel writing and characters and

Since few good, rarely, ~~human nature, if you are any good at all you end up with a sense of what~~

in a small extent, ~~the universe might be like and, at least a little bit, what god might be like.~~

Some even ~~You begin to posit the need for a Devil. There are very few novels that are~~

can do without ~~any good that don't need a villain, And the moment you begin to~~

~~one you are, soon~~
contemplate a villain you are of course, living with the notion of Evil. And

from Evil you arrive at the next idea, the Devil. Let me rest for a moment.

Now, where in all this is the
Picking up this argument from the place where I began, which is the

nature of repetition, it's relation to ritual. I will say that writing novels
in writing novel you look to do the opposite.
that tends to push one away from repetition. A good novel does not keep

repeating itself. That is exactly the hallmark of a bad novel. And so, most

good novelists are suspicious and wary of repetition. Moreover, And I have found, just

humanly speaking, that most people I don't like in life tend to be masters

or and monsters of mediocre repetition. The politicians we despise, are one example

example very often keep saying the same things over and over and over.

until you are ready to throttle them if you could get away with it. So given

develop an understanding when
all that, given that notion that repetition can be dangerous as used as a

~~power~~ tool by mediocre people, ^{and} adurations that are endlessly repetitive, ^{yo}

~~that wreck families.~~ ^{often} Tyrannical parents or even unimaginative parents who

what they say over and over, I can't

know nothing better than to repeat ~~all~~ that worries me greatly about the

I think it looks to get human
nature of ritual. ~~Because what ritual does it confirms, it sets it gets human~~

nature into a form. ~~And whether human nature should be put into such rigid~~

a form has always been a large question for me. Moreover, we know that

TV evangelists [del] seem diabolically
the fundamentalists, who I just distrust viscerally since I feel that their
inspired to me when they
permeation
~~notion of God is absolutely Devil inspired~~ cleave and cling to repetition.

So my guess on ritual, if I'm going to give you an answer—parenthetically

I'll say one more thing: This is I've been in one ritual once in my life apart

from the ones when I was a child and going to the Synagogue on Saturdays

occasionally where it's all ritual all repetition very much so.

ML: For thousands of years.

~~When I was a child I was bored stiff. Once in awhile I'd be slightly~~
~~moved and affected, however it really washed over me. I might just as well~~

~~have been a shell on the surf's edge with the waves washing over me and~~
~~washing away... Still except for a little wear and tear the same shell at the~~

~~end of the service was there at the beginning year after year. But I did have~~

~~one ritual that went through which was interesting to me. It was~~

~~Transcendental Meditation - TM - which was a fashion a few years ago.~~

~~No, not a few years ago, thirty five years ago. And I remember you had to~~

~~bring a flower to your instructor who was kind of a gawky kid who was~~

absolutely wild with the ^{a bout} religion of Transcendental Meditation which I ~~had~~

found, ^{no more than odd} in passing, slightly odd and boring, because ^{we were just supposed} you just emptied your

^{to empty your} head for twenty minutes, ^{not} didn't allow thoughts to come through and I said

to myself, "Why am I doing this? I've been doing this ^{for years as a writer,} all my life as a

^(one goes to work) writer." Every time you go up in the morning to work, the first thing ^{to} you do

~~is~~ is empty your head. So I'd been doing this ^{practising} Transcendental Meditation ^{willy-nilly}

~~without the fancy word on it~~ ~~the word I usually had on it was "I've got to~~

~~go through a half hour of boredom before I get going."~~ Nonetheless, they

~~said a few words in an Asian language, and then~~

~~said a few words, they gave me a mnemonic to repeat. I forget what mine,~~

~~It was something like~~ ^(Allan Ginsberg's) was. It was something like OM. Alan Ginsberg's old OOMM. I kept

repeating whatever the sound was in my head for twenty minutes.

^{an evant} Whenever a thought came through you ^{into your head, you were supposed to use} had to wash that thought away. ~~At~~

said, I brought a flower. ~~I think they sprinkled a little water into the air and~~

~~there was some perfume.~~ It was a very small ritual, but I ~~felt an effect.~~

did feel an effect. And I ~~recognized that with this two bit ritual.~~ Something

~~took place.~~ Obviously, ~~with a deep and powerful ritual,~~ a great deal ~~takes~~ ^{happens}

~~place.~~ So ~~I~~ ^{let me} move forward ~~from that to make my next point. Which is,~~

~~Given my fundamental notion that God and the Devil are at war all the time,~~

I would go so far as to ~~post~~ ^{suggest} that ritual ~~was first created by the Devil and~~ ^{may well have been}

God, recognizing its efficacy and determined not to lose any soul ~~he or she~~ ^(unnecessarily)

~~did not have to lose~~ entered ritual as well. ~~So~~ I think ritual becomes an

~~enmeshment~~ intense and fascinating mixture of the presence of God and the Devil. ~~And I~~

~~think it does call in the demons and the saints warring in.~~ ^{It} ~~think they do call them in.~~ There is a very sturdy power ^{to} of the repetitions;

the music, the chanting, the ceremony, the knowledge of everyone present,

the concentration of the principals so it ^{indeed} was ~~an~~
~~the intense consciousness of everyone present~~ This is a terribly important

~~moment in the scheme of things~~ ^{it may be} It brings the attendance of God and the

~~Devil~~. One of my favorite notions is that when major events occur the Lord

and Satan are absolutely there. That old remark by the general on the eve of

a great battle, gets out of bed and ^{first} ~~it is~~ very important to him whether or not

^{stretching} ^{first}
he puts ~~but~~ his left foot ~~or~~ his right foot first.

ML: A ritual?

^{but that is} NM: No ^{present} that's not a ritual, that's a sense that ~~the~~ powers are ~~there~~. This,

goes back after all, you know, ^{anyone} anyone who reads Homer will find nothing

strange about this. So, that I think would be ^{my} the way I would answer it. ~~I~~

I don't scoff at ritual ^{and} I don't trust it. I would be happier if we lived without it,

~~ritual~~ but I ^{have to} ~~recognize~~ ^{trust my} ~~my own ignorance, my own stance, my own~~

~~my life has~~ ^{had} ~~little to do with rituals,~~
upbringing my own tastes. ~~These~~ ^{are} the contributing factors to this. So

~~None the less, I can find it~~
that finally the last underlining remark I will make is that ritual is

fascinating ~~because if you want to study the nature of God and the Devil~~

~~interest is~~ that's not a bad place to start. Because there ^{they are} cooperating! One of

~~the notions about the war between God and the Devil~~ ^{that} keep in mind there

^{may be} ~~is~~ ^{when God and the Devil}
any number of occasions where they have to cooperate—exactly because

they each are trying to outwit the other ^{at times, to engage} and for that they have to have close

^{formal}
contact.

ML: Continuing just a little bit more on ritual, ^{what} ~~what about the rituals that~~ ^{concerning}

athletes. ~~I~~ I'm sure professional ~~heavy weight~~ boxers decide which glove is

going to be laced on first and how many minutes they want to be alone

before the fight and which jock strap they wear, ~~and the same with soldiers.~~

I know ~~with~~ professional baseball players have certain things ~~that~~ they have

to do. The center fielder has to step on second base when he runs in or you

know, the forces will be against him. So athletes are particularly

superstitious and they go ^{through} various rituals and preparations before and during

the game, ~~and~~ I know soldiers do the same thing. I ~~knew~~ ^{was} sailors when I was

in the Navy ^{I knew sailors} who were tremendously ritualistic about how they tied a knot.

It was a ~~very~~ bad omen if you tied a knot the wrong way, ~~or you~~ did

something on the ship ^{that} ~~and~~ it was not done exactly in the right way, ~~it was~~

~~just very, very bad luck and~~ ^{that} you felt like you were calling down evil things

upon you. These ~~aren't~~ ^{are not} religious rituals but they are ~~done~~ rituals of

~~athletes of soldiers and sailors~~ are often done with the knowledge that

there ^{is} something ~~around them~~ ^{in the air.}

NM: Yes. I used to be very susceptible to that when I was younger. ~~So I~~

~~I~~ do know what you are talking about. ^{Back} And I that period in San Francisco

in ~~1964~~ 1963, I used to walk
~~back~~ what was the year?
parapets which had sheer drops
to the street below, I used to
be full of dread every morning

~~ML: 64~~

(Norman, as your transcriber, I have no idea what you are referring to

~~here.)~~

NM: Early sixties—where I walk parapets in San Francisco all the

time... ~~used to dread every day~~ because I knew ^{that} before the day was ^{done} over I'd

be walking the parapets. ~~If there would be a bad fall on one side or the~~

other. This was my form of *levatism* because the parapets were not that

~~narrow~~. They varied in width between eight inches ^{to so much as} and very often a foot

and a half ^{in width} wide so there was no ^{great} risk at all unless you lost your head. ^{But} ~~at~~

~~right, the point is, I would suspect that in the cosmic nature of the relations,~~

of gods to humans, and ~~my saying the gods I mean God and the Devil, plus~~

~~plus their various angels, affiliates, cohorts, coworkers, what have you, the~~ ^{separate cohorts of angels and devils, the}

^{the} ~~whole~~ spirit world if you will, ^{does} ~~that they do~~ pay much more attention to

people ~~who are going to be engaged~~ in unusual events. Whereas we started

~~out~~ by talking about ritual, ^{now} we are involved with rote. Whenever

people engage in rote in other words, express superstition, ^{a superstitious fear} ~~go in for~~ ^{by going}

in for

~~repetitive or customary moves at a time~~ when a great deal is at stake, that ~~can~~

~~draw~~

attracts the attention of the Gods. ~~Just as I say coincidence occurs when~~

So, athletes

~~major events are going to occur one of my fundamental notions is that it~~

~~would be worth checking it out perhaps if one could is that when you~~

~~major events are occurring coincidences multiply. But not to get straight off~~

~~the point~~ athletes who are going to be playing in games ~~very important to~~

that with

~~them, very important to them in the scheme of things and if they're~~

~~sufficiently important to have a great influence on many young people or~~

~~are going to attract the attention~~
~~old people or other people crowds so to speak yes the gods are going to~~

~~of the gods. One does have the~~
~~pay attention. And so there is this feeling that one is engaged in something~~

~~where one is not alone, Surrounded by spirits at the least. I don't know if I~~

~~can go (sounds like 'further than that.' voice trails off)~~

ML: No, that, that does it. Ok. Um. I'll be moving around here a fair

~~amount.~~ ^{but when} When I was writing my Doctorial thesis on you, I never told you this story

~~this story, I had a chapter in my thesis on you, on your theology, your~~

~~cosmology. I had a philosophy professor on the committee, they always put~~

~~somebody out.~~ ^{plus} They had two or three English professors and a Philosophy

^{PLD} professor on the committee and he was going to ~~read it.~~ ^{he} And ~~he~~ argued with

me about it. Wrote me long letters.

NM: Let me get this straight, ~~I don't want to interrupt.~~ ^{this happened?} This is while you

were formulating the thesis ~~and he was asking you to shift your thesis?~~

ML: Yea, he was reading drafts, ^{like} a draft of the thesis. And he started, it

was the second chapter of my dissertation, about your cosmology, and he

~~argued me and he~~ said that your system, as far as he could understand it was
terribly incomplete.

(Mailer Laughs)

He said he could not find in it either ^abeginning, how the universe came into
being or ^{how it}ends. How the cosmic war would end at the end of time or even if
there would be an end of time.

NM: He sounds like a major league ~~Ass~~.

ML: ^{But he thought}well, no, he was gentle with me ~~but he kept saying...~~

~~NM: He didn't know the work. I mean he might have been a marvelous~~

~~any~~
ML: He thought that anybody who was a philosopher, had a philosophical system, ought to have—let me finish—

NM: Let me just stress one point: I never heard of ^{this before} ~~that~~ that you have to

have a beginning and an end to your philosophy. What about the Logical

^{Do they have}
positivists? ~~They live without~~ a beginning and an end?

ML: Well he was an Aristotelian. That explains a lot probably. But he also

felt that the chief thing was that you had no clear definition ^{of Being} ~~and~~ what he

believed and what a lot of philosophers believe—is the central question of

philosophy: Being. What is being? What is the ultimate nature of Man
what is the ultimate nature of God? What is being? When he confronted
me I kept saying, existentialism, existentialism. As much as I knew about it
and I knew a little but not a great deal, ~~to his questions~~. One of my English
professors on the committee said, "Look, Mailer is a literary man. He's not
a systematic philosopher. He has ideas, he has feelings ~~that are profound,~~
but he isn't out to create a philosophical system." And that's what finally
got the philosopher to back down. He goes, "You're right. This is a
literature ~~Ph.D.~~ ^{Ph.D.}, not a philosophy ~~Ph.D.~~ ^{Ph.D.}." But I've thought about it for many,
many years, this debate that we had. It kind of slowed things down
although it didn't hurt me in the end, and everybody—and you wrote about
Marx, Freud, Kierkegaard, Sartre, Schopenhauer—it wasn't that you

~~may be one of the concepts. Eternal, not eternity. Eternal. May be one of~~

~~the concepts that lock us up into the lack of knowledge the lack of~~

~~comprehension of the answer to questions.~~ The simplest ^{response} ~~response~~ I could give

is that no philosopher has ever come up with an answer to these questions

that is satisfactory to us. No human, and I won't be the first either, ~~but what~~

^{what} (I will say is this. I have ~~certain~~ basic beliefs. I don't know what we've been

talking about through these ~~five~~ interviews. I thought I'd said it. God is not

^{All P} ~~all~~ powerful and ^{All G} ~~all~~ good. God is ^{comparable to} like a Greek god if you will. ^{like Zeus} ~~like Zeus~~. If

^{if} we need some model. I don't need one. In other words, ^{god} ~~god~~ is a warrior

engaged in trying to shape some very large part of existence. How large is

^{consciousness} absolutely out of our ~~consciousness~~. I have no notion at all whether ^{our} ~~god~~ ₂ is a

god for the solar system or ^{includes} some of the galaxy, or half the galaxy. I have

~~does not go beyond the earth and the moon.~~

word, which is that ^{is not} existence is ~~not~~ predetermined. By its nature it is not

predetermined. It is open. So in other words, god has a vision of existence, ^{and we look to} ~~and we are fulfilling that notion and denying it.~~ ^{even as we often proceed to deny it.} Because I repeat, there is,

In addition, given ^{often} the war between God and the Devil that keeps God from expressing his or ^{coming near}

to it is on) ^{must always} her notion of how things should be, God ~~must live~~ in intolerable states of

frustration. That makes ~~much~~ ^{that} more sense to me than ^{he has} (God clearly knowing

exactly what ~~he~~ ^{is} or she is doing and ^{tells} telling us how to do it and were all little ^{so that we are}

~~no more than~~ ^{or particles in a Brownian movement} actors in a huge opera. ^{But} I've said this over and over. ~~So~~ ^{to} get back to it, the

— the end is open. Existence is open. This notion that there is a predetermined

place that we all will reach that there is a single point to existence which we

^{achieve} will find by working it out, that we will fulfill god's notion, ^{is} if you stop to

think of it, that's no more than ^{a personification of God} god as a vast opera director who is perfectly ^{the} of an immense opera ~~who~~ with a full script in hand.

happy because the script is at hand. But ^{I am} ~~I'm~~ ^{it is} ~~saying it's~~ more complex than

that, more difficult than that, ^{we are} ~~it's~~ more ennobling than that. We're not just

serfs. ^{from} ~~we're~~ not just children drawn in off the street to be part of the

children's chorus, but not allowed to sing. We are ^{the base} ~~part of~~ that opera. And

^{so to demand of me as a philosophical presentation,} ~~there is not to demand philosophically~~ that I say where we are going, is to

^{unanswerable} ~~of best~~ my point of view, an outrageous demand. All we can know ^{is} ~~are~~

^{might be} ~~at~~ the present. Everything in ^{our} ~~our~~ existence fortifies this concept ^{to} ~~to~~ me. I

know where I am at ^{the} ~~the~~ moment within reason. ^{But do} ~~do~~ I know where I will be

in a year? ^{Will I still} ~~Do I know if I will be alive?~~ No. ^{If I should remain} ~~Do I know if I'm alive for~~

^{a live for an} ~~(twenty years, do I have any notion of where I will be, do I have any concept~~

^{Hardly,} ~~of~~ where society will be in a hundred years? ~~No~~. We live in the present.

^{That is} ~~That's~~ all we are given. And ^{do} ~~we~~ have instincts which ^{and they can be powerful} ~~I would go so far~~

as to say I would go along with ^{Goethe} ~~Goethe~~ on this: ~~That~~ These powerful instincts are

god-given. We are embodying god's plans, but ^{such plans} ~~gods plans~~ are subject to

change because ~~the nature of existence is so complex. And~~ the storms of

the cosmos are not all prerecorded, ^{but} ~~for god~~. God is an artist, not in

^{total} command of the ship of the ^{universe} ~~universe~~.

ML: The moment of death carries more weight in your theological thinking

than in any other I know of, ~~even Mother Theresa's~~, but I don't see any

consideration of what happens to I believe it's 20% of all people who die

~~they die~~ of strokes, heart attacks, aneurisms, ~~some people are dead~~, I have a

friend who died, ³⁰ ~~he was dead~~ before he hit the ground—you

know, there is no time for them to prepare themselves, there is no time to

reflect, project, anything. Are they just unlucky, is this just a flaw in the way god did things given the importance of our state of mind when we go into eternity? These people have no chance.

NM: To begin with, ^{there is} ~~the answer is~~, nobody dies without a moment. You know, ^{that} the famous Catholic notion ^{that} (Graham Greene) was obsessed with ^{stirrup} ~~something~~ between the ¹ and the ground. Time, after all, to anyone who has had experience with even minor drugs like ~~Marijuana~~ knows that time is extendable; time telescopes, time compresses. One can have a tenth of a second that feels like five minutes in a dream, ² so they tell me. ~~But~~ In that sense, the notion that you die without warning, no. But apart from that, even if you have very little time at the moment before your death, that's not

death where it takes place. It takes place ^{within us,} as we live our lives. ^{That} It is exactly where

morality enters ^{into} everyone's consciousness. The question, "Am I a good man,

or a bad man?" ^{accompanies,} is with us from a ^{very} early age. ^{It is} It is with us as children

"Am I a good child or a bad child?" As you get older and ^{commence to} you begin to

think more ^{and more} about death, so you ^{also} think more ^{and more} about if there

is judgment. ^{Of course,} because not everyone believes in judgment. ^{It is} one of the things

that is ^{that so} disheartening is ^{hear} very often you will see ^{some} rather fine people say "oh,

there is nothing after this. All I want is a little peace." It is a ^{very} sad

remark ^{because,} particularly sad to me because, given my notion that ^{many of} we're ^{us} ~~have to~~ look to the promise of being ^{it is sad if life has been} reborn that many of us, perhaps most of us, indeed some of us are reborn

^{so corrosive that} (two or three words unintelligible) and repeat my notions about

~~reincarnation so it's very sad if one does not want to be reincarnated~~ ^{can} ^{reincarnated} That

~~in a sense~~, suggests ^{so} a deep sense of defeat. ~~In one's own human purpose.~~

~~It, as I presume,~~ ^{look to}
~~And as I've said earlier, since~~ our human purposes align with god's purpose,
~~we are then~~
~~it is in the very deep sense~~ turning against god as well.

ML: I guess I'm not making myself sufficiently clear. We had a long

discussion in which you emphasized how critical the final moments of one's

life was. ^{according to you,} They were just extraordinarily important because that was the time

you could really prepare yourself ~~and think about what you were going to do.~~

~~and~~ you used the example of the people in the ~~death~~ chambers, in the gas

chambers who were cheated out of that moment and ^{how} ~~it was~~ a terrible thing ^{it was}

^{But you} for them. You know, if you have a brain aneurism, you don't have a tenth

of a second. You have nothing. Your brain stops. There's no thought.

Maybe some people can do, like Graham Greene a perfect act of contrition
before they hit the ground and then go to heaven, that old Catholic idea—

NM: Yea, yea, but I don't ^{buy} ~~buy~~ any of that....

ML: I know you don't, I ~~know you don't~~ ^{did}, but you ^{put} all this emphasis on ^{how}
^{you} ^{say} the end of it and I'm wondering....

NM: Let's say that 99% of the people who are alive have a reasonable
amount of time to think before they die.

ML: They do.

All right, then,
NM: ~~Alright~~ So you are talking ~~about~~ the one percent. And if I can't

~~account for that~~

contain ~~the~~ one percent then I can't. Everything ~~that~~ I attempt here, if I ~~can~~ ^{may}

~~(the assumption that it is)~~ honor it with the word ~~philosophically~~ suggests that we don't have a ~~look for~~

~~one~~ hundred percent ~~for~~ ⁱⁿ anything. I'm opposed to the notion that any kind of

~~call that~~ ~~That's~~ ~~It's~~ thought can be complete and totally comprehensive. That's part of the

reason that we get into such terrible troubles. It's one of the reasons ~~that~~ I ^{so}

~~It insists on~~ detest fundamentalism. ~~I don't like one hundred percent theories~~ So let's

~~say that~~ ^{maybe} what I have to say is valid for 9/10ths of people, or 99% ^{the} of people,

or 80% of people, but ~~what~~ I do believe that, yes, our preparation for death

is ~~very~~ important. And for those of us that have the opportunity to think ~~—~~

about it and mind you, I think we think about it more and more quickly as

we go on, more and more quickly. So that if you have just a few minutes at

~~to prepare yourself~~
the end, it isn't as if you are suddenly facing death for the first time; you ^{have}

been facing it all your life. ~~Let us say, you have thanked,~~
But now you are ~~really~~ refining ~~it~~. You are

are handing in the final submission.

Now, let me go back a moment. As
I've indicated, I think

ML: And if God is limited, then it occurred to me that god didn't work this
out. He created a human being that dies in a variety of ways and one of
these ways didn't allow for this. All right. God's—um I'm not perfect.

NM: I don't think we're all reincarnated. I don't think that at all. I think

~~reincarnation is a species of reward. And that's why I get depressed when~~
~~To repeat that's~~

people say, "Oh, I ^{just} want some peace." And mean it. ~~They want to be off the~~

others can feel that with
board. Whereas some feel, no, life is interesting enough. Life is,

if they've caused, that there is
challenging enough. With all the bad that one's experienced, there was still

in them to I believe that
enough good that one wants another chance at it. And of course I go back

God is often ^{sometimes} ready to give that chance
to the most improbable cases. I go back to my
to my basic notion: God is the artist. An artist is never satisfied with what

has been achieved. A fine can look
was done. With what the artist has created. The artist ~~often~~ can look

for another attempt to
another chance to do it better, to do it better. But that, in terms of art work,

gets very limiting and, as a practical matter, we don't redo many of our art

works. That's rare. But in terms of Humans who are much more interesting

even
that I believe that still an intrinsic
beyond the greatest art works, the dullest human is a work of art beyond our

maybe for the Lord/ can improve
measure. So there is every reason to want to redo, to see if this human ~~see~~

can improve. But ~~that's~~ I ~~believe~~
what I'm getting at is that God is our Father, if you will, God is our parent.
cannot. But good parents
Parents never control their children. They're never in total knowledge of

~~their children. They're doing the best with their children. Their children are~~ ^{They can remain}

~~in part~~ If we are fascinated by the nature of God, (a mystery to them. As well as a form of certitude. And so God is fascinated ~~but God in His turn may want~~ but God is fascinated ~~with the mystery we present to God.~~ ^{him.} {R4067} God wants to know about many of us.

~~may many of)~~ God needs us. He ~~wants~~ ^{is} God wants us to come back. However, the scriptures are still there. You.

are not to want it for too little. Not ever. God's engaged in an heroic

adventure. Which is to take ~~God's~~ ^{His} notion of existence and carry it across the

stars. And for that, ~~God~~ ^{God} needs humans to become ~~better and better~~ ^{become} all the

~~time~~ more and more extraordinary. More and more wonderful. Well for ^{But, you}

~~that, they've got to develop. You~~ don't create people who are wonderful by

an act of will. Often, such ^{can} development comes ~~out of~~ ^{from} rebirth.

~~If you are~~ Out of being put in situations where ~~you~~ ^{but succeed} failed in one life, for example, in the next, ~~then, you, to that degree, you~~ have made God happy, you have strength ^{that} I'll give you very crude examples, if one was a coward physically speaking in this purpose.

If let me ~~offer~~ offer a crude scenario.

~~ITS~~ ^{you are}
in certain ways in one existence and terrified of heights, well then possibly

~~for~~ ^{you are placed}
in the next existence if one was rather marvelous in other ways, god sites

~~So~~ ^{So the}
you in a family of mountain climbers. And a child may go through horrors

^{in its new} ^{this child has}
at an early stage. But now they've got guides ^{to} human guides who ~~can~~ carry him

^{or having an advice} ^{reach}
them into a place where they couldn't go in their previous life. Well, take

^{if to not go back to} ^{your first} ^{question}
that in all sorts of examples. In other words, it's the development of the

human that is one of the elements you could say, going back to the initial

^{of why} ^{I would say that}
~~question "why the death is important?"~~ it's because maybe at the

moment of one's death one has a better sense of what one did or didn't do in

one's life and what one ^{might} would like to be in one's ^{next} life, and maybe that gives a

^{give a} ^{the} [?]
coloration to one's soul at the last moment, which is aid to all those poor

~~overworked monitors in all those immense bureaucratic halls of karmic~~

reassignment.

~~Yes.~~
ML: ~~You, yes... That's good. That's Very good. This will be~~

~~NM: Where are we on tape?~~

~~ML: We're good. Um, What happens, and this is sort of a continuation of~~
ML: All right. Let us say that ^{such} ~~the a~~
what you just said, what happens to the souls of individuals if god has put ~~a~~

~~where to put them on a good~~
them on the right track in their reincarnation and the person becomes a ^{does}

successful mountain climber and is ~~no longer a coward and is~~ no longer

^{succession of such good}
afraid of heights? If you have a long run of successful reincarnations and

^{Does a person ever get to be}
^{Do you ever}
~~keep improving, what happens then? If you get as good as you are going to get?~~

it is possible to become?

~~get?~~

NM: No, no. ~~Forgive me. But I think that's a lame proposition. To begin~~

~~with, there is so much to do. We are so far from being anywhere near any~~

~~remote~~ kind of perfection. Most of us are so highly imperfect, so

underdeveloped, so frustrated, so small in relation to what we could have

been, every one of us, even those of us who are ^{relatively} successful, ^{that} ~~that what you've~~
~~the question is also how much~~ ^{become} ~~got, to speak of eternity, if this happens to be your first eternity, is that~~

~~learned from us?~~
~~God knew that is~~
everything gets so good. More than that, not every reincarnation is a

~~success.~~

~~ML: I understand. I'm just trying to~~

~~NM: No, no no. The question is: God is trying to learn more about us. That~~

~~is my fundamental point. It isn't that god understands us—~~ *so well that* ~~don't do this and~~

all we need is
~~do this—and that one needs a little tweaking here and that one needs a little~~

~~←(something) down there, it's not like that. It's that God is~~ *learning along*

with us. Think of God as a protagonist rather than a divinity. A protagonist

(divine decisions on) *well, others do not*
in the cosmos. ~~And so, some reincarnations work well; some don't. The~~ *better the far us,*
~~and some prove worse~~ *God's*
~~desire of one wants to be in the next life is not necessarily well grounded,~~ *the hope*

~~The moment you die you might say, "I want to be this!" And god might say,~~

God's hope is that His
~~"OK, let he or she have what they want." And it might be a mistake. Just,~~

works succeed more often than
~~like a child saying, "I want this candy!" And the parent doing it. We don't,~~
they fail.

~~know, we don't know. Some incarnations improve. Some don't. The hope,~~

is that reincarnation as a ~~general overall, near universal system~~, works more ~~often~~

~~than it fails.~~

ML: So most of the ~~run~~ of reincarnations would be like a roller coaster than ^{not show}

^{clear} it would be a ~~straight~~ improvement or a ~~straight~~ decline. [?] It would be a ~~straight~~

~~mixture~~

NM: Who knows? ~~We don't know the form at any given moment. There~~

~~would be periods lets say, when god as the protagonist, and his particular~~

~~monitors who are working.~~ Who knows whether ^{it is who} God ^{is} makes every single

decision or if there ^{are} ~~is~~ a myriad of ^{monitoring angels} ~~monitors~~

For that matter, → p41

~~ML: A delegation.~~

~~NM: An endless delegation. An endless committee. Who knows how~~

~~Democratic the whole damn thing is. That's absolutely beyond our~~

~~measure. All I'm getting at is, (there are probably periods where god is more~~

~~successful than others in improving the level of reincarnation, the success-~~

~~rate, if you will. But let's stay away from near-corporate images. By the~~

~~way, let me insert—Have I ever told you the joke that I tell to audiences~~

~~about my own reincarnation? That's in our, our...~~

~~ML: Yes...~~

NM: Alright. Well, I go back to that. You know.

ML: We talked about that.

NM: Alright.

ML. ~~And these reincarnations, let's see, these human beings~~ ^{Since} as far as we
know, ~~and I understand that we could be deceived or wrong,~~
^{gone} ~~three or four million years, is it possible that there are souls from the earliest~~ ^{the or}
human beings who have been reincarnated for all of that time?

NM: Well, I'm going to get your professor very annoyed now. ^{Because} ~~Because~~ I

~~don't have a clue. (NM laughs) I would think, if you want me to guess, I,~~

~~can guess, but it's no more than a guess. I tell you, one how to put it?~~

~~One excursion on this notion, one expedition to the side of this notion is that.~~

→ Karma, itself may be embattled. In other words, when you think of one of

~~the great horrors of war, when too many people die at once, like the atom~~

~~bomb explosion,~~

(Note: Or an act of God on a sky blue Christmas day in an Asian Paradise? Ref: The

Tsunami)

when a hundred thousand souls are incinerated in one

~~second~~ ^{that} may create great damage in Karma. Karma may not be equipped

to deal with ~~that~~ ^{so} many deaths at once. That may well be ^{in an instant might this not be} one of the Devil's

most profound urges. ^{? To rail} You mess up Karma forever! Destroy reincarnation,

~~Reincarnation is god's avenue. Reincarnation is god's way of adjusting the~~

~~balance.~~

balance.

balance. If things get away with a given individual — and I'm sure god has

interest in all of us, but in varying degrees like an overworked parent, god

God

might feel at a certain moment after someone has died that that particular

man or woman did not receive enough ^{divine} attention, and god would look to

improve that in the next incarnation. In other words, the one judgment we

may get is neither heaven nor hell, but finally whether we are given a better

or fuller chance the next time out. If we're going to be punished for our sins

it might well be we be really a son-of-a-bitch in our existence in one life,

and then we may be born under the most hideous of circumstances in the

next.

ML: It doesn't strike me, given everything we've said, I don't see any

reason why reincarnations can't go on for a couple of million years. Why

not? No problem.

~~Is it?~~
NM: The ~~only~~ question there is how much time god has. You see, is it a
Does he have ~~lots~~ of time, or is it a cosmic race
race to convince the cosmos or is there endless time? There may not be. It,

~~There may be~~
~~It~~ may be that there are other visions of existence seeking to overtake us in
the universe. Given that as the case,
which case god may be in a great hurry. God may have less patience now

~~He possessed~~ of ~~of~~
than god had three hundred thousand years ago. And that, again, is beyond

me. One of the things I'm amazed at by that professor, and I keep coming

~~When does he get~~
back to him, is the notion that one can have an answer for everything. ~~Is an~~

athema.

ML: He just felt that there was too much indeterminism. He couldn't put his finger on—

NM: Where is Kant's final determinism? What does Kant have to day that's final? Where does Kant give us the rock of the ages?

ML: I don't know. I don't know enough about Kant.

NM: I don't either. (*sounds like Bawaarska, ??*) Spinoza, the great ones.

ML: Well, Spinoza had...

NM: Spinoza said that the existence... Was he a (can't make out) or a duelist? I can't remember...

ML: I thought he was a Moenist. (sp)

NM: Alright so he was a Moenist. So is that the rock of the ages?

ML: Well, ^{PhD} ~~to go back to the philosophy professor~~ even the Maniqiens and the Zorastorians all (~~phonetic~~ spellings) find some terminus to this whole process and I think that's probably what troubled the guy the most. The origins are always the most difficult thing, but the ~~teological~~ ^{teleological} There is usually some teleological sense among all philosophers about how it's going to turn out in the end.

I would say that
NM: God has a vision of existence ~~that god feels~~ ^{which} is more creative ^{and} more
competing
useful to the future than other ~~visions of the future~~ ^{in the cosmos}

ML: What is that vision?

can
NM: That life ^{can} become more and more creative, diverse and splendid and
incredible.

ML: OK

NM: Now give me another vision of existence. That we all are to sit in

heavenly fold and listen to hymns which are beautiful because ~~God~~ has put

us in heaven? What the hell is more final about that?

ML: There is the vision in many religions that you merge with the universal mind. You merge with the mind of god, you become part and parcel of god.

And you just exist not in just sugar land, amusement park or club med ~~or~~

~~any~~ something like that but ~~you~~ exist in pure intellectual bliss having been

completely purged of all weaknesses and corruptions and so forth. In many

religions. The Hindus have that and

NM: That assumes that we're all there to get to a certain place. ~~The reason~~ *If we*

~~we're here is 'cuz if we, to use the expression, try to keep our noses clean~~ *lives*

enough, we will reach heavenly bliss. ~~And~~ I'm saying heavenly bliss is not

guaranteed. ~~That the nature of existence is~~ everything we know about the

nature of existence is that it's cruel, paradoxical, glorious, disappointing,

~~tremendous,~~ ^{and often,} ~~more modest than we expected.~~ ^{And so I believe} ~~And~~ that our best bet is to be

part of ^{a vast} ~~the great~~ creative process that is attempting to go somewhere without

necessarily knowing what the end is. ~~We work in our lives all the time~~ ^{we certainly work}

without knowing what the end is. ^{one we possess} ~~The only end that we know~~ is that we're

going to die. ~~But what we~~ ^{own} ~~don't know~~ ^{that} is what will be the end after death.

^{be such} ~~Will there be an end after death, will there not be? That's one question we~~

~~don't know the answer to.~~ We can ~~only~~ ^{ought to} assume certain answers, but we

^{we're only making} ~~know that we've made an assumption.~~ ^{but we add that if} ~~We don't have a certainty.~~ So given

this ~~that~~ every one of our understandings ^{comes} ~~come~~ down to ^{uncertainty} ~~we don't know~~

~~what the end is~~ why assume that ^{God}~~god~~ knows what the end is? That is a very

large assumption ^{Just} if ~~you~~ stop to think about it, ~~it's not~~

ML: That's essentially what I said back to this guy. And you know, he finally realized that he was dealing with something he wasn't going to be completely satisf— He saw... It wasn't that he didn't see any merit in what you had—

NM: No, I'm not peeved that he didn't see any merit. And I'm attacking him in--- but um, I was struck with was his notion that philosophies give answers. I remember when I took my freshman course in Philosophy at Harvard how irritated I was that there were no final answers. I mean there

was Plato, there was Aristotle there was all of them, but no, there was never any real answer. I wanted to know how shall I live my life? What is there for me? What is good? What is bad? I never got answers. There aren't answers, there are only questions. John Maliquais made that remark.

ML: Yea, you said that... Um.... American historians, for a long time have debated the concept of what they call American Exceptionalism. The idea that the united States has a special roll in history, perhaps even a divine roll. Devine destiny. It goes back to the Puritans, back to Governor Bradford, the City on the Hill. Does this notion mean anything to you, does it

ML:
resonate with you, does it fit or not fit in your theology that America has a special place in ~~the~~ divine project, in god's vision?

that The disaster Guerguine
NM: I've written a lot about it lately. About American Exceptionalism.
in Iraq can be blamed on American)
Since I'm very opposed to the disaster of the war in Vietnam, not Iraq. I

I would say that all of us
blame American Exceptionalism for it. My feeling is that we humans all

all humans, just/
belong to exceptionalism. Not Americans. All of the globe is part of god's

exceptionalism. Which is to translate, it isn't any particular country that

represents ^{God's} ^{sense} gods basic notion of how to do it. It's the human creature that

represents it. I see all of evolution as gods attempt to experiment with

higher and higher animals. God made errors all along the way. The

dinosaurs were a vast error. ...is god finding his or her way? Or believe that

dinosaurs were the answer?

It's dangerous to think

let
Americans
have
a
purchase
on
excep-
tion-
alism
thru,

ML: Well why couldn't some humans be more successful and god pay more attention....

NM: Absolutely, absolutely...

ML: ...at certain countries at certain times...

NM: No, but to the point where one country alone. I could see where certain people in certain countries are very important to god. There could be somebody in Thailand who is more important to god at this moment than all of America put together. Who knows? That's not the point. The *to assume* ~~assumption, the vain glory of assuming that America is it and this is god's~~

So god's sales could God put up

~~desire... How could god put up for god sales~~ (with suburbs and malls and

superhighways and plastics...
?

ML: Well, maybe we've blown it. You know, in the beginning, the idea of

American Exceptionalism came from the idea that they blew it in Europe.

~~They blew~~ it. There was endless wars and corruption. And we were a new

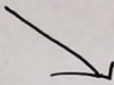
start.

NM: I won't argue ~~with that~~. *So America* God may have had certain hopes. ~~Even a~~

~~hundred and fifty years ago, two hundred years ago maybe even a hundred~~

~~years ago~~. But I don't think ^{we} ~~god~~ has had much hope since the Second

World War. *In the last five decades* ~~I think we've blown it badly since the Second World War.~~
Since then


~~And~~ we've cheapened the very surface of life. We've ruined the freshness

of the air, the cleanliness of the rivers. ~~I don't want to get into ranting. But~~

~~no, in fact.~~ At this point I would say that America is not a country whose

spiritual goodness ^{*holds up under*} ~~bears much~~ examination.

ML: I know when Kennedy was assassinated somebody said, and you

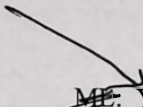
quoted it, that god ~~had~~ withdrawn his blessing from America.

NM: ~~I think~~ ^{*believe*} it was John Updike.

ML: ~~Yea, I think it was Updike.~~ And that remark moved you.



~~NM: Yea. Yea~~


~~ME:~~ You thought he might be on to something there.

NM: Yea. Yea

ML: Several times in this and other conversations I've had with you, ~~and in,~~
~~your writings,~~ you've mentioned the possibility that god might have intended ~~ed~~
~~human beings~~ to develop their telepathic powers.



~~NM: Yea.~~

~~ML: Well, there was a little bit of it way back.~~

NM: Dickens enters people's minds.

ML: Not much. Not like Joyce. Or Virginia Wolfe ~~or people like that.~~

NM: All right.

ML: Do your speculations about telepathy have anything to do with using
this novelistic tool? I mean you certainly explore the consciousness of
virtually all of your heros. You rarely see characters from just the outside.

NM: Yes, but I don't think that I would lay claim to any more telepathy

than is average. ~~That is~~ ^{it is} we all have the experience of occasionally thinking

of a song and someone ^{in the room} starts humming it. As example I found in Doyle

~~(Texas something... Great poker player) was talking about ESP and we're all~~

~~aware of ESP. People who are married for a while very often find they~~ ^{are}

thinking ^{of} something at the same time. Or we ^{phone} ~~call~~ someone just as they are

about to call us. ~~There's all of that.~~ But in terms of practical novel writing

I think this is ~~much more interesting... There is a much more available~~

~~dialectic that takes place. Which is we study everybody from the outside in~~

~~life.~~ Once in a while, through love, ^{del} we enter literally the body ^{or} of the soul of

someone else. But generally speaking, we observe. ~~we also~~ ^{we have} the faculty

of imagination and we have ^{life} ~~our own~~ experience. And I've always felt that

to be a good novelist one must be able to project that imagination into far

places. It's my old notion of crystals which I've talked about many times.

There are
~~That there's~~ certain experiences which should never be written about

are too
because they ~~are~~ crystalline. And ~~one~~ can beam one's imagination through

them from many a direction and obtain many a character and many an event

that one was never near. And yet there's a wonderful verisimilitude to it

because you've protected the crystal. All right, that involves writing. Let

me try to resume. We also, novelists, study society in various ways. Some,

come
~~novelists much more than others.~~ We try to understand how the social

enter into
machine works. We try to understand ~~how~~ characters different from

We work with the
ourselves, ~~work~~. There is this notion that there ~~is~~ a little bit of ourselves in

the stranger. Certain
someone else. ~~We can if we've done enough of the work over the years, we~~

~~can project out a notion of their lives that is complex and real and the~~

cb/ they are mostly from
character comes alive even though he's different than one's self. The best

All the same
novelists can do that. They can go very far away from themselves.

~~Parenthetically, I have always respected novelists who try for more than~~

~~novelists who are very good at genre. In other words, novelists who write~~

~~about things that they know very well and they do it to a tee, and they are~~

~~superb, but they don't venture out. So given all that, telepathy is a very~~

now, I do believe, however
small part of it. ~~There might be people who have much more in the way of~~

~~telepathic powers, but I wouldn't lay such claim for myself.~~

ML: I just get this sense from you that you believe that perhaps we were

~~years ago, ten thousand years ago, people might have been developing in~~

~~that direction but since that time it's atrophied.~~

~~NM: Oh, absolutely. That I do believe and I didn't pick up on your~~

~~question. That's absolutely certain. I do believe that the divinity did want~~

~~us to be telepathic. God did not ^{necessarily enjoin} see electronics. Electronics ^{I suspect} are the Devil's~~

~~contribution.~~

~~purpose.~~ (God just assumed we would become more and more telepathic

and in the course of that ^{there} ~~would develop more and more and more and there,~~

would be less and less need for technology, ^{Technology still flows} ~~which stifles god's creation.~~

~~That is, smog is not good for god's air. Static is not good for our ears. Um,~~

I don't want to go through the old litany of all the things that ^{is} ~~are~~ wrong with

^{I will add one notion, however,} ~~modern civilization. Um, but yes, I've said that. It seems that all I can do~~

~~now is reassert the notion that... Let me add to it one other notion which is~~

which is

that now that technology is ^{with us,} ~~here~~ we have to look upon human history as

~~God's~~ attempt to deal with the Devil. ~~In other words if~~

establishing technological shoots and outbursts and venues and avenues all

God must engage Bat
through society, ~~god (something)~~ technology as well. (He comes in second.

The ~~Devil~~ ^{So} is the pioneer in technology. I would assert.

Bat on
ML: Right. And you stated that pretty much from the age of enlightenment,
~~on you were on to that. But I wondered.~~

technology that is sweeping not just the US but the world—in fact the

~~U~~nited States I understand, is behind great portions of the world, certainly

Europe and Asia—is cell phones. Only half the people in the States use cell

phones, but in Asia and in Europe it's much higher than that. It's sixty,

seventy percent. And, of course, I see all the time, and I see students using it,

and I'm pondering it. Is it the opportunity to call up people all the time, any

where in the world almost, when you want to ~~and confirm some thing or get~~

~~some information or call your mother. Or call your lover or something like~~

that. It's creating a whole new set of communications in the world that

never existed before. Is this ~~How must god and the devil deal with this?~~

~~Is this something that could benefit either of them?~~

NM: Well, it could obviously benefit either of them, ~~benefit both of them.~~

~~But I am~~ My feeling, I'm an old curmudgeon. My feeling is ~~that~~ it's more of a mess

than ~~it is~~ a help. Because I'm not all sure that instant communication with

everyone alive is ~~ideal.~~ ~~see death. (? French?)~~ Not at all. Because very often it's

the hunt for information that creates the ^{development} use that we make of ~~that~~ ^{such}

information ~~and the development of it.~~ In other words ^W we are stimulated by

the hunt for information and ~~the difficulty~~ ^T becomes part of the intellectual

process. ^{So, we do,} ~~Once we've arrived at it, and had to go and work and get it, we do~~

more with it. Everybody is talking these days ^{of gluts} of gluts of information. ~~We~~

~~do.~~ We're all buried under tremendous amounts ^{mountain ranges of data,} of information. ^{are} Which

~~may be~~ stultifying ~~to~~ ^{imagination} ~~So I don't~~ I can't speak with authority

on this question, ^{but if I were} ~~I'm simply too old to deal with that question. If I were~~

younger and ~~were~~ using a cell phone all the time I would say this thing is

^{As of now,} heinous, or I love it. And I would be prepared to ~~argue either way but I am~~

~~not. I find a cell phone a joke so~~ ^{when} I'm just pleased ~~that~~ I can get a goddamn

number through without bugging it.

ML: I remember, you were there, at the birth of television and you

~~pondered it, you thought about it and~~ had many theories about it and you've

written about it ~~quite a bit and~~ it seems to me that the cell phone in many

ways is almost equal ~~in many ways~~ in its power.

back in the early days, everybody
NM: Well ~~let me just say that~~ *with television, I left out of the equation the*
who felt positive about it left the ones out ~~who felt positive about it left the ones out~~ *of the equation. The commercials*
~~commercials in the early days. I thought maybe... I was never a great~~
did a terrible thing to the American
~~enthusiast about television... But I thought maybe there will be all sorts of~~
people. They introduced the expectation
~~new forms, an arise in intelligence in the population as a whole. And I left~~
that your powers of concentration
~~the commercials out of it. And the terrible thing that commercials~~
would suffer a series of hits through
every hour that you watched
~~introduced. Which is the interruption of concentration. So by now the cell~~

phone has come to late for me to have strong feelings about it. I do know

there is one line in almost every cell phone conversation. "I'm not hearing

you very well." "OK, I'll use my land line."

ML: Yea.

NM: "I'll Shift to my land line."

ML: ~~we've talked about the devil and how the devil's association with pure~~

~~intellect and pure intellect of course... technology being a creation of pure~~

~~intellect, and~~ ^{to your mind} you've made it clear that pure intellect may be closer to the

~~Devil~~ than the ~~Lord~~. Which made me think, what about language which is

perhaps the most complex and subtle creation of intellect. Where does

language fit ^{into} ~~in to~~ this ~~whole~~ discussion? [?] ~~this whole pow-wow?~~

NM: ~~Let me just interrupt before I lose it.~~ Language does not ~~just~~ come ^{only}

from intellect. Language is the marriage of intellect and the senses. ~~And~~

That's a huge difference. ^{Whereas} ~~A huge difference.~~ Technology is ^{often} ~~rather~~ divorced

from the senses. ~~You have to speak about a particular object.~~ ^{For example,} Plastic is

~~divorced from the senses.~~ Most electronic machines are not agreeable to

^{Think of cast-iron vice in an old-fashioned cellar,}
employ. ~~You know the old-fashioned Iron Vice in a man's work shop.~~ By

~~god~~ ^{it} makes cranking sounds as you use it, and you ^{able to get a} ~~tighten~~ it up, you've a

feeling as you tighten it ^{at what for the piece} ~~you~~ get as sense of how the wood ~~in~~ the vice is

being held properly. Not being crushed and not ^{too} ~~loose~~. You ^{obtain} ~~have~~ very little

of that with technological machines. At best you're reading dials, perhaps,

and your eyes ^{find} have a little play with the subtlety of the dials. But you can't

ask ~~for much from~~ ^{to do much of} technology ^{in terms of} enriching ^{your senses.} ^{Language}

comes out of the senses. Half of language is ^{anomotopia, like an} ~~anomotopia~~ ^{We love}

^{drawn to} ^{by} (different languages for their qualities. I love German for ^{its} ~~its~~ gutturalness. I ^{vibrations on one's larynx and,}

^{love} French for the emphasis upon the nose, the centrality of the nose ⁱⁿ

~~French~~ ^{manuscript available to your voice, and,} I love English for the ^{postures possible in English.} I love Spanish

for the fire ^{that} ^{within} you can feel ⁱⁿ it. The sense of emotion and anger and rage.

Ditto for Italian ^{with its} ^{reactions,} in its way for its sense of bravura. All these ^{come from}

So, I can separate ~~technology~~ ^{technology and} senses. Language comes in part from the ~~cosmos~~ ^{and people copulating.}

It's known. There is one rule of thumb about language, its if you're in a ^{new country and you want to learn the language you get a girlfriend of that}

language — they exist at the ^{opposite poles of intellect}

nationality who doesn't speak your language and you'll learn it much more quickly. So no, I reject the question.

ML: ~~Well I was just trying to think of what we hadn't talked about in relation to theology and one of things I came up with was ritual and one of the things was language. I guess I see you as a great user of language somebody who uses it deftly and in all of its resources but I've never heard you speak ^{before} philosophically about language.~~

NM: Well, ~~you know~~, I had all sorts of theories years ago which I tried to pursue in superficial fashion, ^I and never really got down to grips with it. I do have these notions still. I ~~do~~ think certain ~~sounds~~, ~~certain~~ consonants in

language have ^{associative} certain qualities. I think ^{with "R"} ~~"R"~~ almost always has to do with

^{"L"}
anger, rage, ire, fury, redness, roar. ~~"R"~~ has to do with love—lassitude,

^{language, libido}
leisure, likelihood; ~~more tender~~... "S's" are sibilant. They suggest

displeasure, sinuosity. I tried to make up a rule for all the consonants, but ~~it~~

~~gets hard after a while.~~ R, L and S are the easiest. "B" is almost always

impact. "B", "K" you know. Break. Sounds that implode upon your ear

tend to have relations to B, K. F....

ML: Well what is the relationship between god and the devil to language?

NM: ^{Well pretty far} Well that's absolutely beyond me. I'll have to disappoint our

~~professor.~~ (both laugh) I think. Look, look. Animals come close to

speaking. I had a dog fifty years ago, a standard poodle. Immensely bright.

I always felt that his greatest pain, his soul suffering—because dogs in my

opinion do have souls—and in fact parenthetically there is one very large

but unascertainable notion ~~it may be~~ ^{man} that in Karma we go back into the

animal chain again. Who knows? In any event, this dog was extraordinary.

He made sounds, hideous sounds in his throat trying to speak to me. Sounds

you couldn't begin to spell out. I could make them for the tape recorder but

~~no one~~ ^{no one} you could ~~never~~ transcribe them. And that dog wanted to speak. So I think

in a certain sense, ~~God~~ ^{God} was discovering language, if you will, through ~~the course~~ ^{the course}

~~of evolution~~ ^{and the sounds of life's animals,} There may have been a point ~~where the insects were chirping~~ ^{when}

~~and humming making all these needle-like sounds and god said, There's~~

~~got to be something better than this." See what if god was discovering the~~

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~~In any case if universe. As god proceeded. God rose from the slime along with us. This~~

~~notion is much more dynamic to me than this divinity that's arrayed above~~

~~us and plays games with us. And delivered us a complete set of these tablets~~

~~that told us how to live and that's the end of it. Don't stray, and keep~~

~~your nose clean. There's more to existence than keep your nose clean.~~

I've gathered that you love
ML: ~~You have~~ little regard for Dante.

NM: Well, let me just say, I've read him in English translation. I don't

know Italian. (I'm sure) I'm sure in Italian he's much, much better. But in English I

and that
was not ~~nearly~~ impressed.

ML: You called him Johnny One-Note.

Delete

NM: Yea. ~~I called him~~ Johnny One-Note. Why? Because he's got nine

circles of hell. ~~That's~~ *That's a* fascinating concept. Nine circles of degradation, of

defoliation of the possibilities of one's soul. *Yety for Dandy,* ~~And~~ they're all the same. You

can't tell one circle from another. ~~They all stink. They're all dull.~~

Everybody suffers in them in very much the same way.

ML: No, no no

NM: That's what I got from my reading. I'm sorry. I didn't *get much* ~~have~~ a feeling

of ~~that~~ subtlety.

delete

ML: You didn't see the diversity of suffering?

NM: No. ~~no~~. Not compared with what could have been done. I felt he
was settling a lot of scores. Every author has got his bad, ugly, mean, small
side.)

(But Dante ^{offers} ~~has got~~ so much of that. So many citizens of Florence that he
was skewering. ~~Too much of it. Too much of it.~~ Compared to
Homer, ^{to} Dante ~~in~~ my mind is.. What's the word ^{I'm} ~~I'm~~ looking for?

ML: Petty?

NM: At the least. Small. ~~Much smaller~~. Now, ^{if I could read} in Italian I might have to

change my mind ~~to a certain extent~~. But not in English.

delete

ML: ~~That's what~~ T.S. Eliot said. You have to be able to read the Italian to

do it... ~~And~~ then its fantastic. It's a fantastic language.

NM: Well, ^{Dante} ~~he~~ probably had an insight into sounds. ^{But I won't} ~~It isn't just because~~

just because

(Eliot said it. T.S. Eliot can be a bore just like any of us. No, it's more that I

Rather it's ~~hard~~ not altogether possible for me
recognize that it's ~~very hard~~ to believe on the basis of reading Dante ~~in~~

only in

(English and ~~deciding that he's overrated~~, that I know more than all the

people who read him in Italian and love him. On the other hand, I'm very

suspicious of Literature courses—and you know a lot about this—^{which} ~~that~~ from

the word go ^{tell} ~~the student is told~~ ^{something} ~~that this~~ is important. They approach it as if

it's important.

delete

ML: Exactly. You know, Milton finally, Milton has the same Christian vision as Dante. Milton believed in Hell.

NM: Yes, but Milton...

ML: And heaven. They both had Paradisios in their writings.

NM: I have a feeling that Milton was settling a lot of private scores. I have the feeling Milton was grappling with the same questions I'm wrestling with. I have a lot of respect for Milton. Yea, I notice that....

ML: And it surprised me, not that you have respect for Milton, but that you

didn't for Dante. I thought he would..

delute

NM: Well maybe you can show me sometime where the suffering

intensifies. I'm not...I could see where the hell....By the way, here's a

thought in passing. Who was it who came up with the nine innings of

Baseball? Was it somebody who had read ^{*Dante?*} ~~Homer~~? In a really exciting

baseball game each inning becomes more and more like a deeper circle of

hell. If everything is at stake and it's the last game of the World Series and

the game is close all the way, by the ninth inning, everybody is in the ninth

circle.

ML: I don't know where the nine innings came from.

delete

(Note: Alexander J. Cartwright, president of the Knickerbocker club, NY, 1845, presided over the official rules of baseball, agreed upon by the New York and Boston groups who each had their own official set of rules. They mutually agreed that these rules should be set in place; the game should run 7 innings. In 1857 the same group met at the Knickerbocker club again and amended the rules to augment the length of the game to nine innings. Cartwright entered this decision officially into the rule book, which stands today. So it may be considered that collective of minds, for whatever reason, came up with the number nine in accordance with innings.)

ML: All right, here's my last question. Have recent geopolitical events reaffirmed or undercut your theological beliefs? I mean, has the reelection of George Bush confirmed your belief system?

NM: ~~I can answer that, perhaps over simply. But~~ I've felt from the word go that George Bush is one of the Devil's creatures. ~~And I don't mean this in any large paranoid sense. If I have any sense of...when I'm regarding a human being. You see, I believe that god and the devil are in all of us. And~~
~~it's very easy to find one side or the other.~~ I suspect that George W. Bush is ^{he's} ~~drenched with the Devil.~~ ^{And} ~~That~~ every time he feels that Jesus is ^{speaking} ~~speaking to~~ him, it's the Devil ^{speaking} ~~speaking~~ talking to him. One of the Devil's greatest talents is to ^{may be} ~~talk like Jesus.~~ You know, ~~to visit us in our dreams. And make us feel that~~

~~"Jesus loves me, Jesus is with me. Jesus told me to do this and tell me to do~~

that." See, the war, on its merits was so hideous and stupid and needless of

a war that is, it was needed for the lowest of reasons. Which is America. I

don't want to get into terms of a political tract, but, from my point of view

America needed a war for the lowest of reasons. That was the only way to

begin to unify a country. And if a country can't be unified, then I say let it

~~go down hill until it finds its own unity. Don't give it a hypodermic. This~~

~~is like using steroids~~ The war in Iraq has been steroidal for America. So in

that sense, ^{winning} I think the Devil is ~~winning~~ right now in America, yes. And

~~it's no small concern.~~ And I think people all over the world are beginning

to feel this. ^{encl} I'm sure they feel that way in France. In large parts of England.

~~In Germany. To a great extent in Italy and Spain. And certainly in the~~

Middle East

Middle East. You can't even begin to get into that. In Israel, being Jewish

myself, I have to wonder how the hell they feel at this point. I remember

many years ago at Norman Podhoretz's house at a time when we were still

friends, Rabin was there. He was a general at the time. And I remember

saying to him at the time—now this was 45 years ago—“You know, you

get into a deep military relationship with America, it's going to screw you.”

And he looked at me, as if I was such an innocent, and he said to me, “What

kind of choices do you think we have?” And that was the end of that. And

um, yes, I think I'm probably right. Depending on America for its military

strength has done something to Israel that is irreparable. On the other hand,

they have an alternative and that would be Arab nations. And so I don't sit

in judgment on these things. I don't sit in judgment on Israel, but I do sit in

judgment on America for going into war with Iraq.

ML: OK, Great.

NM: Well, we've got another edition, don't we?

ML: We've got 45 and twenty—A good hour. I'm figuring now, I've looked at the number of pages and so forth, I've figured that with this we now have between forty and fifty thousand words.

NM: Well, look, here's the other possibility, the only one I can think of—

TAPE ENDS.