

Metaphysical Interview 6

MICHAEL LENNON: March 20th, 2005, interview 6.

I know you've been thinking a lot about Intelligent Design and I have too. I'd like you to begin by just giving general thoughts on this idea. It seems to be gaining credibility outside religious circles and you're an unlikely person to find any credence in Intelligent Design because. . .

NORMAN MAILER: Why?

ML: Well, because it's a pet theory of the fundamentalists.

NM: I don't care. You have to understand—I've always kept open to myself—as an amateur philosopher, I've always kept open to myself the right to find remarks interesting no matter what quarter they come from. I cannot over-stress how important that is because the moment you get frozen into a stance, it tends to determine the way you think, which I want to avoid. I start as a novelist. A novelist cannot afford to get ideologically bound up in any particular stance. If they do—and novelists do it all the time, one way and another, but it's something we fight.

The most perfect example—there are two wonderful examples in America: Henry James and Hemingway, and both of them were fabulous stylists, but they paid for that huge achievement of their separate styles by being only able to write about certain kinds of things. And because, for whatever reason, I can relate to all of this, we've all done these sorts of things—it's always "do the opposite, go off in a different direction every time." Picasso, as I've said many times, had a huge influence on me because for him, style was not a part of one's person, not necessarily, so much as a tool with which you could attack reality. And therefore, if you attack reality from one direction, then attack it from another.

But as far as this idea of Intelligent Design, let me say I come to it somewhat superficially, except the entire notion of this work, of doing these interviews, is exactly that I won't be embarrassed by my lack of knowledge, because what impresses me about theologians because they are all—no matter what high level they are at—they are trapped, absolutely trapped, by their ideas, most of them received ideas, which they have to live with. And what you see are these veritable mental gymnastics. The tsunami was a wonderful example of that. What can I say? I wish I knew more ballet terms, but—unbelievable, they spoke of the "great mystery." In fact, if it weren't such a serious business, it was as if they delighted in the fact they

could hide behind the "mystery" one more time—for the twenty-eighth thousandth time.

My feeling has been from the word "go," that God created us in His image or Her image—which seems as reasonable to me as no, God was working toward an image, working, and working, laboring, to find a better creation than His last one. Remember my remark that I think the dinosaurs, at one point, were a huge part of God's beliefs—He finally found this immense animal that could run the world, then discovered He had misdesigned it and had to go back to the drawing board, so to speak. Part of the humor for me in religion is that God, like us, makes mistakes. The point I'm getting at is I had no idea that Intelligent Design came from the fundamentalists. I happened to read one story in the papers and nothing beyond that.

ML: Well, I don't want to say they invented the idea, because it's been around back to the 18th century when the world was conceived almost as a clock, it was so perfectly designed. So it's really something that grows out of the Enlightenment, as far as that goes, and you can probably trace it back to the Greeks—but then, you can probably trace almost anything back to the Greeks. However—

NM: Maybe I have a misunderstanding of what is meant by Intelligent Design on the basis of reading this one article in the Times, which is that some believe in evolution these days, and now there's a new concept, Intelligent Design, which is that some of this was intended. In other words, -this is how I read it, and maybe this is my bent, and I misread it, but I don't think so—the notion is there is some force in existence that is looking to design creation and I thought this is perfect for what I am talking about because I think, yes, God is always looking to design creation, to make it better and better, but God has these errors. God is an artist, and because God is an artist, He doesn't always succeed, He sometimes fails as well.

ML: You understood the article right, but you can see how it would lend support to those people who are opposed to evolution because this shows the hand of the Creator, and it's all there.

NM: It isn't all there—I don't go near that at all. The Creator was there—only people who have no understanding of an artist can speak that way. In other words, the Creator saw it all at once, and did it perfectly and spat it out

and, lo and behold, it's been perfect ever since, and He never messed up this extraordinary design? Not so.

ML: Let me say what I understand to be the fundamentalist position on Intelligent Design. Intelligent Design would say: we don't know exactly what processes, natural selection, mutation, evolution, the Intelligence used to create the world, we're not saying that, but we are saying that what does exist out there in nature bespeaks of an Intelligence behind it at some level—maybe many removes back, maybe many processes. As opposed to some fundamentalists saying God created the world in one instant six thousand years ago. You wouldn't go along with that at all.

NM: Of course not.

ML: But what they've done with the evolutionists, is Intelligent Design people say that even evolution and mutation over eons cannot explain the appearance of design we see in natural life. Intelligence had to be involved. Darwin said: I don't know, here's the process; I don't know if there was anything behind the process.

NM: I'm no more an expert on evolution than I am on Intelligent Design. I will say this: it certainly makes great sense to me that Intelligent Design is absolutely one of the elements in our evolution, and what I find comfortable, even agreeable about it as a notion, is precisely that if you have a God who can begin to create a universe as manifold as this—how indeed could it be done without having Intelligent Design, without having notions that this is where to go here, this is how to do that, this is how to develop this species, here's what's wrong with this species, there I didn't conceive of enough. Now, the other element I get into over and over and over is God is not all-powerful. These creations go out into a receptive world that doesn't receive them necessarily with open arms. And they change and they're shifted and as soon as God as the artist has to say to Himself or Herself, "I didn't anticipate this or that"—

ML: Tectonic plates. . .

NM: Exactly, over and over. The tectonic plates are an example of God's incapacity to design the world well enough so there wouldn't be these shifting tectonic plates and hideous earthquakes.

ML: Or, to engage the argument, the tectonic plates are just another example of the randomness and the chaos of the universe.

NM: But, you see, the artist works to extract some order from chaos. I would not say chaos is a lack of order. Chaoses are sets of orders that are too complex and too disparate to be ordered within the consciousness of the artist, of the one who would order it. So that each element in chaos can have its own set of bylaws, if you will, until that chaos comes into conflict with another set of bylaws and they're incompatible and tear each apart. You see, I would use Intelligent and Malign Design, all through the universe. By Malign Design, I mean there are people—no, forces, that would be congenial to God's concepts of creativity, and forces opposed to it. And how do I arrive at this? Through the very simple notion that everywhere in existence you find nothing have a free ride. If something comes along that seems wonderful in the beginning, then the opposition begins, the enjambments begin. Sooner or later forward motion is paralyzed or comes to a stop. So when I see this ongoing, continuing intensity of design and evolution—and the evolution, the yin and yang—I hate yin and yang, the warp and the woof—

ML: So you would call it, the Mailer Theory of Intelligent Design. . .

NM: No, no, no—

ML: All right, you would espouse a theory of Intelligent Design that has imperfect design.

NM: No, the design can be perfect until it runs into chaotic elements that could not be comprehended in advance.

ML: That's imperfection.

NM: No. Perfection is too broad a word here. In other words, sometimes you see creatures in the universe who are so exquisitely designed that the moment you mention Intelligent Design, you say, of course! Evolution, trial and error, could not have produced some of the beautiful forms we see in the animal world. Even if we find most insect forms repellant, nonetheless, when we look at them under the microscope, the extraordinary work that went into them, it's very hard to keep believing that evolution said, "yes, the six feelers on this particular leg will have these wonderful curves like

scimitars," and this came about because it was the best way to do it. I would rather this was designed and then—that to me comes closer to what the nature of reality must be.

ML: Let me give you one criticism of Intelligent Design to see if—one criticism is this: you know the old cliché that if you put a million monkeys in a room with a million typewriters—or a billion, whatever it is—eventually one of them will produce War and Peace or Hamlet. Well, if you look at the universe—

NM: But I know that's not true. That's the sort of thing you go to a computer for. I forget the incredible number but it's too vast to be interesting.

ML: OK, it's too vast to be interesting. But, remember, the universe is vast.

NM: But—

ML: Let me give you the criticism—

NM: I'm listening.

ML: In the vastness of the universe, we know there are billions and billions of stars and solar systems and galaxies. So far, to our limited knowledge, of the ones we've looked at, not one of them come close to having the appurtenances of design for a universe, that is the ultraviolet light being shielded by an atmosphere. We can see the failure of that on Mars and Venus. And the water and the rain and the animals and all the things that come to—the world itself has made people say this amazing, organic system that all works together over a period of time, there's nothing like that anywhere we can see in the universe, despite repeated probings to find it. There's been no messages back, nothing like it. Couldn't it be we're just a fluke of the universe? Now, this is a criticism against intelligent design—in a universe so vast with so many possibilities, you've got to have one planet—

NM: But I'd call that an argument FOR Intelligent Design. Precisely you have nothing working remotely anything like the way it does on earth, with all that fineness of detail, and the notion that all this interlocking is merely expressing functions within functions within functions and you find that

nowhere else in the universe—that is precisely a powerful argument for Intelligent Design.

ML: OK, but then what's the function of all the other stars and galaxies?

NM: Well, once you get beyond the solar system, I feel that—and here is a remark I enjoy—I feel I know no more than the theologians. To wit—and the reason I have this vanity I know more than the theologians is as a novelist I've been free to think about life all my life, given the circumstances of my life. I was a novelist at the age of 25 and have been one ever since. I've spent my life thinking about what is the nature of human nature. Theologians don't have that liberty. They have to say, "How do I explain the miracles and the illogic of the New Testament, the Old Testament," or—I won't get into Islam but obviously, there are problems of that sort over there too—I have not had to carry that burden.

ML: But you must be aware—I know you're aware because I know you're an avid reader—you know there are other solar systems, other galaxies—

NM: I've only dabbled in that. We don't begin to know about other solar systems. All we do know, all we can really say with some authority is that in our solar system, the earth seems to be the only planet that made it. All right. So it may be that other gods—and there may be more powerful gods—they too have had their failures. So we start with the Big Bang: the Big Bang is a creative process that goes on through eons of time that destroy our very concept of the possibility of understanding time. But in any event, all we can state with any certainty, is that the earth succeeded in doing something none of the other planets were able to do. And so far as we can see, given the limited powers of astronomy today, there seem to be no near galaxies or other systems comparable. But there may be. There very well may be. There is no real knowledge whether there are or not since there are so many stars. And so many possibilities. So all we can begin to say is that it seems reasonable to posit a god for our universe.

ML: For our solar system.

NM: For our solar system. It may be that this God failed with other planets. Prior to the earth. I don't even begin to get near that because it's all too easy and too fanciful. But what I say is—I don't want to lose this now—I would

say it is far more difficult to conceive of our existence if there is no God. Because then we are back to the trillions of monkeys writing Hamlet and that is hard to believe. It is much easier for me to believe Hamlet is a part of intelligent design. And if it's not a part of Intelligent Design, then if 15 nano-trillion monkeys could also produce Hamlet, what a waste. Look at the man-hours, look at—there has to be the assumption, along with everything else—this is very important—that existence is moving toward something. That existence itself in the deepest, most cosmic sense, is in peril and is moving forward toward something. It's as if we had a rendezvous with disaster if we don't reach a certain period at a certain time, and this sense of disaster that sits over the earth and the solar system may fall upon the universe as well. There are certain things that have to be achieved in order to guarantee the continuation of existence.

This is the very limited, reasonable paranoia. By reasonable paranoia, I mean it comes out without getting nervous about it, without having chills, yet when I start to contemplate these matters, it seems to me that is a reasonable assumption. So obviously, that feeling, Intelligent Design is a crucial part of it. You don't want to just stumble forward with all one's errors. If—when you think of the artists, the great novelists, even those who wrote thumbing their noses, so to speak, at God, people like Dreiser and

Zola, had a great deal of Intelligent Design in their work. Then, of course, you get the artisans, the true artisans like James and Hemingway, and if anything, they were given over to design. It's as if their works live by themselves. They can't come in contact with the raw breath of existence, just the way certain of God's designs, if you will, because they were over-designed. I wish I knew more of botany and zoology because I'm sure there are other examples there.

ML: You've gone off in two very interesting directions but I want to talk about—you mention Hemingway and James and over-design—one of my questions relates to that and it's this: Is there any relation between your idea of a universe at war and Intelligent Design, and your disdain for plot for your novels? Does the latter reflect the former?

NM: That's a big question. Before I get into it, let me add one great writer who is greater than the first two and that's Joyce. Joyce is doing something else entirely. Joyce is playing at the very edges of chaos. He's saying, "look how much you can do with what would be chaos in anyone else's hands." Which is why it is very hard to get near him because we have an instinctive sense we want to avoid chaos, and it's very hard to understand him. But he

undertook to organize whole areas of chaos, it's just another way to do it.

But when you start talking about Intelligent Design, then Joyce is there as an incredible figure as an artist.

Now, to go back to your question if you'd rephrase it for me. . .

ML: Yes. So many times you have written in your review of Tom Wolfe's books, in many essays, many interviews, that, look, I don't worry about plot. Plot is just something that is much less important to me than character. Now, I don't mean plot-as-story—you always have a storyline, but your plots are not Jamesian plots—

NM: They're not clockwork.

ML: They're not pieces of clockwork. I've wondered if for you to have a plot that was very neat and tight and ordered would run counter to your ideas of metaphysics.

NM: When I speak of Intelligent Design, plot is Intelligent Design. It's very well put that you can make that analogy. Plot is interesting to me—and I thought about it a lot in the years I wrote about Harlot's Ghost because

there's the CIA. And I thought there's a perfect example of plot—Intelligent Design coming into contact with the world, coming into contact and conflict with the world. And you see, the reason I don't like plots is they don't allow the figures in the book, the characters in the book, to come into the limits of the plot to the point where life rejects the plot because it's too neat and throws them into another set of conditions that are not quite definable. To me, the uses of plot are in those novels—maybe we'll think of a few while we're talking—where one begins with the plot and then the plot gets shattered.

Now Borges spent his life writing short stories, 5 and 6 page short stories that start with incredible plots and then the plots get shattered. Incredible stories. He, like Joyce, was fascinated with making attacks on the nature of chaos. And to define and delineate chaos. Now Borges showed for all time—talk about a novelist's novelist—he is the novelist's novelist's novelist—he said: "Look what you're all doing. You're taking yourselves too seriously. You're missing the fact that once a plot is shattered, life goes on. The demand continues. There's another species of life and you have to deal with it."

Now, take it back to Intelligent Design. God looks for Intelligent Design. That Intelligent Design gets worked upon by existence. Orville

Wright designed an airplane. And after he designed it, he got it up in the air and the first time—what? It flew a few hundred feet. That was the beginning of Intelligent Design going back to the drawing board, going back, going back, to refine the first knowledge that was received. My argument is Intelligent Design cannot exist without experience. So long as it remains Intelligent Design, it remains analogous to any number of very talented young novelists who never publish because they never get their book to the point where they want it. They will not dare put their book out on the waters. And so implicit in my notion of Intelligent Design is experience. You launch the Intelligent Design and see what happens to it and that's how you learn, how you get to the next Intelligent Design. It's inconceivable to me God would not work that way.

ML: What about a novel like *One Hundred Years of Solitude*?

NM: I don't remember it well enough—and maybe you can refine it for me—I don't think he was concerned that much with plot per se. Well, he has a family, and all sorts of things happen to this family, and there's a wonderful sense of look at the chaos of life, and look at how people react to

it, and how quickly they react, and I just don't think this novel applies to the problem of plot.

Take Joyce. One of my favorite metaphors for Joyce—this is from the book about Henry Miller. I give the example: three people come into a room, a hostess's living room, Henry James, Hemingway, and Henry Miller. And the way it went, each gives a tip of the hat and lo and behold, there's a cow turd on their head. James would be so totally shattered he would have had a breakdown, he might have died from an experience that awful. Hemingway would have gone into a profound depression—he would have seen it as the nature of life, that unexpected disasters, truly, truly shattered your mood that life was something you could enjoy. And Miller would have said, "Good Lord, how did that shit get on my head? And the hostess, I can't tell if it's her nostrils that are quivering or her twat! She is obviously so excited and perturbed—what a wonderful moment!" Miller is an example of someone who couldn't stay with a plot for five minutes because he wanted plot to smash into the world and reveal something new about himself and the world. So he's one extreme, Henry James is the other. And between them lies Intelligent Design.

ML: But what would Joyce have done?

NM: Joyce is so much of a genius I don't want to hang onto his coattails because I'll fall off. I don't know what he would have done.

ML: I think he would have appreciated it.

NM: He would have looked for the 22 words that were closest to shit, and those that were deviants in their meaning but nonetheless had to be taken into account, and what would be the wonderful omnibus word he would come up with? On the other hand, he would have been removed from the situation.

ML: He was the first. . .

NM: It was not life he was interested in so much as language.

ML: The first person to wipe his ass in a novel—a description of wiping your ass in a novel—he rips a page out of a book and wipes his ass.

NM: It kept the book from being published.

ML: Yes, people were offended by it. I can't help from quoting the line of Edgar Allen Poe who said, "The universe is a plot of God."

NM: Well, that's Poe. "The universe is a plot of God"—what does it mean? Look into it—it doesn't mean anything.

ML: Poe had a sense that the universe would unfold itself—the universe would expand and expand, and then contract and contract, and then into one ball, and then it would be repeated.

NM: It's a species of fundamentalism to have ideas like that. The idea that the universe is part of a machine whose movements can be predicted is what I'm totally against. It's why I'm so opposed to organized religion. I was listening to television the other night and one of those guys—and God, they are imitable—you know, Nietzsche abhors every priest and he meant not just every Catholic priest but every reverend—he calls them all liars. He says the sine qua non for becoming a theologian is to be a liar. All right, so you've this minister talking in that big, Southern voice that any impassioned fool can imitate, saying, "It's not enough to go to your death believing in the

Lord Jesus, you have to have all the people you brought with you because you convinced them that they, too, must believe in Jesus, and then you'll be measured how many you bring to Jesus." And I listened and I thought, "where the fuck does he get all this crap? Arrogance—to speak with any kind of certitude?" I never cease apologizing for speaking with any certitude in this book. It's outrageous.

ML: Let me go back to Sartre. You recently criticized Sartre's existentialism for being "floorless." Without floor.

NM: Without a foundation.

ML: Because, as you put it, "It is, after all, near to impossible for philosopher to explore into why we are here without entertaining some notion of what prior force might have been." Therefore, if we grant your limited God is that prior force—and I'm happy to grant that—then I'm compelled to ask what force preceded your God? I assume you would choose infinite regress rather than a Prime Mover?

NM: Again, I refuse to be trapped in those kinds of questions. I mean, that's the atheist's last line of defense. There's a story you're probably familiar with, of Bertrand Russell and the lady—Russell is talking about how the origin of the universe is not knowable. And a lady, a distinguished old lady says, "On the contrary, Professor Russell. I know the basis of the universe." He says, "Well, what is it, Madam?" She replies, "The universe is resting upon a turtle." And he says, "Well, thank you, Madam." "A giant turtle," she adds. "Well, Madam, that's very helpful, but what is the turtle resting upon?" And she says, "It's turtles all the way down!"

ML: I do remember that.

NM: I'm not going to get trapped in that. The arguments of the atheists—they're saying because you can't explain what came behind the God you're talking about, you have no right to talk about God.

ML: But you beat Sartre over the head because he won't allow for a force behind humanity. Why can't we then try to find out—I'm not trying to refute you, but—

NM: OK, let me put it this way: we first have to become close enough to God and helpful enough to God—large questions we haven't even entered, the relationship of humankind to God is something we haven't even touched on—and until we're a great help to God, why should God trust us? You remember, at the end of Harlot's Ghost, I have Huge Montague goes off on this wonderful—to me, wonderful—speech on how God, having decided—he gives his defense of Creationists—that God having decided man was wholly untrustworthy, therefore created the illusion of evolution, and He put fossil remains in different places, created the entire notion that the universe was created in six days.

ML: I remember it well—a beautiful piece of writing.

NM: Maybe we could insert it—I didn't say it very well in here. Excuse me—the universe really was created entire, immediately, ex nihilo, by God, but he then put evidence all over the place that evolution had done it so man would not get near God's roots. So, implied in all that is that when we get close enough to God to feel we are in some kind of alliance with God—which I think has always been implicit in the relationship but may not be actual, because as you know from my novel, I believe in the devil to an

extraordinary degree—so the answer is we don't begin to know who the God is behind God till we get nearer to God.

ML: But you see that as a possibility.

NM: Yes. Ultimately. Ultimately. If things go far better than I expect they will.

ML: Here's something. I don't know if you're familiar with the philosopher David Hume—

NM: Vaguely. I had him in college.

ML: Well, he actually got into the Intelligent Design argument way back when because one of the proofs of St. Thomas Aquinas for the existence of God is the argument from design. It goes back that far, a thousand years. A different way of putting it, Aquinas has many proofs of God's existence but the fifth one was the design is so perfect in the universe—he didn't even see beyond the solar system—

NM: But there, you run smack into the ugly helmet of Catholicism, that ugly helmet with all those projections that smash your face when you try to embrace it—you know, the insistence of Catholicism on perfection and God's perfection, is one of the things—I feel as if I run into a magnetic field that just repels me when I come near that. Because precisely what characterizes Intelligent Design is that it's partial. And that's so important to grasp the notion that these are partial attempts. I'm so glad we have the novel to fall back upon; it's the metaphor. When you write a novel, a novel is an exercise, an attempt to come up with a piece of intelligent design and it's never perfect, never. Some parts of the Intelligent Design are better than others and the way you find out is by publishing. And then the returns come back and very often the returns have no relation to what you had written. Occasionally they do. And slowly over the years you learn more and more and more, and by the end of your life as a novelist you are wiser than when you started. And the heart of one of my notions in all this is that God is always looking to become wiser. That notion we mentioned way back is God the Father does not always necessarily understand the children all that well. And that is also in the nature of existence, that what you create, you do not necessarily understand completely.

ML: Now, listen to this collision between Aquinas and David Hume:

Hume criticized the argument from design. In particular, he emphasized there is no legitimate way—now this is a paragraph, so bear with me—there is no legitimate way, Hume said, we can infer the properties of God from the qualities of the world, his creation. For instance, Hume questioned, how can we be sure the world was not created by a team? Or this is but one of many attempts at creation, the first few having been botched? Or, on the other hand, that our world is not puerile first attempt of an infant deity who afterwards abandoned it, ashamed of his lame performance.

NM I want to see where we are—I can't read these numbers—

ML: We're fine.

NM: It's excellent. If I'd read it, I would have quoted it. These are various possibilities; they're all possible logically. It's perfectly possible God has deserted the universe. I think it's a little weak to say it was a lame performance and He moved on. That doesn't fulfill my notion of the passion implicit in the artistry of God. I can't conceive of a great artist ever junking a work and moving on because it's lame, if that has been the major

opus. I do lean to the notion that our world was God's major opus, certainly for this solar system. But Hume put it very well. The argument of a perfect universe is almost intolerable. All it does is scramble people's brains and say to the deans of the church that they believe for a certainty the priests are over them. Which is not fair. And then the priests suffer prodigiously. I really think an absolutely great novel could be written about the Catholic Church and the people who work in it—many times I wish I were a Catholic as a novelist, as a greedy novelist. Man, what material is there, what material! But the training is such that it's almost impossible for someone who's a priest to become a novelist—a great novelist.

ML: It's a fabulously successful institution—and probably because of that.

NM: Fabulously successful, yes, but you could also say the Jewish religion has been fabulously successful in that the Jews didn't perish—but what a price they paid. And I'd say what a price Catholics have paid. To have created a Church that brought so much architectural beauty to the world, so much musical beauty, so much ritual beauty—and then be locked into a set of notions they can't let go of that explain nothing.

You know, organized religion when it's beautiful moves me to the extent that I feel "How tragic. How painful." All this thought, all this devotion, all this loyalty, going into a sump, an intellectual sump because it explains nothing. All they believe is that God will be there to hear our prayers, welcome us when we die—as if that's all God has to do, as if God is a couch potato—sighs when He has to get up to answer the doorbell to welcome a new devotee.

ML: So the idea the universe might have been created by a team--?

NM: Not impossible. Not impossible. It explains one of my basic notions in that the team soon fell out of sorts with one another and you ended up with God and the Devil—one leader was called God and one was called the Devil. I think it could easily explain the book I'm working on now—it was created by a team. It could have been started as, as—

ML: A joint endeavor—

NM: A joint endeavor means two totally separate parties come together? Like those South Seas Companies in the 1700s, 1800s. Absolutely. And then they fought and have been fighting ever since.

ML: Well, that's all but we can handle Judith's questions

NM: —although we don't have to do it all today. Up to now I've felt fine—

ML: They go in all different directions—

NM: Let's see what happens—I may not be able to answer her questions.

ML: Here's one: "If, as you say, the Creator is an artist, and not all creative works are equally successful, wouldn't this lead quite easily to racism—i.e., the "inferior race"—however one's defining it, whether the non-Aryans scapegoated by the Nazis, or the "ice people" of the Afro-centric extremists, wouldn't that "inferior" group simply be one of God's early, inferior drafts?"

NM: Well, I reject the language of the question. But I think that all of the dangers, one of the absolute disasters that Hitler and Nazism brought to

human understanding was an abuse of the concept of race. Because it offers us great clues. It is perfectly possible—and here again, one can only speculate—but it is perfectly possible that races, in the beginning, were intelligent design for different situations. In other words, for people in the tropics, God was saying, "well, how can I design the heating system of their bodies so they can bear the heat?" Ditto for the north. We're discovering that living in these separate climates produces different relaxations and strictures of the throat, and so there are changes in language. Mind you, God is discovering as the artist, discovering within the material itself, where the continuation is. Certain sculptors talk about how they know nothing of what they're essentially going to do until they see the work in the marble—it's as if the marble reveals to them what they must do with the next stroke. Well, maybe the same thing is true with fashioning human designs, animal designs, what have you, and as you work with these designs and attempt to work with them and refine them, the environment plays a great role.

Going back to Hume for a moment, it could be that God came in after a semi-inchoate universe was shaping, and had to deal with the given. That is absolutely within the realm of possibility. There I have to say Hume points the way.

ML: Good, very good. Next one: Your conception of God as artist assumes that God is both vastly-but not all-good, and vastly—but not all-powerful. But why couldn't God be not very compassionate at all and instead immensely curious? In other words, He is fascinated by, but not especially compassionate toward creation, much like a child who winds up toys and watches them slam into each other and chortles at the smashup. You say, "In other words, why are there volcanoes? Because God was not a perfect engineer" Or because like a two-year-old, God found the noise and fury fascinating and amusing. Maybe even the shrieks of the dying fascinating and amusing. You keep assuming God is a nice person, so to speak, but that seems a bit arbitrary. Your reaction?

NM: It is arbitrary, and it could be my conditioning. I grew up in a household that was as religious as the next—it wasn't a dogma-driven household, but I remember my mother on Friday night praying before a lit candle, praying to Shekhina, who is, of course, the wife of God, and there were tears in my mother's eyes and a feeling of great tenderness and compassion was coming off her. And from that, I think I always assumed and took it for granted that God is compassionate in relation to us.

Now, those arguments raised cannot be denied. I cannot refute them. I cannot say, "No, God is not going in for capers. He's not going in for mean streaks." Of course, God could go in for that. But to me—maybe because I too am searching for an orderly existence to some degree—the notion that God and the devil are in conflict with one another makes more sense to me than that we've got this one God who has good and bad, as compassionate as Jesus and a mean little prick in the corners. That I find really goes nowhere. That doesn't mean it doesn't exist. That question is not refutable.

ML: Well, your mother's father was a rabbi.

NM: Yes. He was a kosher rabbi, he was—a back-bencher rabbi. He'd done a lot of scripture-reading into the game. What happened was he studied to be a rabbi in Lithuania but by the he came over here, the only way he could make his living was a peddler. Then he moved to small town called Long Branch, New Jersey, where he opened a butcher shop. [Side One Ends.] So when he came to Long Branch, he was a butcher, but he had the education to be a rabbi, so occasionally when the rabbi was ill—there was only one synagogue in Long Branch—so when the rabbi was ill or off

on vacation, he was the rabbi. And my mother was very proud of him. In the fundamental snobbery of the Jews, she was very proud—it was much better to be a rabbi than a butcher. I was delighted, it gave me two different strains to develop.

ML: Well, I'm thinking of your mother's devotion and the tear in her eye—obviously, she must have come from a pretty religious household.

NM: He was very religious—he started studying the Talmud when he was four years old. The best thing to be said about the Talmud is it's very hard to become a fundamentalist reading the Talmud. It's all too easy reading the Bible but very difficult reading the Talmud because the Talmud is the opposite of the Old Testament. It inquires into the nuances of things. For instance, in the Talmud, the people brought animals to be sacrificed to the temple. Very often there were small disasters—a poor man wanted to sacrifice his prize heifer because his child was ill and he wanted to pray to God so he's sacrificing his heifer into the synagogue and the animal would defecate. Well, the Talmud gets into where did it defecate—on the outside, on the patio, did it defecate on the steps, in the vestibule, in the aisle, at the altar approach, was it on the altar—could there be a sacrifice where it

defecated—all these are different proximities and therefore there are different punishments. In certain cases the animal can still be sacrificed, perhaps, partially. In other cases, the animal is lost completely—if it defecates close enough to the altar, it has to be thrown away completely. It can't even be eaten, and so forth. So in the Talmud there are all these efforts to find zones of relative compatibility between God and humans—the exact opposite of the Old Testament in that sense. The Old Testament and the New Testament are completely—I use the word rhetorical. In other words, they lay it out: they say "This is the way it is. Don't argue with it." Then, of course, they contradict themselves two pages later.

ML: Well—and there is a certain measure, which you yourself recognize, of Orphic ambiguity in the utterances of Christ.

NM: I wouldn't call it ambiguity. I would call it the wars of the committees. And, you know, it's exactly equal to what's going on between the Sunnis and the Shiites in Iraq, to wit, I'll give you this and you give me that.

ML: Did your mother talk much about her father?

NM: Only with a kind of gentle reverence. She adored him, and he was a very kind man. She told one story I loved when I was a kid. She said, "My mother worked so hard in the butcher shop, and we as children worked hard, I worked hard—we'd get angry at my father because when a poor woman would come in and he'd be weighing the meat she bought, he'd put his finger under the scale so it cost less. And we thought, That's all very well, but you're taking the money away from us.

ML: So he was a compassionate man.

NM: Most people seemed to think he was a lovely man. Who knows? I like to think so too.

ML: Here's a question on ritual: All your ideas have an underlying assumption that God has a continuing, even a profound interest in at least some individuals, and certainly in the ultimate fate of the human species and the rest of His creation. This is completely at odds with some of the earliest recorded religious expression, namely from the Sumerians, whose prayers were always begging the gods to "Remember!" Prayer and ritual were a

constant attempt to engage the attention of forgetful and indifferent gods who had created and abandoned humanity. This, by the way, wasn't a notion emerging from disasters and dislocations but could be found even as their civilization flourished. Can you comment?

NM: Well, I can attempt to comment. It's the other half of the equation. I think one of the reasons American fundamentalists who've invaded us en masse these days—you know, there's a close war going on between Texas Hold'Em Poker and fundamentalists. Night after night, the fundamentalists skunk the Texas Hold'Em Poker players, in that there'll be five fundamentalist shows on in a given hour and two poker shows—all right, I'm joking, but the obverse side of prayer is that it never gets answered. So rarely is it answered. So rarely that people cite these things at these religious meetings as miracles. [in a southern accent] "I prayed to God and I didn't know if I was answered or not, and then, to my astonishment, I fell to me knees and I began to weep, I began to weep for the sores of Christ because my prayer had been answered." Prayers are not answered. I always felt the Lord has enough to take care of without having to listen to a bunch of repetitive prayers. To use a modern assumption, it's like people who get on the internet because they want to be part of what's going on and they

discover that thousands of boring messages come to them that they have to wade through. Think of God wading through those prayers: "Oh, God, let my team win the game!" "Oh, God, let me get some money, let me sell this old heap that's no good and get something better because I need it to drive the children to school, you understand," all that, all that.

I don't think God listens to prayer. The Sumerians—I don't know anything about them. I think they were relatively sophisticated people who recognized that they prayed and they prayed and they prayed and answers didn't come very often. In fact, talk about the mega-million monkeys typing Hamlet, some of the same could be applied to prayer.

Now let me say there are some people with a child who's ill, and they pray to God with great sincerity for their child to live, and usually the child does live—I'm willing to accept the idea that that's not something to sneer at. I'm not saying it helps or it works but humanly speaking, we can certainly feel for the parent who weeps in that manner.

ML: You wrote once about the time you prayed.

NM: Yes.

ML: Yes. Bobby Kennedy.

NM: Well, there was another time I prayed—well, I don't want to get into it, I'll tell you off the record.

ML: Let's go on to another question.

NM: The reason I don't want to get into it is it's a long, comic story and has nothing to do with what we're talking about. It's not a revelation, or I'd tell you about it.

ML: When you were talking about Gandhi, you said: "But there are a few [oxymorons] that are vital and immensely valuable. One of them is "heroic passivity." That's where one's wisdom becomes the arbiter. There can be heroic passivity, or quasi- heroic passivity. The latter might be a disaster." Along that same line, what would you say about any possible value of the contemplative life? By that I mean the cloistered orders who don't run hospitals or schools, just pray for the world. This is a strong Christian tradition, ditto for the Buddhists and some Hindus, and probably the Jews have some variant of that.

NM: The Twelve Just Men. . .

ML: Do you see a value in this kind of passivity?

NM: I would answer yes. I'm not opposed to that. Yeah, we haven't talked about the relation of God to humans and humans to God.

ML: We have.

NM: Yes, but if we're going to get nearer to God to find the God behind the God, in that sense, it's perfectly conceivable to me there could be a God who really pays attention to transcendental sincerity. And I have a crude analogy to offer, which is occasionally, after having worked on a novel, you get a review that's so intelligently written and gets to close to what I was attempting to do, or shows me new ways I didn't see in the book, that illumines the book for me, I love that critic and I do feel better about the act of writing. And I think taken through many orders of magnitude, I think there are people who contemplate existence, who pray to God in their sleep and on their knees and are qualified to do so, who are not petty greed-bags.

What I hate about prayer is most of the time it's so greedy, I'm trying to get an edge—I'm a mediocrity, I'm kind of stupid, God, but maybe you'll help me because I'm praying to you.

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

NM: Well, I think it's a beautiful notion and I subscribe to it—not personally. I wouldn't make it; I don't have that kind of compassion. The difficulty I've always had with Buddhism is nirvana—that the point of existence is not to rise above all petty feeling, but on the contrary, to be able to struggle with those petty feelings in such a way that we alter them into

somewhat more vigorous feelings, you're more able to contribute to the best of existence. So nirvana always struck me as a place I had no interest in. If it existed or not—I had no idea—it didn't appeal to me. I remember talking to a friend of mine who's a good Buddhist and scolding him, getting into a rage over drinks: "You bastards always talk about nothingness, getting to nothingness. I'm a writer, I live with nothingness every minute I'm working. I sit at my desk and for the first half hour there's nothing—I have to pass through it in order to get a few ideas. I said, why the hell—you're not talking about nothingness. Nothingness is an awful state! It's an empty state. Why don't you talk about what it really is, which is the ineffable? When you get into the ineffable, then you have something to talk about!"

I like to think he was struck with it, even a little.

Back to the bodhisattva: I think it's an absolutely beautiful conception. Whether true or not, I have no idea. In other words, true or not in the sense whether one has the power to say, I choose to reincarnate rather than going into Nirvana, I think the Lord might say, "Reincarnation's not your choice, it's mine." And in that sense, I'm beyond my range. I can step away from that question with the idea it is a beautiful notion.

ML: Look at the end of your last interview, you said in many ways the Creator was like a Greek god—strong yet not all powerful, flawed but noble, well, you know Greek myths are full of incidents where the gods took human form, or animal form. Apart from the well-known stories of Zeus turning up as this or that to impregnate some human woman, there are also stories of Zeus turning up as a beggar. In one story, peasants take in a wretched beggar overnight, share their far-from abundant meal with him, treat him very well, and next morning, find his bed empty and a sack of gold in his place—Zeus came calling—and rewarded them for their kindness to the poor! God showing up on earth is an idea embraced long before Christian theology, but I see nothing in your writings of God as a swan, a river, or anything as possibly Jesus.

NM: I don't see any need to answer the question. I just take it for granted. If God wants to appear as a human, why not? And indeed, He would. But I think actually what's more interesting is the belief if you're good when you don't have to be good, something wonderful happens. Which I think is also part of human nature. Humans live for revenge—but they also live for a sentiment that maybe I am capable of goodness. So the brunt of those stories, the impact they have on me, is look at the human desire involved.

One, that I can be capable of goodness and two, that there's something in the universe that rewards you for goodness. Prayer is the ugly stepchild of that emotion. What makes it interesting is the pot of gold—they weren't praying for the gold. That's far better than saying, "Hey, I was good—now reward me!"

ML: That's it.

Metaphysical Interview 6

Faxed
by
Jury
3/25/05

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MICHAEL LENNON: March 20th, 2005, interview 6.

I know you've been thinking a lot about Intelligent Design and I have,
too. I'd like you to begin by just giving general thoughts on this idea. It

~~seems to be gaining credibility outside religious circles and you're an~~
~~unlikely person to find any credence in Intelligent Design because.~~
But aren't you an
There?

Fundamentalists think.

NORMAN MAILER: Why?

ML: ~~Well,~~ because it's a pet theory of the fundamentalists.

That's the last of my concern
NM: ~~I don't care. You have to understand. I've always kept open to~~
~~myself as an amateur philosopher, I've always kept open to myself the~~
~~right to find~~ *Certain ideas* *Grounded*
~~interesting no matter what quarter they come from. I~~
~~cannot over stress how important that is because the moment you get frozen~~
~~in~~ *too completely*
~~into a stance, it tends to determine the way you think, which I want to avoid.~~

I start as a novelist. A novelist cannot afford to ~~get~~ *be* ideologically bound up
~~in any particular stance. If they do—and novelists do it all the time, one,~~

~~way and another, but it's something we fight~~ *even if we tend to*
~~to do just treat by way of our style.~~

the way of our style

The most perfect example ~~There are two wonderful examples in~~
~~America:~~ Henry James and Hemingway, ~~and both of them~~ were fabulous

stylists, but they paid for ^{the} that huge achievement of their separate styles by
 being ^{only} able to write ^{about} certain kinds of things. ~~And because, for~~
~~lacked into their style,~~ ^{Then were}
 whatever reason, I can relate to all of this, we've all done these sorts of

things—it's always "do the opposite, go off in a different direction every

time." Picasso, as I've said ^{hearing} many times, had a huge influence on me because

for him, style was not a part of one's person, not necessarily. ^{I think he saw}
~~style as a~~

(tool with which you could attack reality. And therefore, if you attack reality

^(first) from one direction, then ~~attack~~ it from another.

^{As far} But ~~as far as~~ this idea of Intelligent Design, let me say I come to it

^{On the other hand, the premise behind}
 somewhat superficially, except the entire notion of this work, of doing these

interviews, is ~~exactly~~ that I won't be embarrassed by my lack of knowledge,

because what impresses me about theologians because they are all—no

matter ^{at} what high level they are ^{celebrate} at—they are trapped, absolutely trapped, by

their ideas, most of them received ideas, which they have to live with. And

what you see are these veritable mental gymnastics. The tsunami ^{gives a powerful example of that} was a

wonderful example of that. What can I say? I wish I knew more ballet

terms, but ~~unbelievable~~, they spoke of the "great mystery." In fact, if it

were't such a serious business, it was as if they delighted in the fact they

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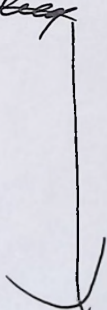
weren't such a serious business, it was as if they delighted in the fact they

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weren't such a serious business, it was as if they delighted in the fact they

by their ideas. They are obliged (2a)
to do their thinking with received
ideas, that is, ideas they are not
free to change. (As for example,
God is All-Good and All-Powerful.)
So, theologians ~~have to~~ build
their philosophies ~~on~~ by way
of ~~unstable~~ mental ~~gymnastics~~
gymnastics. So, there are
many questions they cannot
begin to confront.

I must say that the ~~to~~ name
comes to mind, all they can offer
~~for the world that is~~
for explanation is that God is
a great mystery and His ways
are unfathomable. It was as if
they delighted in the fact that



could hide behind the "mystery" one more time—for the twenty-eighth thousandth time.

My feeling has ^{always} been ~~from the word "on"~~ that God created us in His image or Her image, ⁱⁿ ~~which seems as reasonable to me as no~~, God was ^{by my} ~~notion is always~~ working toward an image, working, and working, laboring, to find a better, more well-adapted creature than his last design. I creation than His last one. Remember my remark that ~~I think~~ the dinosaurs, ^{must have been} ~~had dared to~~ at one point, were a huge part of God's beliefs. He ~~finally found this~~ ^{create this} ~~immense animal that could run the world, then discovered He had~~ the mountains and the plains. Then ~~he discovered~~ ^{that he had} ~~misdesigned it and had to go back to the drawing board, so to speak. Part of~~ the humor for me in religion is that God, like us, makes mistakes. ^{I must say} ~~The point~~ I'm getting at is ^{that} ~~I had no idea that~~ Intelligent Design ^{has been given to us} ~~came~~ from the fundamentalists. ~~I happened to read one story in the papers and nothing~~ beyond that.

ML: Well, I don't want to say they invented the idea, because ~~it's been~~ ^{since} around ~~back to~~ the 18th century when the world was conceived almost as a ^{to be virtually} clock, it was so perfectly designed. ^{Intelligent Design} ~~So it's really something that grows out~~ of the Enlightenment, as far as that goes, and you can probably trace it back ~~to the Greeks~~ but then, you can probably trace almost anything back to the ~~Greeks. However~~

Perhaps
 NM: Maybe I have a misunderstanding of what is meant by Intelligent Design on the basis of reading this one article in the Times, which is that ~~some believe in evolution these days, and now there's a new concept, spoke of a concept that was at odds with evolution~~ Intelligent Design, which is that some of this was intended. In other words,

~~this is how I read it, and maybe this is my bent, and I misread it, but I don't~~
~~It offered the notion that there may be a~~
 think so ~~the notion is there is some force in existence that is looking to~~
~~bring a sense of design into Creation itself,~~
 design creation and I thought this is perfect for what I am talking about.

~~Because I think, yes, God is always looking to design creations to make it~~
~~better, more finely designed, but God makes errors,~~
 better and better, but God has these errors. ~~God is an artist, and because~~

~~As~~
~~God is an artist, He doesn't always succeed, He sometimes fails as well.~~

ML: You understood the article right, ~~but you can see how it would lend~~
 support to ~~those~~ people who are opposed to evolution, ~~because this shows~~
~~the hand of the Creator, and it's all there~~

~~It is only people like fundamentalists~~
 NM: It isn't all there ~~I don't go near that at all. The Creator was there~~

~~only people who have no understanding of an artist can speak that way.~~
~~other words, the Creator saw it all at once, and did it perfectly and spat it out,~~

and, ~~to~~ and behold, it's been perfect ever since, and He never messed up this. *Sailed once,*
~~the design was extraordinary from the~~
~~extraordinary design? Not so~~
~~short~~ *He even gave us an Old and*
~~new Testament to hold for our under~~
~~standing of His immaculate design,~~

ML: Let me say what I understand to be the ~~fundamentalist~~ *or*
~~present-day~~ *IX*
 Intelligent Design. Intelligent Design would say: we don't know exactly
~~which of~~ *are directly related to the*
~~what~~ *processes, natural selection, mutation, evolution, the* Intelligence used

to create the world, ~~we're not saying that,~~ but we are saying that what does
~~exist out there in nature~~ *the presence of*
~~speaks of an Intelligence behind it at some~~
~~level—maybe many removes back, maybe many processes. As opposed to~~ *at some* *but it is certainly*
~~those~~ *late result*
~~some~~ *fundamentalists saying* God created the world in one instant six
 thousand years ago. You wouldn't go along with that at all.

NM: Of course not.

ML: ~~But what they've done with the evolutionists, is Intelligent Design~~
~~people say that even evolution and mutation over cons cannot explain the~~ *all*
~~appearance of design we see in natural life. Intelligence had to be involved.~~ *also*

whereas Darwin said: ~~I don't know, here's the process. I don't know if there was~~
~~anything behind the process.~~ *it*

NM: ~~I'm no more an expert on evolution than I am on Intelligent Design.~~

~~will say this.~~ It certainly makes great sense to me that Intelligent Design is

~~absolutely~~ one of the elements in ~~our~~ evolution, and what I find

comfortable, even agreeable about it as a notion, is ~~precisely~~ that if ~~you~~ ^{we do}

have a God who ^{created} ~~can begin to create~~ a universe as manifold as ~~this~~ ^{ours} (now

^{have been} indeed could it be done without ~~having~~ Intelligent Design, without having

notions that this is where to go here, this is how to do that, this is how to

develop this species, here's what's wrong with this species, there I didn't

conceive of enough. Now, ^(present, which I must emphasize) the other element I get into over and over ~~and~~

^{that} ~~over~~ is God is not all-powerful. These creations go out into ^{an existence} ~~a receptive~~

^{generosity} ~~world~~ that doesn't receive them necessarily with open arms. And they ^{change}

~~under external circumstances~~ ^{and they} change and they're shifted and as soon as ^{designer} God as the artist has to say to

Himself or Herself, "I didn't anticipate this," or that"

ML: Tectonic plates. . .

NM: Exactly, ~~over and over.~~ The tectonic plates are an example of God's

incapacity to design the world ^{so} ~~well enough~~ ^{that} so there wouldn't be these

^{ensuing} shifting tectonic plates and hideous earthquakes, ^{incommensurable}

loss, and ~~whole~~ failures of ~~even~~ explanations ^{or to say} God permitted ^{or would it} that, how much simpler to assume that he ~~didn't~~

indeed, just like us, he was a great

ML: Or, to engage the argument, the tectonic plates are just another example of the randomness and the chaos of the universe.

NM: But, ~~you see~~, the artist works to extract ~~some~~ order from chaos. I

~~would not say~~ ^{even (that)} chaos is a lack of order. ^{is the mix of} Chaos ~~are~~ sets of orders that are

too complex and too disparate to be ordered within the consciousness of ^{whoever} the

artist, ~~or the one who~~ ^{If you will, each} would order it. ^{So that} each element in chaos can

^(laws and processes) have its own set of bylaws, ^{but that organization within a particular} if you will, until that chaos comes into conflict

with another set of bylaws and they ^{orders, are} are incompatible, and ^{they} tear each apart.

^{I also would postulate} You see, I would use Intelligent and Malign Design, all through ~~the~~ our

universe. By Malign Design, I mean there are ~~people~~ ^{which} ~~no~~ forces, ~~that~~

~~would be~~ ^{not at all} congenial to God's concepts of creativity, ~~and forces~~ ^{and} opposed to it.

~~And~~ ^{Because neither neither} how do I arrive at this? Through the very simple notion that

^{can} everywhere in existence you find ~~nothing~~ ^{that} have a free ride. ^{Anything} If something

~~that~~ ^{which} comes along ~~that~~ ^{useful} seems wonderful in the beginning, then the opposition,

~~begins~~, the enjambments ~~begin~~. ^a Sooner or later, forward motion is paralyzed, ^{or}

^{stunned, as hindered,} or comes to a stop. So when I see this ongoing, continuing intensity of

design and evolution ~~and the evolution, the yin and yang~~ I hate yin and

yang, the warp and the woof

ML: So you would call it, the Mailer Theory of Intelligent Design.

NM: No, no, no—

ML: ~~All right, you would espouse~~ *Do you then* a theory of Intelligent Design that has imperfect design?

NM: ~~No, the design can be perfect~~ *excellent* until it runs into chaotic elements that could not be comprehended in advance.

ML: That's imperfection.

NM: No. Perfection is ~~too broad a word here~~ *may not be the best*. In other words, Sometimes

you see creatures in the universe who are so exquisitely designed that the moment you mention *one speaks of* Intelligent Design, you say, of course! *Onchids, snow flakes, tigers,* Evolution, trial

and error, could not have produced some of the beautiful forms we see in the animal world. *Racehorses. Certain dogs.* Even if we find most insect forms repellent, nonetheless,

when we look at them under the microscope, *we can see* the extraordinary work that went into them, *it becomes harder to believe* it's very hard to keep believing that evolution said, "yes, the

six feelers on this particular leg will have these wonderful curves like

scimitars," and this ^{will come} came about because it ^{is only} was the best way to do it. ^{for the} I would
~~survival of the species. It is literally easier~~
 rather this was designed and then—that to me comes closer to what the
~~to believe that it was designed for beauty~~
~~nature of reality must be,~~
 as well as function

ML: ~~Let me give you one criticism of Intelligent Design to see if one~~
~~criticism is this:~~ you know the old cliché that if you put a million monkeys
 in a room with a million typewriters—or a billion, whatever it is—
 eventually one of them will produce War and Peace or Hamlet. Well, if you
 look at the universe—

NM: ~~But I know that's not true.~~ That's the sort of thing you go to a
 computer for. I forget the incredible number but it's too vast to be
 interesting.

ML: ~~OK, it's too vast to be interesting. But, remember, the universe is vast.~~

~~NM. But~~

ML: Let me give you the criticism ~~of Intelligent Design.~~

NM: I'm listening.

ML: In the vastness of the universe, ~~we know~~ ^{by} there are billions and billions of stars and solar systems and galaxies. So far, to our limited knowledge, of

the ones we've looked at, not one of them comes close to having the ~~fundamentals~~ ^{besides to} appearances of design for a universe, that is the ultraviolet light being

~~shielded by an atmosphere. We can see the failure of that on Mars and~~

Venus. And the water and the rain and the animals and all the things that ~~have~~ ^{How and how} ~~went into creating~~ come to the world itself has made people say this amazing, organic system

~~has been able to~~ that all works together over a period of time, there's nothing like that ^{ever that} anywhere we can see in the universe, despite repeated probings to find it.

~~There's been no messages back, nothing like it. Couldn't it be we're just a~~

~~fluke of the universe? Now, this is a criticism against intelligent design, in~~

~~In a universe so vast with so many possibilities, you've got to have one~~

~~planet that the mega-billions monkeys who just pounded out Hamlet, or that one typewriter~~

NM: But I'll call that an argument FOR Intelligent Design. Precisely you

~~have nothing working remotely anything like the way it does on earth, with~~

~~all that fineness of detail, and the notion that all this interlocking is merely~~

~~expressing functions within functions within functions and you find that~~

~~nowhere else in the universe~~ ^{as the} ~~that is precisely a~~ powerful argument for Intelligent Design.

^{What then is}
ML: OK, but then what's the function of all the other stars and galaxies?

^{we}
NM: Well, ~~once~~ you get beyond the solar system, I feel ~~that~~ ^{I have} and here is a ~~make this next remark~~ ^{I enjoy it so much} ~~remark I enjoy~~ I feel I know no more than the theologians. ~~To wit~~ ^{that out there} and ^{is because I} the reason I have this vanity ~~I know more than the theologians~~ is as a ~~novelist~~ ^{that I can see further} ~~I've been free to think about life all my life, given the circumstances~~ ^{indeed} ~~of my life. I was a novelist at the age of 25 and have been one ever since.~~ ^{have been a} ~~I have had to spend~~ ^{and so} ~~I've spent~~ my life thinking about what ~~is~~ the nature of human nature.

^{do not}
Theologians ~~don't~~ have that liberty. They have to say, "How do I explain the miracles and the illogic of the New Testament, the Old Testament," ^{and} or ^{they have had a few} I won't get into Islam but obviously, there are problems of that sort over ^{as well} ~~there too. I have not had to carry that burden~~ ^{I have not had to} ^{carry.}

ML: But you must be aware ~~I know you're aware because I know you're~~ ~~an avid reader~~ ~~you know~~ there are other solar systems, other galaxies—

NM: I've only dabbled in that. We don't begin to know about other solar

~~systems.~~ All we ~~do~~ know, all we can really say with some ^{any} authority is that

in our solar system, the earth seems to be the only planet that ~~made it.~~ ^{is now} All

~~alive with creatures,~~ ^{conceivable gods} right. So it may be that other gods—and there may be more powerful

~~gods than ours, that have had even larger~~ gods—they too have had their failures. So we start with the Big Bang: the

Big Bang is a creative process that goes on through eons of time that

destroy our very concept of the possibility of understanding time. But in

any event, ^{it is possible} all we can state with any certainty is that the earth succeeded in

~~doing something none of the other planets were able to do.~~ ^{accomplishing} ~~And so far as~~ ^{unable}

~~we can see,~~ ^{given} the limited powers of astronomy today, there seem to be

no near galaxies ^{that are} or other systems comparable. But there may be. There

very well may be. ^{life} There is no real knowledge whether there are or not since

~~There are so many stars. And so many possibilities. So~~ ^{all} we can begin to

say is that it seems reasonable to posit a god for our universe.

ML: For our solar system.

NM: For our solar system. It may be that this God failed with other planets.

Prior to the earth. I don't even begin to get near that ^{approach} because it's all too easy

and too fanciful. But ~~what I say is I don't want to lose this new~~ ^{I would}

^{that}
say it is far more difficult to conceive of our existence if there is no God.

Because then we are back to the trillions of monkeys writing Hamlet and

^{so} that is hard to believe. It is much easier for me to ^{suppose that} believe Hamlet is a part of

^{human} intelligent design. And if it's not a part of Intelligent Design, then it ~~is it~~

^{if it took} of ^{an equivalent of} a nano-trillion monkeys could also produce Hamlet, what a waste. Look at

~~the man hours~~, look at ~~it~~ there has to be the assumption, along with

everything else, ~~this is very important~~ that existence is moving toward

~~a goal. It is certainly possible that~~ something. That existence itself in the deepest, most cosmic sense, is in

^(so it) ^{or necessarily it is} peril and is moving forward toward something. It's as if we had a ~~will have~~

a rendezvous with disaster if we don't reach a certain period ^{do act} at a certain time, ^{or place} as if

and this sense of disaster that sits over the earth and the solar system may

fall upon the universe as well. There are certain things ^{if, undeniably} that have to be

achieved in order ^{to protect} the guarantee ^{what I would term} the continuation of existence.

This is the very limited, ^{which} reasonable paranoia. By reasonable paranoia,

^{one does} I mean it comes out without getting nervous about it, without having chills,

^{undergoing direct} ^{feels} But if there is some

reason ^{at} to the assumption, then

reasonable assumption. So obviously, that feeling, Intelligent Design is a

crucial part of it. You don't want to just stumble forward with all one's

errors. If ~~when you think of the artists, the great novelists, even those~~

who ~~wrote~~ ^{like} thumbing their noses, so to speak, at God, people ~~lie~~, Dreiser and

declines or
want
outburst,

Zola, had a great deal of Intelligent Design in their work. Then, of course, you get the artisans, the true artisans like James and Hemingway, and if anything, they were given over to design. It's as if their works live by themselves. They can't come in contact with the raw breath of existence, just the way certain of God's designs, if you will, because they were over-designed. I wish I knew more of botany and zoology because I'm sure there are other examples there.

ML: You've gone off in two very interesting directions but I want to talk about you mention Hemingway and James and over-design one of my questions relates to that and it's this: Is there any relation between our idea of a universe at war and Intelligent Design, and your disdain for plot ^{as a element of prose} in your novels? Does the latter reflect the former?

NM: That's a big question. Before I get into it, let me add one great writer
 on top of ~~James Joyce~~ ^{James Joyce} unlike Hemingway
 who is greater than the first two and that's Joyce. Joyce is doing something
 and Henry James who are not only great novelists
 but awfully intelligent. Design so pure that
 else entirely. Joyce is playing at the very edges of chaos. He's saying, "look

how much you can do with what would be chaos in anyone else's hands."

Which is why it is very hard to get near ~~him because~~ we have an instinctive

sense we want to avoid chaos, and it's very hard to understand him. But he *did*

ML: Fine. I want to take a chance (130)
with this discussion. I want to
take a flyer, so to speak. You tell us
that if you think at all as a philosopher,
it is because you have been a
novelist all your life. Splendid!
I want to see what you can do
with a parallel ~~that~~ that ~~of~~
apparent to me. Novelists, after
all, create worlds.

NM: Yes, we certainly try to, at times.

ML: Good. Let's take the notion
of Intelligent Design in relation
to the novel.

NM: It's true. You are right. As I
said at the beginning this afternoon
both Henry James and Hemingway were
given over entirely to design. It's as
if their works had to live solely
by themselves, as if they felt
less need as creators to come in
contact with the raw material of
existence.

ML: All right, let me take another leaf.
Is there any relation between your
assumption that Intelligent Design is
confronted and altered by experience

^{take}
~~under~~ to organize whole areas of chaos, it's just another way to do it

~~But when you start talking about Intelligent Design, then Joyce is there as
 an incredible figure as an artist.~~

~~Now, to go back to your question if you'd rephrase it for me.~~

I don't want to lose my point.

ML: ~~Yes. So many times you have written in your review of Tom Wolfe's~~
~~books, in many essays, many interviews, that, look, I don't worry about plot.~~
you have said in effect

Plot is ~~just something that is much~~ less important to me than character.

Now, I don't mean plot as story ~~—~~ you always have a storyline, but your
 plots are not ~~Jamesian plots~~

NM: They're not clockwork.

Now so, I've

ML: ~~They're not pieces of clockwork. I've~~ wondered if for you to have a
^{is}
 plot that ~~was~~ very neat and tight and ordered would run counter to your
 ideas of metaphysics.

Good. Plot, I mean well,

NM: ~~When I speak of Intelligent Design, plot is Intelligent Design. It's~~
~~very well put that you can make that analogy. Plot is interesting to me—and~~
it

I thought about it a lot in the years I wrote about Harlot's Ghost because

there's the CIA, ^{6.5} And I thought there's a perfect example of plot — Intelligent

Design, coming into contact ^{that is,} ~~with the world, coming into contact~~ and conflict

with the world. And you see, ^{to prevent} the reason I don't like plots ^{that} is, they don't allow

the figures in the book, the characters ^{push} in the book, to come into the limits of

^{wholly pre-designed} the plot to the point where life rejects the plot because it's too neat and

^{life finds the plot} ~~to unacceptable, and so throws the design~~ throws them into another set of conditions ^{no longer as} that are not quite definable. For

~~me, the uses of plot are in those novels — maybe we'll think of a few while~~

~~we're talking — where one begins with the plot and then the plot gets~~

~~shattered.~~ ^{Borges is the brilliant model of this process}

New ^{wrote} Borges spent his life writing short stories, 5 and 6 page short

stories that start with incredible plots, ^{and} then the plots get shattered. ^{All in}

^{5 or 6 pages} Incredible stories. He, like Joyce, was fascinated with making attacks on

the nature of chaos. ~~And to define and delineate chaos.~~ Now Borges

^{us!} showed for all time — talk about a novelist's novelist — ~~he is the novelist's~~

^{he said to us: at} ~~novelist's novelist — he said:~~ "Look what you're all doing. You're taking

^{take} yourselves too seriously. You're ^{miss} missing the fact that once a plot is

shattered, ^{still} life goes on. The demand continues. ~~There's~~ another species of

^{beginning} life and you have to deal with it."

~~Now, take it back to Intelligent Design. God looks for Intelligent~~

^{then that} Design. ~~That~~ Intelligent Design gets worked upon by existence. Orville

Don't we know that!
 Wright designed an airplane. And after he designed it, he got it up in the air
~~for~~ *and it* and the first time ~~what?~~ it flew a few hundred feet. *He went back* That was the

~~beginning of Intelligent Design going back~~ to the drawing board, ~~going~~
~~back, going back~~, to refine the ~~first~~ knowledge that was received. ~~My~~

~~argument is~~ Intelligent Design cannot exist without experience. So long as

pure heart intention
 it remains Intelligent Design, it remains analogous to any number of very

talented young novelists who never publish because they never get their

book to the point where they want it *to be seen*. They will not ~~care~~ put their book out

on the waters. And so implicit in ~~my~~ *my* notion of Intelligent Design is

Whenever God, I will obviously argue launches each
~~experience. You launch the Intelligent Design and see what happens to it~~

God learns, how God gets
~~and that's how you learn, how you get~~ to the next Intelligent Design. ~~It's~~

~~inconceivable to me God would not work that way~~

ML: What about a novel like One Hundred Years of Solitude?

NM: I don't remember it well enough—and maybe you can refine it for
 me—I don't think he was concerned that much with plot per se. Well, he
 has a family, and all sorts of things happen to this family, and there's a
 wonderful sense of look at the chaos of life, and look at how people react to

it, and how quickly they react, and I just don't think this novel applies to the problem of plot.

Let me enjoy a wild aspect of the notion.
 Take Joyce. One of my favorite metaphors for Joyce—this is from *In my* the book about Henry Miller, I *spoke of* ~~give the example~~ *men coming* three people come into a

~~room,~~ a hostess's living room, Henry James, Hemingway, and Henry Miller.

And the way it went, *takes off his hat* each gives a tip of the hat and lo and behold, there's a cow turd on ~~their~~ *each* head. James *I then go on to say* would be so totally shattered he would have *perished* had a breakdown, he might have ~~died~~ from an experience that awful.

Hemingway would have gone into a profound depression—he would have *emblematic of* just when life seemed *soothing* seen it as the nature of life, ~~that unexpected disasters, truly, truly shattered~~ *you could enjoy, unexpected disasters shatter up* your mood that life was something you could enjoy. And Miller would have

said, "Good Lord, how did that shit get on my head? *look at* And the hostess, *look* ~~can't tell if it's her nostrils that are~~ *is it?* quivering on her twat? She is ~~obviously~~ so excited and perturbed—what a wonderful moment!" Miller is an

example of someone who couldn't stay with a plot for five minutes because he wanted ~~plot~~ to smash into the world and reveal something new about himself and the world. *So* ~~he's~~ *one extreme*, Henry James is the other. And *the effective use of* between them lies intelligent Design.

ML: But what would Joyce have done?

NM: Joyce is so much of a genius I don't want to hang onto his coattails,
~~because~~ I'll fall off. I don't know what he would have done, *with the*
castrated.

ML: I think he would have appreciated it.

NM: He ~~would~~ ^{unwarily} have looked for the 22 words ^{in sixteen languages/} that were closest to ~~shit~~, and,
~~those that were deviants in their meaning but nonetheless had to be taken,~~
~~the sound of shit.~~ ^{sound}
~~into account, and what would be the wonderful omnibus word he would~~
~~come up with? On the other hand, he would have been removed from the~~
~~situation.~~

~~ML: He was the first.~~

~~NM:~~ It was not life he was interested in so much as language.

I disagree.
 ML: (The first person to wipe his ass in a novel ^{is Leopold Bloom} ~~a description of wiping~~
~~your ass in a novel he rips a page out of a book and wipes his ass~~

NM: You point. You are ad-in.

~~helped to keep~~ ^{in America}
 NM: It kept the book from being published ~~for quite a while.~~ *p 21*
p 20 is deleted

~~delete p. 7~~
~~If Change of venue?~~

ML: Yes, people were offended by it (I can't help from quoting the line of Edgar Allen Poe who said, "The universe is a plot of God."

NM: Well, that's Poe. "The universe is a plot of God"—what does it mean? Look into it—it doesn't mean anything.

ML: Poe had a sense that the universe would unfold itself—the universe would expand and expand, and then contract and contract, and then into one ball, and then it would be repeated.

NM: It's a species of fundamentalism to have ideas like that. The idea that the universe is part of a machine whose movements can be predicted is ~~what~~ ^{exactly}

~~I'm totally against it.~~ It's why I'm so opposed to organized religion. I was listening to television the other night and one of those guys—and God, they are imitable—you know, Nietzsche abhors every ^{theologian—he says,} ~~priest and he meant not~~ ~~just every Catholic priest but every reverend—he calls them all liars. He~~ ^{have} ~~says~~ the sine qua non for becoming a theologian is to be a liar. All right, so you've ^a ~~this~~ minister talking in ~~that~~ big, Southern voice that any impassioned fool can imitate, saying, "It's not enough to go to your death believing in the

~~to take along/ can you do~~
 Lord Jesus, you have to have all the people you brought (with you because
~~you convinced them that they, too, must believe in Jesus, and then you'll be~~
~~measured how many you bring to Jesus."~~ ~~And I listened and I thought,~~
~~where the fuck does he get all this stuff?~~ ~~Arrogance to speak with any~~
~~kind of certitude?"~~ I never cease apologizing for speaking with any ~~of my~~
~~certitude in this book. It's outrageous.~~

ML: Let me go back to Sartre. You recently criticized Sartre's existentialism for being "floorless." Without floor.

NM: Without a foundation.

ML: Because, as you put it, "It is, after all, near to impossible for a
 philosopher to explore into why we are here without entertaining some
 notion of what ^{the} prior force might have been." Therefore, if we grant your
 limited God ^{as} that prior force, ~~and I'm happy to grant that~~ then I'm
 compelled to ask what force preceded your God? I assume you would
 choose infinite regress rather than a Prime Mover?

NM: Again, I refuse to be trapped in ^{such} ~~these kinds of~~ questions. ~~I mean,~~
 That's the atheist's last line of defense. There's a story you're probably
 familiar with, of Bertrand Russell and ^{an old} ~~the~~ lady—Russell is talking about
 how the origin of the universe is not knowable. And a lady, a distinguished
^{in the audience speaks up and}
 an old lady says, "On the contrary, Professor Russell. I know the basis of the
 universe." He says, "^uWell, what is it, Madam?" She replies, "The universe
 is resting upon a turtle." And he says, "~~Well, thank you, Madam.~~" "~~A giant~~
~~turtle,~~" she adds. "^uWell, Madam, that's very helpful, but what is the turtle
 resting upon?" And she says, "It's turtles all the way down!"

ML: I do remember that.

NM: I'm not going to get trapped in ~~that~~ ^{the} ~~The~~ arguments of the atheists
^{that ask me to}
~~they're saying~~ because you can't explain what came behind the God ^{I'm}
 talking about. ~~you have no right to talk about God.~~

ML: But you beat Sartre over the head because he won't allow for a force
 behind humanity. Why can't we then try to find out—I'm not trying to
 refute you, but—

NM: ~~OK, let~~ me put it this way: we first have to become close enough to God and helpful enough to God—large questions we haven't even entered, the relationship of humankind to God is something we haven't even touched ~~upon~~—and until we're a great help to God, why should God trust us? You remember, at the end of Harlot's Ghost, I have Hugh Montague goes off on this ~~wonderful~~ ^{intriguing speech}—to me, wonderful speech on how God, having decided ~~he gives his defense of Creationists~~—that God having decided man was wholly untrustworthy, ~~therefore~~ ^{did create the world in six days} created the illusion of evolution, and He put fossil remains in different places, ~~created the entire notion that the universe~~ ^{and so had the right} was created in six days.

that in deed, the

ML: I remember it well—a beautiful piece of writing—

NM: Maybe we could insert it—I didn't say it very well in here. Excuse me—the universe really was created entire, immediately, ex nihilo, by God, ^{in six days, but then he laid in} but he then put evidence all over the place that evolution had done it so ^{never} many millions of years, ^{so that we could not get} would not get near God's roots. So, implied in all that is that when we get ^(to)

close enough to God to feel we are in some kind of alliance with God—

which I think has always been implicit in the relationship, but may not be actual, because as you know from my novel, I believe in the ^{existence of the} devil to an

why then we might begin to have some knowledge
 extraordinary degree—so the answer is we don't begin to know who the God
of who) *But that won't happen until*
 (is behind God, ~~we~~ we get nearer to God.

ML: But you ^{do} see that as a possibility.

NM: ~~Yes. Ultimately.~~ Ultimately. If things go far better than I expect they will.

ML: ~~Here's something.~~ I don't know if you're familiar with the philosopher David Hume—

~~All that~~
 NM: ~~Vaguely.~~ I had him in college.

ML: Well, he ~~actually~~ got into the Intelligent Design argument way back ,
~~when because~~ one of the proofs of St. Thomas Aquinas for the existence of
 God is the argument from design. It goes back that far, a thousand years. ~~A~~
~~different way of putting it,~~ Aquinas has many proofs of God's existence but
 the fifth one was ^{that} the design is so perfect in the universe—he didn't even see
 beyond the solar system—

(Right)
 NM: ~~But~~ there, you run smack into the ~~ugly~~ ^{ugliest aspect} helmet of Catholicism, that
~~ugly helmet with all those projections that smash your face when you try to~~
~~embrace it—you know, the insistence of Catholicism on perfection and~~
~~God's perfection, is one of the things—I feel as if I run into a magnetic field~~
~~that just repels me when I come near that. Because precisely what~~
 What characterizes Intelligent Design is that ~~it's~~ ^{it's} partial. And ~~that's~~ ^{we do well to} so important to
 grasp the notion that these are partial attempts. I'm so glad ~~we~~ ^I have the
 novel to fall back upon; it's ~~the~~ ^a metaphor. When you write a novel, ~~a novel~~ ^{it's}
~~is an exercise, an attempt to come up with a piece of intelligent design and~~
~~but~~ it's never perfect, ~~never~~. Some parts of the Intelligent Design are better than
~~others and the way you find out is by publishing. And then the returns come~~
~~back, and very often the returns have no relation to what you had written.~~
 Occasionally, they do. ~~And~~ ^{It goes into existence, and} slowly over the years you learn more and more
~~and more, and by the end of your life as a novelist you are wiser than when~~ ^{maybe as a novelist}
 you started. ~~And~~ ^{say} the heart of one of my notions ~~in all this~~ is that God is
 always looking to become wiser. That notion ~~we mentioned way back is~~
 God the Father does not always necessarily understand ~~the~~ ^{his} children all that
 well. And that is also in the nature of existence, ~~that~~ ^{all too well} what you create, you
 do not necessarily understand ~~completely~~.

the services of they are
 You know, ~~organized religion~~, when ~~its~~ beautiful moves me, to the
~~extent that~~ I feel "How tragic. How painful." All this *pondering,* ~~thought,~~ all this
~~devotion, all this loyalty, going into a sump, an intellectual sump because it~~
~~explains nothing.~~ *you are finally asked to* All they believe is that God will be there to hear *your*
~~prayers if your nose is clean enough.~~ *God will*
~~prayers,~~ welcome us when we die—as if that's all God has to do, as if God is
 a couch potato—sighs when He has to get up to answer the doorbell to
 welcome a new devotee.

what about Hume's
 ML: ~~So the~~ idea the universe might have been created by a team--?

NM: Not impossible. Not impossible. It explains one of my basic notions,
~~in that~~ the team soon fell out of sorts with one another and ~~you~~ *we* ended up
 with God and the Devil, ~~one leader was called God and one was called the~~
~~Devil.~~ I think it could easily explain the book I'm working on now ~~it was~~
~~created by a team. It could have been started as, as~~

ML: A joint endeavor—

NM: Like those South Seas Companies in
 the 1700's, the 1800's, they started to
 split and have been at odds
 ever since.

human understanding was an abuse of the concept of race. Because *if race*

offers ~~us~~ great clues. It is perfectly possible—and here again, one can only speculate—but it is perfectly possible that races, in the beginning, were

Intelligent Design for different situations. In other words, for people in the tropics, God was saying, "well, how can I design the heating system of their bodies so they can bear the heat?" *a little more easily* Ditto for the north. We're discovering

that living in ~~these~~ separate climates produces different relaxations and strictures of the throat, *languages reflect that* and so there are changes in language. Mind you,

God is ~~discovering~~ *is* as the artist, discovering within the material itself, where

the continuation is. *might be* Certain sculptors talk about how they know nothing of

exactly what the work may become *do not* *cutting*
~~what they're essentially going to do until they see the work in the marble~~
~~until they begin to cut into the marble~~
~~it's as if the marble reveals to them what they must do with the next stroke.~~

Well, maybe *work* the same thing is true with fashioning human designs, *or* animal

designs, what have you, and as you work with these designs and attempt to work with them and refine them, *the* the environment plays a great role.

Returning
 Going back to Hume for a moment, it could be that God came in after a semi-inchoate universe was shaping, and had to deal with the given. That is absolutely within the realm of possibility. There I have to say Hume points the way.

Now, ^{the} those arguments raised ^{a bore} ~~cannot be denied. I cannot refute them.~~ ^{refuted}

I cannot say, "No, God is not going in for capers. He's not going in for ^a ~~mean streaks.~~ ^{mean acts.}" Of course, God could go in for ~~that.~~ But to me—maybe because I too am searching for an orderly existence to some degree—the notion that God and the devil are in conflict with one another makes more sense to me ~~than that we've got this one God who has good and bad, as~~ ^{is more} ~~compassionate as Jesus and a mean little prick in the corners. That I find~~ ^{than not} ~~really goes nowhere. That doesn't mean it doesn't exist. That question is~~ ~~not refutable.~~

ML: Well, your mother's father was a rabbi.

NM: Yes. ~~He was a kosher rabbi, he was a back-bencher rabbi. He'd~~

~~done a lot of scripture-reading into the game. What happened was he~~

~~He~~ studied to be a rabbi in Lithuania but by the ^{time he} ~~he~~ came over here, the only way he could make his living was ^{as} a peddler. Then he moved to ^a small town

called Long Branch, New Jersey, where he opened a butcher shop. [Side

~~then he worked as a butcher but~~ ~~One Ends.) So when he came to Long Branch, he was a butcher, but he had~~

~~the education to be a rabbi, so occasionally when the rabbi was ill there~~

~~there~~ was only one synagogue in Long Branch ^{and} ~~so~~ when the rabbi was ill or off

my grandfather stood in for him, (Alvin)
 on vacation, he was the rabbi. (And my mother was very proud of him.)

~~The~~ fundamental snobbery of the Jews, ~~she was very proud~~—it was much better to be a rabbi than a butcher. I was delighted, it gave me two different ~~sets of~~ ~~inherently~~ strains to develop. ~~I think it's~~

ML: Well, I'm thinking of your mother's devotion and the tear in her eye—obviously, she must have come from a pretty religious household.

my grandfather began
 NM: He was very religious—he started studying the Talmud when he was

four years old. The best thing to be said about the Talmud is it's very hard

to become a fundamentalist *while studying it* reading the Talmud. It's all too easy reading *to go*

fundamental when living with the Bible but *very* difficult reading the Talmud, *It* ~~because the Talmud~~ is the

opposite of the Old Testament, *when* it inquires into the nuances of things. For

instance, in the Talmud, *to the temple* the people brought animals to be sacrificed to the

~~temple~~. Very often there were small disasters—a poor man *might have decided* wanted to

sacrifice his prize heifer because his child was ill, *But on his way* and he wanted to pray to—

with the God so he's sacrificing his heifer into the synagogue and the animal would

does focus on defecate. Well, the Talmud gets into where did it defecate? *Did it do it?* on the outside?

on the patio? *?* did it defecate on the steps? *?* in the vestibule? *?* in the aisle? *?* at the

altar approach? *?* was it on the altar? *?* could there be a sacrifice where it

~~For~~ defecated all these are different proximities and therefore there are
 different punishments. In certain cases the animal can still be sacrificed.
~~At other sites~~
~~perhaps, partially.~~ In other cases, the animal is lost completely—if it
 defecates ^(too) close enough to the altar, it has to be ~~thrown away~~ ^{disposed of} completely. It

can't even be eaten, and so forth. So in the Talmud there are all these efforts
 to find zones of relative compatibility between God and humans—the exact
 opposite of the Old Testament ^{on the New Testament where} in that sense. The Old Testament and the

New Testament are completely—I use the word rhetorical. In other words,
~~both lay it out~~ ^{sketch}
~~they lay it out. they say "This is the way it is. Don't argue with it." Then,~~

~~Then, of course, they contradict themselves two pages later.~~
~~sketch~~

ML: Well—and there is a certain measure, which you yourself recognize,
 of Orphic ambiguity in the utterances of Christ.

NM: I wouldn't call it ambiguity. I would call it the wars of the
~~Analogous~~
 committees. And, you know, it's exactly equal to what's going on between
 the Sunnis and the Shiites in Iraq, to wit, I'll ^(RT) give you this, and you ^{must} give me
 that.

ML: Did your mother talk much about her father?

NM: ~~Only~~ once with a kind of gentle reverence. She adored him, and he was a very kind man. ~~She told~~ once one story I loved when I was a kid. She said, "My mother worked so hard in the butcher shop, and we as children worked hard, ~~too~~, I worked hard—we'd get angry at my father because ~~when~~ whenever a poor woman would come in and he'd be weighing the meat she bought, he'd put his finger under the scale so it cost less. And we thought, That's all very well, but you're taking the money away from us."

ML: So he was a compassionate man.

NM: Most people seemed to think he was a lovely man. I was only four when he died. ~~Who knows? I~~

But I like to think so too.

Then
~~ML:~~ Here's a question on ritual: All your ideas have an underlying assumption that God has a continuing, even a profound interest in at least some individuals, and certainly in the ultimate fate of the human species and the rest of His creation. This is completely at odds with some of the earliest recorded religious expression, namely from the Sumerians, whose prayers were always begging the gods to "Remember!" Prayer and ritual were a

constant attempt to engage the attention of forgetful and indifferent gods who had created and abandoned humanity. This, by the way, wasn't a notion emerging from disasters and dislocations but could be found even as their civilization flourished. Can you comment?

NM: Well, ~~I can attempt to comment.~~ It's the other half of the equation. ~~I think one of the reasons American fundamentalists who've invaded us en masse these days — you know, there's a close war going on between Texas Hold'Em Poker and fundamentalists. Night after night, the fundamentalists skunk the Texas Hold'Em Poker players, in that there'll be five fundamentalists shows on in a given hour and two poker shows — all right, I'm joking, but the obverse side of prayer is that it ^{rarely} never gets answered. So rarely is it answered. So rarely that people cite these things at these ^{at such events} religious meetings as miracles. [in a southern accent] "I prayed to God and I didn't know if I was answered ^{hard} or not, and then, to my astonishment, I fell to me knees and I began to weep, I began to weep for the sores of Christ because my prayer had been answered." Prayers are not answered. I always felt the Lord has enough to take care of without having to listen to ^{all these that} a bunch of repetitive prayers. To use a modern assumption, ~~it's like people who get on the internet because they want to be part of what's going on and they~~~~

~~discover that thousands of boring messages come to them that they have to wade through.~~ Think of God wading through those prayers: "Oh, God, let my team win the game!" "Oh, God, let me get some money, ^u let me sell this old heap that's no good and get something better ^y because I need it to drive ~~the children to school, you understand,~~" all that, all that.

I don't think God listens to prayer. The Sumerians—I don't know *As you describe them, they* anything about them. ~~I think they~~ were relatively sophisticated people who

recognized that they prayed and ~~they~~ prayed and ~~they~~ prayed and answers *did not* didn't come very often. ~~In fact, talk about the mega-million monkeys typing~~

~~Hamlet, some of the same could be applied to prayer~~

Now let me ~~say there are~~ ^{have} some people with a child who's ill, and they pray to God with great sincerity for their child to live, and usually the child does live—I'm willing to accept the idea that that's not something to sneer at. I'm not saying it helps or it works but humanly speaking, we can certainly feel for the parent ~~who weeps in that manner.~~

ML: You wrote once about the time you prayed.

NM: Yes.

ML: Yes. Bobby Kennedy.

NM: Well, there was another time I prayed—well, I don't want to get into it, I'll tell you off the record.

ML: Let's go on to another question.

NM: The reason I don't want to get into it is it's a long, comic story and has nothing to do with what we're talking about. It's not a revelation, or I'd tell you about it.

Speech!

~~ML:~~ When you were talking about Gandhi, you said: "But there are a few

[oxymorons] that are vital and immensely valuable. One of them is "heroic passivity." That's where ^{has to} one's wisdom ^{then we can} (becomes) the arbiter. There can be

be encountering only the variety and the
 (heroic passivity, or quasi- heroic passivity. The latter might be a disaster."

Along that ~~same~~ line, what would you say about any possible value of the

contemplative life? By that I mean the cloistered orders who don't run

hospitals or schools, just pray for the world. This is a strong Christian

tradition, ditto for the Buddhists and some Hindus, and probably the Jews

have some variant of that.

NM: The Twelve Just Men. . .

ML: Do you see a value in this kind of passivity?

NM: I would answer yes. I'm not opposed to that. ~~Yeah, we haven't talked about the relation of God to humans and humans to God.~~

~~ML: We have.~~

~~NM: Yes, but if we're going to get nearer to God to find the God behind the~~
~~God, in that sense, it's perfectly conceivable to me there could be a God who~~
~~really pays attention to transcendental sincerity. And I have a crude~~

going
that the God of
which I speak does

analogy to offer, ~~which is~~ occasionally, after having worked on a novel, you
~~get a review that's so intelligently written and gets to close to what I was~~
~~attempting to do, or shows me new ways I didn't see in the book, that~~
~~illuminates the book for me, I love that critic and I do feel better about the act~~
~~of writing. And I think taken through many orders of magnitude, I think~~
~~there are people who contemplate existence, who pray to God in their sleep~~
~~and on their knees and are qualified to do so, who are not petty greed-bags.~~

come across
even better, you never saw how
it does
works well, I can estimate
Raise that up
I do
in depth
they

What I hate about prayer is most of the time ^{it's} so greedy, I'm trying to get ^{for an undeserved advantage} ~~an edge~~ ^{or an undeserved advantage} (I'm a mediocrity, I'm kind of stupid, God, but maybe you'll help me because I'm praying to you.

JMCN!

~~ML: That does fit in.~~ This is about Buddhism: what's your take on the Buddhist notion of the bodddhisatva vow? Reaching nirvana is a catch-22— if you have achieved a level of deep compassion, enough to reach nirvana, you can't go happily off into it while other sentient beings are still here struggling and suffering. So, even though you personally have a free-pass out of this far from perfect world, you ^{underline - not at} VOLUNTARILY reincarnate as a ^{no cap} "bodddhisatva"—a helper, a teacher, a way-shower—and KEEP reincarnating until everyone has achieved nirvana. Devout Buddhists of many persuasions—and all the monks and nuns, take the "bodddhisatva vow" at an advanced stage of their training.

NM: Well, I think it's a beautiful notion, ~~and~~ I subscribe to it—not personally. I wouldn't make it; I don't have that kind of compassion. The difficulty I've always had with Buddhism is nirvana—that the point of existence is not to rise above all petty feeling, but on the contrary, ^{the point is} to be able to struggle with those petty feelings in such a way that we alter them into

so we're)
somewhat more vigorous feelings, you're more able to contribute to the best
of existence. ~~So~~ nirvana always struck me as a place I had no interest in. If

it existed or not—I had no idea—it didn't appeal to me. I remember talking
to a friend of mine who's a good Buddhist and scolding him, getting into a

polite)
(rage over drinks: "You bastards always talk about nothingness, getting to
nothingness. I'm a writer, I live with nothingness every minute I'm working.

I sit at my desk and for the first half hour there's nothing—I have to pass

~~that nothingness~~
through it in order to get a few ideas. I said, why the hell—you're not even
talking about nothingness. Nothingness is an awful state! It's an empty

state. Why don't you talk about what it really is, which is the ineffable?

When you get into the ineffable, then you have something to talk about!"

~~the thought~~
I like to think he was struck with it, even a little.

Back to the boddhisatva: I think it's an absolutely beautiful

conception. Whether true or not, I have no idea. In other words, ~~true or not~~ ^{how can}

~~I begin~~ ^{any human}
in the sense whether one has the power to say, I choose to reincarnate rather

than going into Nirvana. I think the Lord might say, "Reincarnation ^{is} not

your choice, it's mine." ~~And in~~ ^{obviously} that sense, I'm beyond my range. ~~I can step~~

~~away from that question with the idea~~ ^{But} it is a beautiful notion.

~~ME:~~ ^{that} Look ~~at~~ the end of your last interview, you said ^{that} in many ways the Creator was like a Greek god—strong yet not all powerful, flawed but noble, well, you know Greek myths are full of incidents where the gods took human form, or animal form. Apart from the well-known stories of Zeus turning up as this or that to impregnate some human woman, there are also stories of Zeus turning up as a beggar. In one story, peasants take in a wretched beggar overnight, share their far-from abundant meal with him, treat him very well, and next morning, find his bed empty and a sack of gold in his place—Zeus came calling—and rewarded them for their kindness to the poor! God showing up on earth is an idea embraced long before Christian theology, but I see nothing in your writings of God as a swan, a river, or anything as possibly Jesus.

NM: I don't see any need to answer the question. I just take it for granted. If God wants to appear as a human, why not? And indeed, He would. But I think actually what's more interesting is the belief if you're good when you don't have to be good, something wonderful happens. Which I think is also part of human nature. Humans live for revenge—but they also live for a sentiment that maybe ^{we are} ~~are~~ capable of goodness. So the brunt of those stories, the impact they have on me, is look at the human desire involved.

One, that I can be capable of goodness and two, that there's something in the universe that rewards you for goodness. Prayer is the ugly stepchild of that emotion. What makes it interesting is the pot of gold—they weren't praying for the gold. That's far better than saying, "Hey, I was good—now reward me!"

~~ML. That's it.~~

ML: ~~Now, listen to this collision between Aquinas and David Hume:~~

Hume criticized the argument from design. In particular, he emphasized

there is no legitimate way ~~now this is a paragraph, so bear with me~~ there

is no legitimate way, Hume said, ^{to} we can infer the properties of God from

the qualities of the world, ~~this~~ creation. For instance, Hume questioned, how

can we be sure the world was not created by a team? Or this ^{maybe} is ^{only} but one of

many attempts at creation, the first few having been botched? Or, on the

other hand, ^{could be that} ~~that~~ our world is not puerile first attempt of an infant deity who

afterwards abandoned it, ashamed of his lame performance.

~~NM: I want to see where we are. I can't read these numbers.~~

~~ML: We're fine.~~

NM: It's excellent. If I'd read it, I would have quoted it. These are various

~~possibilities; they're all possible logically. It's perfectly possible God has~~

deserted the universe. I think it's a little weak to say it was a lame

performance and He moved on. That doesn't fulfill my notion of the

passion implicit in the artistry of God. I can't conceive of a great artist ever

junking a work and moving on because it's lame, if that has been ^{has} the major

opus. I do lean to the notion that our world ^{is} ~~was~~ God's major opus, ~~certainly~~
~~for this solar system.~~ But Hume ^{did} put it ~~very~~ well. The argument of ^{say} a perfect
 universe is ^{near to} ~~almost~~ intolerable. All it ~~does~~ ^{is} scramble people's brains ~~and~~
~~say to the deans of the church that they believe for a certainty the priests are~~
~~over them.~~ ^{Even} Which is not fair. And then the priests suffer prodigiously. I
 really think an absolutely great novel could be written about the Catholic
 Church and the people who work in it. ~~many times I wish I were a Catholic~~
~~as a novelist, as a greedy novelist.~~ Man, what material is there, what
 material! But the training is such that it's almost impossible for ~~someone~~
~~who's a priest to become a~~ ^{great} ~~novelist.~~ a great novelist.

ML: It's a fabulously successful institution—and probably because of that.

NM: Fabulously successful, yes, but you could also say the Jewish religion
 has been fabulously successful in that the Jews didn't perish—but what a
 price they paid. And I'd say what a price Catholics have paid. To have
 created a Church that brought so much architectural beauty to the world, so
 much musical beauty, so much ritual beauty—and then be locked into a set
 of notions they can't let go of ^{notions} that explain nothing, ^{clearly and}
^{magically} spiritual and moral confusion.

~~NM: A joint endeavor means two totally separate parties come together.
Like those South Seas Companies in the 1700s, 1800s. Absolutely. And
then they fought and have been fighting ever since.~~

ML: Well, that's all but we can handle Judith's questions

NM: —although we don't have to do it all today. Up to now I've felt fine—

ML: They go in all different directions—

~~NM: Let's see what happens—I may not be able to answer her questions.~~

start a separate page
JMN *Judith's Questions*
per answering
ML: Here's one: "If, as you say, the Creator is an artist, and not all creative works are equally successful, wouldn't this lead quite easily to racism—i.e., the "inferior race"—however one's defining it, whether the non-Aryans scapegoated by the Nazis, or the "ice people" of the Afro-centric extremists, wouldn't that "inferior" group simply be one of God's early, inferior drafts?"

NM: Well, I reject the language of the question. ~~But I think that all of the dangers, or~~ one of the absolute disasters that Hitler and Nazism brought to

J M L N

~~ML:~~ Good, very good. ~~Next one:~~ Your conception of God as artist assumes that God is both vastly-but not all-good, and vastly—but not all-powerful. But why couldn't God be not very compassionate at all and instead immensely curious? In other words, He is fascinated by, but not especially compassionate toward creation, much like a child who winds up toys and watches them slam into each other and chortles at the smashup. You say, "In other words, why are there volcanoes? Because God was not a perfect engineer" Or because like a two-year-old, God found the noise and fury fascinating and amusing. Maybe even the shrieks of the dying fascinating and amusing. You keep assuming God is a nice person, so to speak, but that seems a bit arbitrary. Your reaction?

~~ML:~~ ^{well,} It is arbitrary, and it could be my conditioning. I grew up in a household that was as religious as the next—it wasn't a dogma-driven household, but I remember my mother on Friday night praying before a lit candle, praying to ^{the} Shekhina, who is, of course, the wife of God, and there were tears in my mother's eyes and a feeling of great tenderness ~~and~~, ^{came from} compassion was coming off her. ~~And from that,~~ I think I always assumed ~~and~~ took it for granted that God is compassionate in relation to us.

Metaphysical Interview 6

MICHAEL LENNON: March 20th, 2005, interview 6.

I know you've been thinking a lot about Intelligent Design and I have too. I'd like you to begin by just giving general thoughts on this idea. It seems to be gaining credibility outside religious circles and you're an unlikely person to find any credence in Intelligent Design because. . .

NORMAN MAILER: Why?

ML: Well, because it's a pet theory of the fundamentalists.

NM: I don't care. You have to understand—I've always kept open to myself—as an amateur philosopher, I've always kept open to myself the right to find remarks interesting no matter what quarter they come from. I cannot over-stress how important that is because the moment you get frozen into a stance, it tends to determine the way you think, which I want to avoid. I start as a novelist. A novelist cannot afford to get ideologically bound up in any particular stance. If they do—and novelists do it all the time, one way and another, but it's something we fight.

The most perfect example—there are two wonderful examples in America: Henry James and Hemingway, and both of them were fabulous stylists, but they paid for that huge achievement of their separate styles by being only able to write about certain kinds of things. And because, for whatever reason, I can relate to all of this, we've all done these sorts of things—it's always "do the opposite, go off in a different direction every time." Picasso, as I've said many times, had a huge influence on me because for him, style was not a part of one's person, not necessarily, so much as a tool with which you could attack reality. And therefore, if you attack reality from one direction, then attack it from another.

But as far as this idea of Intelligent Design, let me say I come to it somewhat superficially, except the entire notion of this work, of doing these interviews, is exactly that I won't be embarrassed by my lack of knowledge, because what impresses me about theologians because they are all—no matter what high level they are at—they are trapped, absolutely trapped, by their ideas, most of them received ideas, which they have to live with. And what you see are these veritable mental gymnastics. The tsunami was a wonderful example of that. What can I say? I wish I knew more ballet terms, but—unbelievable, they spoke of the "great mystery." In fact, if it weren't such a serious business, it was as if they delighted in the fact they

could hide behind the "mystery" one more time—for the twenty-eighth thousandth time.

My feeling has been from the word "go," that God created us in His image or Her image—which seems as reasonable to me as no, God was working toward an image, working, and working, laboring, to find a better creation than His last one. Remember my remark that I think the dinosaurs, at one point, were a huge part of God's beliefs—He finally found this immense animal that could run the world, then discovered He had misdesigned it and had to go back to the drawing board, so to speak. Part of the humor for me in religion is that God, like us, makes mistakes. The point I'm getting at is I had no idea that Intelligent Design came from the fundamentalists. I happened to read one story in the papers and nothing beyond that.

ML: Well, I don't want to say they invented the idea, because it's been around back to the 18th century when the world was conceived almost as a clock, it was so perfectly designed. So it's really something that grows out of the Enlightenment, as far as that goes, and you can probably trace it back to the Greeks—but then, you can probably trace almost anything back to the Greeks. However—

NM: Maybe I have a misunderstanding of what is meant by Intelligent Design on the basis of reading this one article in the Times, which is that some believe in evolution these days, and now there's a new concept, Intelligent Design, which is that some of this was intended. In other words, -this is how I read it, and maybe this is my bent, and I misread it, but I don't think so—the notion is there is some force in existence that is looking to design creation and I thought this is perfect for what I am talking about because I think, yes, God is always looking to design creation, to make it better and better, but God has these errors. God is an artist, and because God is an artist, He doesn't always succeed, He sometimes fails as well.

ML: You understood the article right, but you can see how it would lend support to those people who are opposed to evolution because this shows the hand of the Creator, and it's all there.

NM: It isn't all there—I don't go near that at all. The Creator was there—only people who have no understanding of an artist can speak that way. In other words, the Creator saw it all at once, and did it perfectly and spat it out

and, lo and behold, it's been perfect ever since, and He never messed up this extraordinary design? Not so.

ML: Let me say what I understand to be the fundamentalist position on Intelligent Design. Intelligent Design would say: we don't know exactly what processes, natural selection, mutation, evolution, the Intelligence used to create the world, we're not saying that, but we are saying that what does exist out there in nature bespeaks of an Intelligence behind it at some level—maybe many removes back, maybe many processes. As opposed to some fundamentalists saying God created the world in one instant six thousand years ago. You wouldn't go along with that at all.

NM: Of course not.

ML: But what they've done with the evolutionists, is Intelligent Design people say that even evolution and mutation over eons cannot explain the appearance of design we see in natural life. Intelligence had to be involved. Darwin said: I don't know, here's the process; I don't know if there was anything behind the process.

NM: I'm no more an expert on evolution than I am on Intelligent Design. I will say this: it certainly makes great sense to me that Intelligent Design is absolutely one of the elements in our evolution, and what I find comfortable, even agreeable about it as a notion, is precisely that if you have a God who can begin to create a universe as manifold as this—how indeed could it be done without having Intelligent Design, without having notions that this is where to go here, this is how to do that, this is how to develop this species, here's what's wrong with this species, there I didn't conceive of enough. Now, the other element I get into over and over and over is God is not all-powerful. These creations go out into a receptive world that doesn't receive them necessarily with open arms. And they change and they're shifted and as soon as God as the artist has to say to Himself or Herself, "I didn't anticipate this or that"—

ML: Tectonic plates. . .

NM: Exactly, over and over. The tectonic plates are an example of God's incapacity to design the world well enough so there wouldn't be these shifting tectonic plates and hideous earthquakes.

ML: Or, to engage the argument, the tectonic plates are just another example of the randomness and the chaos of the universe.

NM: But, you see, the artist works to extract some order from chaos. I would not say chaos is a lack of order. Chaoses are sets of orders that are too complex and too disparate to be ordered within the consciousness of the artist, of the one who would order it. So that each element in chaos can have its own set of bylaws, if you will, until that chaos comes into conflict with another set of bylaws and they're incompatible and tear each apart. You see, I would use Intelligent and Malign Design, all through the universe. By Malign Design, I mean there are people—no, forces, that would be congenial to God's concepts of creativity, and forces opposed to it. And how do I arrive at this? Through the very simple notion that everywhere in existence you find nothing have a free ride. If something comes along that seems wonderful in the beginning, then the opposition begins, the enjambments begin. Sooner or later forward motion is paralyzed or comes to a stop. So when I see this ongoing, continuing intensity of design and evolution—and the evolution, the yin and yang—I hate yin and yang, the warp and the woof—

ML: So you would call it, the Mailer Theory of Intelligent Design. . .

NM: No, no, no—

ML: All right, you would espouse a theory of Intelligent Design that has imperfect design.

NM: No, the design can be perfect until it runs into chaotic elements that could not be comprehended in advance.

ML: That's imperfection.

NM: No. Perfection is too broad a word here. In other words, sometimes you see creatures in the universe who are so exquisitely designed that the moment you mention Intelligent Design, you say, of course! Evolution, trial and error, could not have produced some of the beautiful forms we see in the animal world. Even if we find most insect forms repellant, nonetheless, when we look at them under the microscope, the extraordinary work that went into them, it's very hard to keep believing that evolution said, "yes, the six feelers on this particular leg will have these wonderful curves like

scimitars," and this came about because it was the best way to do it. I would rather this was designed and then—that to me comes closer to what the nature of reality must be.

ML: Let me give you one criticism of Intelligent Design to see if—one criticism is this: you know the old cliché that if you put a million monkeys in a room with a million typewriters—or a billion, whatever it is—eventually one of them will produce War and Peace or Hamlet. Well, if you look at the universe—

NM: But I know that's not true. That's the sort of thing you go to a computer for. I forget the incredible number but it's too vast to be interesting.

ML: OK, it's too vast to be interesting. But, remember, the universe is vast.

NM: But—

ML: Let me give you the criticism—

NM: I'm listening.

ML: In the vastness of the universe, we know there are billions and billions of stars and solar systems and galaxies. So far, to our limited knowledge, of the ones we've looked at, not one of them come close to having the appurtenances of design for a universe, that is the ultraviolet light being shielded by an atmosphere. We can see the failure of that on Mars and Venus. And the water and the rain and the animals and all the things that come to—the world itself has made people say this amazing, organic system that all works together over a period of time, there's nothing like that anywhere we can see in the universe, despite repeated probings to find it. There's been no messages back, nothing like it. Couldn't it be we're just a fluke of the universe? Now, this is a criticism against intelligent design—in a universe so vast with so many possibilities, you've got to have one planet—

NM: But I'd call that an argument FOR Intelligent Design. Precisely you have nothing working remotely anything like the way it does on earth, with all that fineness of detail, and the notion that all this interlocking is merely expressing functions within functions within functions and you find that

nowhere else in the universe—that is precisely a powerful argument for Intelligent Design.

ML: OK, but then what's the function of all the other stars and galaxies?

NM: Well, once you get beyond the solar system, I feel that—and here is a remark I enjoy—I feel I know no more than the theologians. To wit—and the reason I have this vanity I know more than the theologians is as a novelist I've been free to think about life all my life, given the circumstances of my life. I was a novelist at the age of 25 and have been one ever since. I've spent my life thinking about what is the nature of human nature. Theologians don't have that liberty. They have to say, "How do I explain the miracles and the illogic of the New Testament, the Old Testament," or—I won't get into Islam but obviously, there are problems of that sort over there too—I have not had to carry that burden.

ML: But you must be aware—I know you're aware because I know you're an avid reader—you know there are other solar systems, other galaxies—

NM: I've only dabbled in that. We don't begin to know about other solar systems. All we do know, all we can really say with some authority is that in our solar system, the earth seems to be the only planet that made it. All right. So it may be that other gods—and there may be more powerful gods—they too have had their failures. So we start with the Big Bang: the Big Bang is a creative process that goes on through eons of time that destroy our very concept of the possibility of understanding time. But in any event, all we can state with any certainty, is that the earth succeeded in doing something none of the other planets were able to do. And so far as we can see, given the limited powers of astronomy today, there seem to be no near galaxies or other systems comparable. But there may be. There very well may be. There is no real knowledge whether there are or not since there are so many stars. And so many possibilities. So all we can begin to say is that it seems reasonable to posit a god for our universe.

ML: For our solar system.

NM: For our solar system. It may be that this God failed with other planets. Prior to the earth. I don't even begin to get near that because it's all too easy and too fanciful. But what I say is—I don't want to lose this now—I would

say it is far more difficult to conceive of our existence if there is no God. Because then we are back to the trillions of monkeys writing Hamlet and that is hard to believe. It is much easier for me to believe Hamlet is a part of intelligent design. And if it's not a part of Intelligent Design, then if 15 nano-trillion monkeys could also produce Hamlet, what a waste. Look at the man-hours, look at—there has to be the assumption, along with everything else—this is very important—that existence is moving toward something. That existence itself in the deepest, most cosmic sense, is in peril and is moving forward toward something. It's as if we had a rendezvous with disaster if we don't reach a certain period at a certain time, and this sense of disaster that sits over the earth and the solar system may fall upon the universe as well. There are certain things that have to be achieved in order to guarantee the continuation of existence.

This is the very limited, reasonable paranoia. By reasonable paranoia, I mean it comes out without getting nervous about it, without having chills, yet when I start to contemplate these matters, it seems to me that is a reasonable assumption. So obviously, that feeling, Intelligent Design is a crucial part of it. You don't want to just stumble forward with all one's errors. If—when you think of the artists, the great novelists, even those who wrote thumbing their noses, so to speak, at God, people like Dreiser and

Zola, had a great deal of Intelligent Design in their work. Then, of course, you get the artisans, the true artisans like James and Hemingway, and if anything, they were given over to design. It's as if their works live by themselves. They can't come in contact with the raw breath of existence, just the way certain of God's designs, if you will, because they were over-designed. I wish I knew more of botany and zoology because I'm sure there are other examples there.

ML: You've gone off in two very interesting directions but I want to talk about—you mention Hemingway and James and over-design—one of my questions relates to that and it's this: Is there any relation between your idea of a universe at war and Intelligent Design, and your disdain for plot for your novels? Does the latter reflect the former?

NM: That's a big question. Before I get into it, let me add one great writer who is greater than the first two and that's Joyce. Joyce is doing something else entirely. Joyce is playing at the very edges of chaos. He's saying, "look how much you can do with what would be chaos in anyone else's hands." Which is why it is very hard to get near him because we have an instinctive sense we want to avoid chaos, and it's very hard to understand him. But he

undertook to organize whole areas of chaos, it's just another way to do it. But when you start talking about Intelligent Design, then Joyce is there as an incredible figure as an artist.

Now, to go back to your question if you'd rephrase it for me. . .

ML: Yes. So many times you have written in your review of Tom Wolfe's books, in many essays, many interviews, that, look, I don't worry about plot. Plot is just something that is much less important to me than character. Now, I don't mean plot-as-story—you always have a storyline, but your plots are not Jamesian plots—

NM: They're not clockwork.

ML: They're not pieces of clockwork. I've wondered if for you to have a plot that was very neat and tight and ordered would run counter to your ideas of metaphysics.

NM: When I speak of Intelligent Design, plot is Intelligent Design. It's very well put that you can make that analogy. Plot is interesting to me—and I thought about it a lot in the years I wrote about Harlot's Ghost because

there's the CIA. And I thought there's a perfect example of plot—Intelligent Design coming into contact with the world, coming into contact and conflict with the world. And you see, the reason I don't like plots is they don't allow the figures in the book, the characters in the book, to come into the limits of the plot to the point where life rejects the plot because it's too neat and throws them into another set of conditions that are not quite definable. To me, the uses of plot are in those novels—maybe we'll think of a few while we're talking—where one begins with the plot and then the plot gets shattered.

Now Borges spent his life writing short stories, 5 and 6 page short stories that start with incredible plots and then the plots get shattered. Incredible stories. He, like Joyce, was fascinated with making attacks on the nature of chaos. And to define and delineate chaos. Now Borges showed for all time—talk about a novelist's novelist—he is the novelist's novelist's novelist—he said: "Look what you're all doing. You're taking yourselves too seriously. You're missing the fact that once a plot is shattered, life goes on. The demand continues. There's another species of life and you have to deal with it."

Now, take it back to Intelligent Design. God looks for Intelligent Design. That Intelligent Design gets worked upon by existence. Orville

Wright designed an airplane. And after he designed it, he got it up in the air and the first time—what? It flew a few hundred feet. That was the beginning of Intelligent Design going back to the drawing board, going back, going back, to refine the first knowledge that was received. My argument is Intelligent Design cannot exist without experience. So long as it remains Intelligent Design, it remains analogous to any number of very talented young novelists who never publish because they never get their book to the point where they want it. They will not dare put their book out on the waters. And so implicit in my notion of Intelligent Design is experience. You launch the Intelligent Design and see what happens to it and that's how you learn, how you get to the next Intelligent Design. It's inconceivable to me God would not work that way.

ML: What about a novel like *One Hundred Years of Solitude*?

NM: I don't remember it well enough—and maybe you can refine it for me—I don't think he was concerned that much with plot per se. Well, he has a family, and all sorts of things happen to this family, and there's a wonderful sense of look at the chaos of life, and look at how people react to

it, and how quickly they react, and I just don't think this novel applies to the problem of plot.

Take Joyce. One of my favorite metaphors for Joyce—this is from the book about Henry Miller. I give the example: three people come into a room, a hostess's living room, Henry James, Hemingway, and Henry Miller. And the way it went, each gives a tip of the hat and lo and behold, there's a cow turd on their head. James would be so totally shattered he would have had a breakdown, he might have died from an experience that awful. Hemingway would have gone into a profound depression—he would have seen it as the nature of life, that unexpected disasters, truly, truly shattered your mood that life was something you could enjoy. And Miller would have said, "Good Lord, how did that shit get on my head? And the hostess, I can't tell if it's her nostrils that are quivering or her twat! She is obviously so excited and perturbed—what a wonderful moment!" Miller is an example of someone who couldn't stay with a plot for five minutes because he wanted plot to smash into the world and reveal something new about himself and the world. So he's one extreme, Henry James is the other. And between them lies Intelligent Design.

ML: But what would Joyce have done?

NM: Joyce is so much of a genius I don't want to hang onto his coattails because I'll fall off. I don't know what he would have done.

ML: I think he would have appreciated it.

NM: He would have looked for the 22 words that were closest to shit, and those that were deviants in their meaning but nonetheless had to be taken into account, and what would be the wonderful omnibus word he would come up with? On the other hand, he would have been removed from the situation.

ML: He was the first. . .

NM: It was not life he was interested in so much as language.

ML: The first person to wipe his ass in a novel—a description of wiping your ass in a novel—he rips a page out of a book and wipes his ass.

NM: It kept the book from being published.

ML: Yes, people were offended by it. I can't help from quoting the line of Edgar Allen Poe who said, "The universe is a plot of God."

NM: Well, that's Poe. "The universe is a plot of God"—what does it mean? Look into it—it doesn't mean anything.

ML: Poe had a sense that the universe would unfold itself—the universe would expand and expand, and then contract and contract, and then into one ball, and then it would be repeated.

NM: It's a species of fundamentalism to have ideas like that. The idea that the universe is part of a machine whose movements can be predicted is what I'm totally against. It's why I'm so opposed to organized religion. I was listening to television the other night and one of those guys—and God, they are imitable—you know, Nietzsche abhors every priest and he meant not just every Catholic priest but every reverend—he calls them all liars. He says the sine qua non for becoming a theologian is to be a liar. All right, so you've this minister talking in that big, Southern voice that any impassioned fool can imitate, saying, "It's not enough to go to your death believing in the

Lord Jesus, you have to have all the people you brought with you because you convinced them that they, too, must believe in Jesus, and then you'll be measured how many you bring to Jesus." And I listened and I thought, "where the fuck does he get all this crap? Arrogance—to speak with any kind of certitude?" I never cease apologizing for speaking with any certitude in this book. It's outrageous.

ML: Let me go back to Sartre. You recently criticized Sartre's existentialism for being "floorless." Without floor.

NM: Without a foundation.

ML: Because, as you put it, "It is, after all, near to impossible for philosopher to explore into why we are here without entertaining some notion of what prior force might have been." Therefore, if we grant your limited God is that prior force—and I'm happy to grant that—then I'm compelled to ask what force preceded your God? I assume you would choose infinite regress rather than a Prime Mover?

NM: Again, I refuse to be trapped in those kinds of questions. I mean, that's the atheist's last line of defense. There's a story you're probably familiar with, of Bertrand Russell and the lady—Russell is talking about how the origin of the universe is not knowable. And a lady, a distinguished old lady says, "On the contrary, Professor Russell. I know the basis of the universe." He says, "Well, what is it, Madam?" She replies, "The universe is resting upon a turtle." And he says, "Well, thank you, Madam." "A giant turtle," she adds. "Well, Madam, that's very helpful, but what is the turtle resting upon?" And she says, "It's turtles all the way down!"

ML: I do remember that.

NM: I'm not going to get trapped in that. The arguments of the atheists—they're saying because you can't explain what came behind the God you're talking about, you have no right to talk about God.

ML: But you beat Sartre over the head because he won't allow for a force behind humanity. Why can't we then try to find out—I'm not trying to refute you, but—

NM: OK, let me put it this way: we first have to become close enough to God and helpful enough to God—large questions we haven't even entered, the relationship of humankind to God is something we haven't even touched on—and until we're a great help to God, why should God trust us? You remember, at the end of *Harlot's Ghost*, I have Huge Montague goes off on this wonderful—to me, wonderful—speech on how God, having decided—he gives his defense of Creationists—that God having decided man was wholly untrustworthy, therefore created the illusion of evolution, and He put fossil remains in different places, created the entire notion that the universe was created in six days.

ML: I remember it well—a beautiful piece of writing.

NM: Maybe we could insert it—I didn't say it very well in here. Excuse me—the universe really was created entire, immediately, *ex nihilo*, by God, but he then put evidence all over the place that evolution had done it so man would not get near God's roots. So, implied in all that is that when we get close enough to God to feel we are in some kind of alliance with God—which I think has always been implicit in the relationship but may not be actual, because as you know from my novel, I believe in the devil to an

extraordinary degree—so the answer is we don't begin to know who the God is behind God till we get nearer to God.

ML: But you see that as a possibility.

NM: Yes. Ultimately. Ultimately. If things go far better than I expect they will.

ML: Here's something. I don't know if you're familiar with the philosopher David Hume—

NM: Vaguely. I had him in college.

ML: Well, he actually got into the Intelligent Design argument way back when because one of the proofs of St. Thomas Aquinas for the existence of God is the argument from design. It goes back that far, a thousand years. A different way of putting it, Aquinas has many proofs of God's existence but the fifth one was the design is so perfect in the universe—he didn't even see beyond the solar system—

NM: But there, you run smack into the ugly helmet of Catholicism, that ugly helmet with all those projections that smash your face when you try to embrace it—you know, the insistence of Catholicism on perfection and God's perfection, is one of the things—I feel as if I run into a magnetic field that just repels me when I come near that. Because precisely what characterizes Intelligent Design is that it's partial. And that's so important to grasp the notion that these are partial attempts. I'm so glad we have the novel to fall back upon; it's the metaphor. When you write a novel, a novel is an exercise, an attempt to come up with a piece of intelligent design and it's never perfect, never. Some parts of the Intelligent Design are better than others and the way you find out is by publishing. And then the returns come back and very often the returns have no relation to what you had written. Occasionally they do. And slowly over the years you learn more and more and more, and by the end of your life as a novelist you are wiser than when you started. And the heart of one of my notions in all this is that God is always looking to become wiser. That notion we mentioned way back is God the Father does not always necessarily understand the children all that well. And that is also in the nature of existence, that what you create, you do not necessarily understand completely.

ML: Now, listen to this collision between Aquinas and David Hume:

Hume criticized the argument from design. In particular, he emphasized there is no legitimate way—now this is a paragraph, so bear with me—there is no legitimate way, Hume said, we can infer the properties of God from the qualities of the world, his creation. For instance, Hume questioned, how can we be sure the world was not created by a team? Or this is but one of many attempts at creation, the first few having been botched? Or, on the other hand, that our world is not puerile first attempt of an infant deity who afterwards abandoned it, ashamed of his lame performance.

NM I want to see where we are—I can't read these numbers—

ML: We're fine.

NM: It's excellent. If I'd read it, I would have quoted it. These are various possibilities; they're all possible logically. It's perfectly possible God has deserted the universe. I think it's a little weak to say it was a lame performance and He moved on. That doesn't fulfill my notion of the passion implicit in the artistry of God. I can't conceive of a great artist ever junking a work and moving on because it's lame, if that has been the major

opus. I do lean to the notion that our world was God's major opus, certainly for this solar system. But Hume put it very well. The argument of a perfect universe is almost intolerable. All it does is scramble people's brains and say to the deans of the church that they believe for a certainty the priests are over them. Which is not fair. And then the priests suffer prodigiously. I really think an absolutely great novel could be written about the Catholic Church and the people who work in it—many times I wish I were a Catholic as a novelist, as a greedy novelist. Man, what material is there, what material! But the training is such that it's almost impossible for someone who's a priest to become a novelist—a great novelist.

ML: It's a fabulously successful institution—and probably because of that.

NM: Fabulously successful, yes, but you could also say the Jewish religion has been fabulously successful in that the Jews didn't perish—but what a price they paid. And I'd say what a price Catholics have paid. To have created a Church that brought so much architectural beauty to the world, so much musical beauty, so much ritual beauty—and then be locked into a set of notions they can't let go of that explain nothing.

You know, organized religion when it's beautiful moves me to the extent that I feel "How tragic. How painful." All this thought, all this devotion, all this loyalty, going into a sump, an intellectual sump because it explains nothing. All they believe is that God will be there to hear our prayers, welcome us when we die—as if that's all God has to do, as if God is a couch potato—sighs when He has to get up to answer the doorbell to welcome a new devotee.

ML: So the idea the universe might have been created by a team--?

NM: Not impossible. Not impossible. It explains one of my basic notions in that the team soon fell out of sorts with one another and you ended up with God and the Devil—one leader was called God and one was called the Devil. I think it could easily explain the book I'm working on now—it was created by a team. It could have been started as, as—

ML: A joint endeavor—

NM: A joint endeavor means two totally separate parties come together? Like those South Seas Companies in the 1700s, 1800s. Absolutely. And then they fought and have been fighting ever since.

ML: Well, that's all but we can handle Judith's questions

NM: —although we don't have to do it all today. Up to now I've felt fine—

ML: They go in all different directions—

NM: Let's see what happens—I may not be able to answer her questions.

ML: Here's one: "If, as you say, the Creator is an artist, and not all creative works are equally successful, wouldn't this lead quite easily to racism—i.e., the "inferior race"—however one's defining it, whether the non-Aryans scapegoated by the Nazis, or the "ice people" of the Afro-centric extremists, wouldn't that "inferior" group simply be one of God's early, inferior drafts?"

NM: Well, I reject the language of the question. But I think that all of the dangers, one of the absolute disasters that Hitler and Nazism brought to

human understanding was an abuse of the concept of race. Because it offers us great clues. It is perfectly possible—and here again, one can only speculate—but it is perfectly possible that races, in the beginning, were intelligent design for different situations. In other words, for people in the tropics, God was saying, "well, how can I design the heating system of their bodies so they can bear the heat?" Ditto for the north. We're discovering that living in these separate climates produces different relaxations and strictures of the throat, and so there are changes in language. Mind you, God is discovering as the artist, discovering within the material itself, where the continuation is. Certain sculptors talk about how they know nothing of what they're essentially going to do until they see the work in the marble—it's as if the marble reveals to them what they must do with the next stroke. Well, maybe the same thing is true with fashioning human designs, animal designs, what have you, and as you work with these designs and attempt to work with them and refine them, the environment plays a great role.

Going back to Hume for a moment, it could be that God came in after a semi-inchoate universe was shaping, and had to deal with the given. That is absolutely within the realm of possibility. There I have to say Hume points the way.

ML: Good, very good. Next one: Your conception of God as artist assumes that God is both vastly-but not all-good, and vastly—but not all-powerful. But why couldn't God be not very compassionate at all and instead immensely curious? In other words, He is fascinated by, but not especially compassionate toward creation, much like a child who winds up toys and watches them slam into each other and chortles at the smashup. You say, "In other words, why are there volcanoes? Because God was not a perfect engineer" Or because like a two-year-old, God found the noise and fury fascinating and amusing. Maybe even the shrieks of the dying fascinating and amusing. You keep assuming God is a nice person, so to speak, but that seems a bit arbitrary. Your reaction?

NM: It is arbitrary, and it could be my conditioning. I grew up in a household that was as religious as the next—it wasn't a dogma-driven household, but I remember my mother on Friday night praying before a lit candle, praying to Shekhina, who is, of course, the wife of God, and there were tears in my mother's eyes and a feeling of great tenderness and compassion was coming off her. And from that, I think I always assumed and took it for granted that God is compassionate in relation to us.

Now, those arguments raised cannot be denied. I cannot refute them. I cannot say, "No, God is not going in for capers. He's not going in for mean streaks." Of course, God could go in for that. But to me—maybe because I too am searching for an orderly existence to some degree—the notion that God and the devil are in conflict with one another makes more sense to me than that we've got this one God who has good and bad, as compassionate as Jesus and a mean little prick in the corners. That I find really goes nowhere. That doesn't mean it doesn't exist. That question is not refutable.

ML: Well, your mother's father was a rabbi.

NM: Yes. He was a kosher rabbi, he was—a back-bencher rabbi. He'd done a lot of scripture-reading into the game. What happened was he studied to be a rabbi in Lithuania but by the time he came over here, the only way he could make his living was as a peddler. Then he moved to small town called Long Branch, New Jersey, where he opened a butcher shop. [Side One Ends.] So when he came to Long Branch, he was a butcher, but he had the education to be a rabbi, so occasionally when the rabbi was ill—there was only one synagogue in Long Branch—so when the rabbi was ill or off

on vacation, he was the rabbi. And my mother was very proud of him. In the fundamental snobbery of the Jews, she was very proud—it was much better to be a rabbi than a butcher. I was delighted, it gave me two different strains to develop.

ML: Well, I'm thinking of your mother's devotion and the tear in her eye—obviously, she must have come from a pretty religious household.

NM: He was very religious—he started studying the Talmud when he was four years old. The best thing to be said about the Talmud is it's very hard to become a fundamentalist reading the Talmud. It's all too easy reading the Bible but very difficult reading the Talmud because the Talmud is the opposite of the Old Testament. It inquires into the nuances of things. For instance, in the Talmud, the people brought animals to be sacrificed to the temple. Very often there were small disasters—a poor man wanted to sacrifice his prize heifer because his child was ill and he wanted to pray to God so he's sacrificing his heifer into the synagogue and the animal would defecate. Well, the Talmud gets into where did it defecate—on the outside, on the patio, did it defecate on the steps, in the vestibule, in the aisle, at the altar approach, was it on the altar—could there be a sacrifice where it

defecated—all these are different proximities and therefore there are different punishments. In certain cases the animal can still be sacrificed, perhaps, partially. In other cases, the animal is lost completely—if it defecates close enough to the altar, it has to be thrown away completely. It can't even be eaten, and so forth. So in the Talmud there are all these efforts to find zones of relative compatibility between God and humans—the exact opposite of the Old Testament in that sense. The Old Testament and the New Testament are completely—I use the word rhetorical. In other words, they lay it out: they say "This is the way it is. Don't argue with it." Then, of course, they contradict themselves two pages later.

ML: Well—and there is a certain measure, which you yourself recognize, of Orphic ambiguity in the utterances of Christ.

NM: I wouldn't call it ambiguity. I would call it the wars of the committees. And, you know, it's exactly equal to what's going on between the Sunnis and the Shiites in Iraq, to wit, I'll give you this and you give me that.

ML: Did your mother talk much about her father?

NM: Only with a kind of gentle reverence. She adored him, and he was a very kind man. She told one story I loved when I was a kid. She said, "My mother worked so hard in the butcher shop, and we as children worked hard, I worked hard—we'd get angry at my father because when a poor woman would come in and he'd be weighing the meat she bought, he'd put his finger under the scale so it cost less. And we thought, That's all very well, but you're taking the money away from us.

ML: So he was a compassionate man.

NM: Most people seemed to think he was a lovely man. Who knows? I like to think so too.

ML: Here's a question on ritual: All your ideas have an underlying assumption that God has a continuing, even a profound interest in at least some individuals, and certainly in the ultimate fate of the human species and the rest of His creation. This is completely at odds with some of the earliest recorded religious expression, namely from the Sumerians, whose prayers were always begging the gods to "Remember!" Prayer and ritual were a

constant attempt to engage the attention of forgetful and indifferent gods who had created and abandoned humanity. This, by the way, wasn't a notion emerging from disasters and dislocations but could be found even as their civilization flourished. Can you comment?

NM: Well, I can attempt to comment. It's the other half of the equation. I think one of the reasons American fundamentalists who've invaded us en masse these days—you know, there's a close war going on between Texas Hold'Em Poker and fundamentalists. Night after night, the fundamentalists skunk the Texas Hold'Em Poker players, in that there'll be five fundamentalist shows on in a given hour and two poker shows—all right, I'm joking, but the obverse side of prayer is that it never gets answered. So rarely is it answered. So rarely that people cite these things at these religious meetings as miracles. [in a southern accent] "I prayed to God and I didn't know if I was answered or not, and then, to my astonishment, I fell to me knees and I began to weep, I began to weep for the sores of Christ because my prayer had been answered." Prayers are not answered. I always felt the Lord has enough to take care of without having to listen to a bunch of repetitive prayers. To use a modern assumption, it's like people who get on the internet because they want to be part of what's going on and they

discover that thousands of boring messages come to them that they have to wade through. Think of God wading through those prayers: "Oh, God, let my team win the game!" "Oh, God, let me get some money, let me sell this old heap that's no good and get something better because I need it to drive the children to school, you understand," all that, all that.

I don't think God listens to prayer. The Sumerians—I don't know anything about them. I think they were relatively sophisticated people who recognized that they prayed and they prayed and they prayed and answers didn't come very often. In fact, talk about the mega-million monkeys typing Hamlet, some of the same could be applied to prayer.

Now let me say there are some people with a child who's ill, and they pray to God with great sincerity for their child to live, and usually the child does live—I'm willing to accept the idea that that's not something to sneer at. I'm not saying it helps or it works but humanly speaking, we can certainly feel for the parent who weeps in that manner.

ML: You wrote once about the time you prayed.

NM: Yes.

ML: Yes. Bobby Kennedy.

NM: Well, there was another time I prayed—well, I don't want to get into it, I'll tell you off the record.

ML: Let's go on to another question.

NM: The reason I don't want to get into it is it's a long, comic story and has nothing to do with what we're talking about. It's not a revelation, or I'd tell you about it.

ML: When you were talking about Gandhi, you said: "But there are a few [oxymorons] that are vital and immensely valuable. One of them is "heroic passivity." That's where one's wisdom becomes the arbiter. There can be heroic passivity, or quasi- heroic passivity. The latter might be a disaster." Along that same line, what would you say about any possible value of the contemplative life? By that I mean the cloistered orders who don't run hospitals or schools, just pray for the world. This is a strong Christian tradition, ditto for the Buddhists and some Hindus, and probably the Jews have some variant of that.

NM: The Twelve Just Men. . .

ML: Do you see a value in this kind of passivity?

NM: I would answer yes. I'm not opposed to that. Yeah, we haven't talked about the relation of God to humans and humans to God.

ML: We have.

NM: Yes, but if we're going to get nearer to God to find the God behind the God, in that sense, it's perfectly conceivable to me there could be a God who really pays attention to transcendental sincerity. And I have a crude analogy to offer, which is occasionally, after having worked on a novel, you get a review that's so intelligently written and gets to close to what I was attempting to do, or shows me new ways I didn't see in the book, that illumines the book for me, I love that critic and I do feel better about the act of writing. And I think taken through many orders of magnitude, I think there are people who contemplate existence, who pray to God in their sleep and on their knees and are qualified to do so, who are not petty greed-bags.

What I hate about prayer is most of the time it's so greedy, I'm trying to get an edge—I'm a mediocrity, I'm kind of stupid, God, but maybe you'll help me because I'm praying to you.

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

NM: Well, I think it's a beautiful notion and I subscribe to it—not personally. I wouldn't make it; I don't have that kind of compassion. The difficulty I've always had with Buddhism is nirvana—that the point of existence is not to rise above all petty feeling, but on the contrary, to be able to struggle with those petty feelings in such a way that we alter them into

somewhat more vigorous feelings, you're more able to contribute to the best of existence. So nirvana always struck me as a place I had no interest in. If it existed or not—I had no idea—it didn't appeal to me. I remember talking to a friend of mine who's a good Buddhist and scolding him, getting into a rage over drinks: "You bastards always talk about nothingness, getting to nothingness. I'm a writer, I live with nothingness every minute I'm working. I sit at my desk and for the first half hour there's nothing—I have to pass through it in order to get a few ideas. I said, why the hell—you're not talking about nothingness. Nothingness is an awful state! It's an empty state. Why don't you talk about what it really is, which is the ineffable? When you get into the ineffable, then you have something to talk about!"

I like to think he was struck with it, even a little.

Back to the boddhisatva: I think it's an absolutely beautiful conception. Whether true or not, I have no idea. In other words, true or not in the sense whether one has the power to say, I choose to reincarnate rather than going into Nirvana, I think the Lord might say, "Reincarnation's not your choice, it's mine." And in that sense, I'm beyond my range. I can step away from that question with the idea it is a beautiful notion.

ML: Look at the end of your last interview, you said in many ways the Creator was like a Greek god—strong yet not all powerful, flawed but noble, well, you know Greek myths are full of incidents where the gods took human form, or animal form. Apart from the well-known stories of Zeus turning up as this or that to impregnate some human woman, there are also stories of Zeus turning up as a beggar. In one story, peasants take in a wretched beggar overnight, share their far-from abundant meal with him, treat him very well, and next morning, find his bed empty and a sack of gold in his place—Zeus came calling—and rewarded them for their kindness to the poor! God showing up on earth is an idea embraced long before Christian theology, but I see nothing in your writings of God as a swan, a river, or anything as possibly Jesus.

NM: I don't see any need to answer the question. I just take it for granted. If God wants to appear as a human, why not? And indeed, He would. But I think actually what's more interesting is the belief if you're good when you don't have to be good, something wonderful happens. Which I think is also part of human nature. Humans live for revenge—but they also live for a sentiment that maybe I am capable of goodness. So the brunt of those stories, the impact they have on me, is look at the human desire involved.

One, that I can be capable of goodness and two, that there's something in the universe that rewards you for goodness. Prayer is the ugly stepchild of that emotion. What makes it interesting is the pot of gold—they weren't praying for the gold. That's far better than saying, "Hey, I was good—now reward me!"

ML: That's it.

Metaphysical Interview 6

MICHAEL LENNON: March 20th, 2005, interview 6.

I know you've been thinking ~~about~~ about Intelligent Design and I have,
 too. I'd like you to begin by just giving general thoughts on this idea. It
~~seems to be gaining credibility outside religious circles and you're an~~ ^{But aren't you an}
~~unlikely person to find any credence in Intelligent Design because~~ ^{have?}

Fundamentalists think.

NORMAN MAILER: Why?

ML: ~~Well,~~ because it's a pet theory of the fundamentalists.

that's the last of my concern, what
 NM: I don't care. You have to understand I've always kept open to
~~myself~~ ^{to ask open} as an amateur philosopher, I've always kept open to myself the
~~right to find~~ ^{certain ideas} ~~remarkable~~ ^{grounded} interesting no matter what quarter they come from. I
~~cannot over stress how important that is because the moment you get~~ ^{into}
~~in~~ ^{the simplest} a stance, it tends to determine the way you think, which I want to avoid.

I start as a novelist. A novelist cannot afford to get ideologically bound up
~~in any particular stance.~~ If they do—and novelists do it all the time, one,
~~way and another,~~ but it's something we fight, ^{we} even if we tend to ~~to do just think by way of our style.~~

to the ourselves up by way of our style

The most perfect example ~~There are two wonderful examples in~~

~~America:~~ Henry James and Hemingway, and both of them were fabulous

stylists, but they paid for ^{the} that huge achievement of their separate styles by

being ^{only} able to write about certain kinds of things. And because, ^{then were} for

^{lacked into their style} whatever reason, I can relate to all of this, we've all done these sorts of

things — it's always "do the opposite, go off in a different direction every

^{belong} time." Picasso, as I've said many times, had a huge influence on me because

for him, style was not a part of one's person, not necessarily, ^{I think he saw} so much as a

^{style as a} tool with which you could attack reality. And therefore, if you attack reality

^{first} from one direction, then attack it from another.

^{As far} But ~~on~~ as this idea of Intelligent Design, let me say I come to it

^{On the other hand, the pressure behind} somewhat superficially, except the entire notion of this work, of doing these

interviews, is ~~exactly~~ that I won't be embarrassed by my lack of knowledge,

^{or} because what impresses me about theologians ^{because they are all} — no

matter what high level they are at — they are trapped, absolutely trapped by

their ideas, most of them received ideas, which they have to live with. And

what you see are these veritable mental gymnastics. The tsunami ^{was}

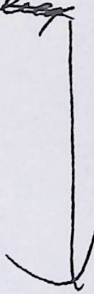
^{the most stupid straw man} gives a wonderful example of that. "What can I say?" I wish I knew more ballet

terms, but — unbelievable, they spoke of the "great mystery." In fact, if

an ^{or} ~~explanation~~ is that God is a great mystery, weren't such a serious business. It was as if they delighted in the fact they

by their ideas. They are obliged (2a)
to do their thinking with received
ideas, that is, ideas they are not
free to change (as for example,
God is All-Good and All-Powerful).
So, theologians ~~have to~~ build
their philosophy ~~on~~ by way
of unalterable mental ~~principles~~
of gymnastics. So, there are
many questions they cannot
begin to confront.

I must say that the tongue
comes to mind. All they can offer
~~for the world is not~~
for explanation is that God is
a great mystery and His ways
are unfathomable. It was as if
they delighted in the fact that



could hide behind the "mystery" one more time—for the twenty-eighth thousandth time.

My feeling has been from the word ^{always} "go," that God created us in His image or Her image, ^{is} ~~which seems as reasonable to me as no~~ God, ^{that seems} ~~by my~~ ^{notion is always} working toward an image, working, and working, laboring, to find a better, more well-adapted creature than his last design. I creation than His last one. Remember my remark that I think the dinosaurs, ^{must have been} at one point, ^{had dared to} were a huge part of God's beliefs. He finally found this ^{create this} immense animal ^{who might be able to rule the jungles,} that could run the world, then discovered He had ^{the mountains and the plains. Then he discovered} ~~misdesigned it~~ and had to go back to the drawing board, so to speak. Part of ^{I must say} ~~the humor for me in religion is that~~ God, like us, makes mistakes. ^{that} ~~The point~~ I'm getting at is I had no idea that Intelligent Design ^{has been 9 years to us} came from the fundamentalists. ~~I happened to read one story in the papers and nothing beyond that.~~

ML: Well, I don't want to say they invented the idea, because ^{since} ~~it's been~~ around ^{to be virtually} back to the 18th century when the world was conceived almost as a clock, it was so perfectly designed. ^{Intelligent Design} ~~So it's really something that grows out~~ of the Enlightenment, as far as that goes, and you can probably trace it back to the Greeks—but then, you can probably trace almost anything back to the ~~Greeks. However~~

Perhaps
 NM: Maybe I have a misunderstanding of what is meant by Intelligent Design. I can only speak of it on the basis of God New York Design on the basis of reading this one article in the Times, which is that some believe in evolution these days, and now there's a new concept, speak of a concept that was at odds with evolution Intelligent Design, which is that some of this was intended. In other words,

this is how I read it, and maybe this is my bent, and I misread it, but I don't It offered the notion that there may be a think so the notion is there is some force in existence that is looking to bring a sense of design into Creation itself, design creation and I thought this is perfect for what I am talking about.

Because I think, yes, God is always looking to design creation, to make it exist better, more finely designed, but God makes errors, better and better, but God has these errors. (God is an artist, and because

As God is an artist, He doesn't always succeed, He sometimes fails as well.

ML: You understood the article right, but can't you you can see how it would lend support to those people who are opposed to evolution In Intelligent Design, because this shows by contrast, I know the hand of the Creator, and it's all there

It is only people like fundamentalists
 NM: It isn't all there. I don't go near that at all. The Creator was there to who are able to only people who have no understanding of an artist speak that way. As they see it other words, the Creator saw it all at once, and did it perfectly and spat it out.

and, ~~to~~ and behold, it's been perfect ever since, and He never messed up this ^{failed once}
~~the design was extraordinary from the~~
~~extraordinary design?~~ Not so
~~shame he even gave us an Old and~~
~~New Testament to help us understand~~
~~standing of His immaculate design.~~

ML: Let me say what I understand to be the ~~fundamentalist~~ ^{or} position ~~is~~

~~present-day~~

IX

Intelligent Design. Intelligent Design would say: we don't know exactly

~~which~~ ^{are directly related to the}
~~what~~ processes, natural selection, mutation, evolution, ~~the~~ Intelligence used

to create the world, ~~we're not saying that~~, but we are saying that what does

exist out there in nature ^{the presence of} speaks of an Intelligence behind it at some

level—maybe ^{at some} many removes back, maybe many processes ^{but it is certainly} as opposed to

~~those~~ ^{what would} some fundamentalists saying God created the world in one instant six

thousand years ago. You wouldn't go along with that at all.

NM: Of course not.

ML: ~~But what they've done with the evolutionists, is Intelligent Design~~

people ^{do} say that ~~even evolution and mutation over time~~ ^{all} cannot explain the

appearance of design ^{that} we see in natural life. Intelligence had ^{also} to be involved.

~~whereas~~ Darwin said: ~~I don't know~~, here's the process. I don't know if there was

anything behind ^{it} the process [≡]

NM: ~~I'm no more an expert on evolution than I am on Intelligent Design. I~~
~~will say this:~~ It certainly makes great sense to me that Intelligent Design is
~~absolutely~~ one of the elements in ~~our~~ evolution, ~~and~~ what I find
 comfortable, even agreeable about it as a notion, is ~~precisely~~ that if ~~you~~ ^{we do}
 have a God who ~~can begin to create~~ ^{created} a universe as manifold as this ^{ours} (how
~~indeed could it be done without having~~ ^{have been} Intelligent Design, without having
 notions that this is where to go here, this is how to do that, this is how to
 develop this species, here's what's wrong with this species, there I didn't
 conceive of enough. Now, ~~the other element I get into over and over and~~ ^(present, which I must emphasize)
~~over is~~ ^(not) God is not all-powerful. These creations go out into ^{an existence} ~~a receptive~~
~~world that doesn't receive them necessarily~~ ^{generosity} with openness. And they ^{change}
~~under external circumstances until~~ ^{change} ~~change and they're shifted and as soon as~~ God as the artist has to say to
~~Himself or Herself, "I didn't anticipate this or that"~~ ^{designing}

ML: Tectonic plates. . .

NM: Exactly, ~~over and over~~ ^{so} ~~The~~ ^{that} tectonic plates are an example of God's
 incapacity to design the world ~~well enough~~ ^{so} so there wouldn't be ~~these~~
 shifting tectonic plates and hideous earthquakes, ^{ensuing} ~~incalculable~~
 loss, and whole failures of ~~even~~ ^{or we have it} explanations
 as to why God permitted ~~this~~ ^{how much} ~~simplicity~~ to assume that ~~the~~ ^{the} ~~design~~

indeed,
 just like
 us, it was
 a giant

ML: Or, to engage the argument, the tectonic plates are just another example of the randomness and the chaos of the universe.

NM: But, you see, the artist works to extract ~~some~~ order from chaos. I ~~would not say~~ ^{even that} chaos is a lack of order. ^{is the mix of} Chaos ~~are~~ ^{are} sets of orders that are

too complex and too disparate to be ordered within the consciousness of ^{heaven} ~~the~~

artist, ~~of the one who~~ ^{If you will, each} would order it. ~~So that each~~ ^{each} element in chaos can

^{laws and processes} ~~have its own set of~~ ^{but that organization within a particular} bylaws, if you will, until that chaos comes into conflict

with another set of ^{orders, are they} bylaws and they're incompatible and tear each apart.

~~You see, I would use~~ ^{I also would postulate} Intelligent and Malign Design ~~all through the~~ ^{our}

universe. By Malign Design, I mean there are ~~people~~ ^{which} ~~no~~ forces that

~~would be~~ ^{not at all} congenial to God's concepts of creativity, ~~and~~ ^{and} forces opposed to it.

~~And~~ ^{Because neither} how do I arrive at this? Through the very simple notion that

~~everywhere in existence you find~~ ^{can} ~~nothing have~~ ^{Anything} a free ride. ~~If something~~

~~comes along that seems wonderful in the beginning, then the opposition,~~ ^{that}

~~begins, the enjambments~~ ^{or} ~~Sooner or later~~ forward motion is paralyzed, ~~as~~

~~or comes to a stop. So when I see this ongoing, continuing intensity of~~ ^{stunned, as I understand,}

~~design and evolution~~ ^{and the evolution, the yin and yang} ~~I have yin and~~

~~yang, the warp and the weft~~

ML: So you would call it, the Mailer Theory of Intelligent Design.

NM: No, no, no—

ML: ^{Do you then} All right, you would espouse a theory of Intelligent Design that has imperfect design?

NM: ^{excellent} No, the design can be perfect until it runs into chaotic elements that could not be comprehended in advance.

ML: That's imperfection.

NM: No. ^{may not be the best} Perfection is too broad a word here. In other words, Sometimes you see creatures in the universe who are so exquisitely designed that the ^{one speaks of} moment you mention Intelligent Design, you say, of course, ^{Orchids, snowflakes, tigers,} Evolution, trial and error, could not have produced some of the beautiful forms we see in ^{Racehorses. Certain dogs.} the animal world. ^{we can see} Even if we find most insect forms repellent, nonetheless, when we look at them under the microscope, ^{It becomes harder to believe} the extraordinary work that went into them, it's very hard to keep believing that evolution said, "yes, the six feelers on this particular leg will have these wonderful curves like

scimitars," and this ^{will come} ~~came~~ about because it ^{is only} ~~was~~ the best way to do it. ^{for the} ~~I would~~
~~survival of the species. It is literally easier~~
~~rather this was designed and then—that to me comes closer to what the~~
~~for believed that it was designed for beauty~~
~~nature of reality must be,~~
~~as well as function.~~

ML: ~~Let me give you one criticism of Intelligent Design to see if one,~~

~~criticism is this:~~ you know the old cliché that if you put a million monkeys
 in a room with a million typewriters—or a billion, whatever it is—
 eventually one of them will produce War and Peace or Hamlet. Well, if you
~~look at the universe—~~

NM: ~~But I know that's not true.~~ That's the sort of thing you go to a
 computer for. I forget the incredible number but it's too vast to be
 interesting.

ML: ~~OK, it's too vast to be interesting. But, remember, the universe is vast.~~

~~NM: But~~

ML: Let me give you the criticism ~~for~~ ^{of} Intelligent Design.

NM: I'm listening.

ML: In the vastness of the universe, ~~we know~~ ^{by} there are billions and billions of stars and solar systems and galaxies. So far, to our limited knowledge, of the ones we've looked at, not one of them come close to having the ~~appearance of design~~ ^{besides to} ~~for a universe, that is the ultraviolet light being~~ ~~shielded by an atmosphere. We can see the failure of that on Mars and~~ ~~Venus. And the water and the rain and the animals and all the things that~~ ~~that work together over a period of time, there's nothing like that~~ ~~anywhere we can see in the universe, despite repeated probings to find it~~ ~~There's been no messages back, nothing like it. Couldn't it be we're just a~~ ~~fluke of the universe?~~ ~~Now, this is a criticism of intelligent design?~~

^{and} ~~In~~ a universe so vast with so many possibilities, you've got to have one ~~planet that has the ingredients for intelligent life~~ ^{Finally there is one} ~~planet that has the ingredients for intelligent life~~ ^{that came out of the egg} ~~planet~~ ^{that came out of the egg} ~~that has the ingredients for intelligent life~~ ^{that came out of the egg} ~~that has the ingredients for intelligent life~~ ^{that came out of the egg}

NM: But I call that an argument FOR Intelligent Design. Precisely you ~~have nothing working remotely anything like the way it does on earth, with~~ ~~all that fineness of detail, and the notion that all this interlocking is merely~~ ~~expressing functions within functions within functions and you find that~~ ^{I would} ^{See} ^{Because} ^{that works} ^{another} ^{I see that precisely}

~~nowhere else in the universe~~ ^{as the)} ~~that is precisely a~~ powerful argument for
Intelligent Design.

^{What then is}
ML: ~~OK~~ but then what's the function of all the other stars and galaxies?

NM: Well, ^{we} once you get beyond the solar system, I feel that ~~and here is a~~
~~make this next remark~~ ^{I have} ~~I enjoy it so much~~
~~remark I enjoy~~ I feel I know no more than the theologians. To wit ~~and~~
~~that out there~~ ^{is because I}
^{I indeed} the reason I have this vanity, I know ~~more than the theologians~~ is as a
~~have been a~~ ^{novelist} I've been free to think about life all my life, given the circumstances
~~of my life~~ I was a novelist at the age of 25 and have been one ever since.
~~I have had to spend my life~~
I've spent my life thinking about what is the nature of human nature.
Theologians ^{do not} have that liberty. They have to say, "How do I explain
the miracles and the illogic of the New Testament, the Old Testament," ^{and} ~~or~~
I won't get into Islam but obviously, ^{they have had a few} there are problems of that sort over
^{as well} ~~there are burdens~~ ~~I have not had to~~
~~there too~~ ~~I have not had to carry that burden~~ ^{carry}

ML: But you must be aware I know you're aware because I know you're
~~an avid reader~~ ~~you know~~ there are other solar systems, other galaxies—

NM: I've only dabbled in that. We don't begin to know about other solar

systems. All we ~~do~~ know, all ~~we~~ can really say with ^{any} some authority is that

in our solar system, the earth seems to be the only planet that ^{is now} ~~is now~~

~~blue with creatures~~ ^{conceivable of gods} right. So it may be that other gods—and there may be more powerful

~~gods than ours, that have had even larger~~ gods—they too have had their failures. So we start with the Big Bang: the

Big Bang is a creative process that goes on through eons of time that

destroy our very concept of the possibility of understanding time. But in

any event, ^{it is possible} ~~we~~ can state with any certainty, ^{that} ~~is~~ that the earth succeeded in

^{accomplishing} ~~doing something~~ none of the other planets were able to do. And so far as

~~we can see~~ ^{given} the limited powers of astronomy today, there seem to be

no near galaxies or other systems comparable. But there may be. There

very well may be. ^{life} ~~There is no real knowledge whether there are or not since~~

~~There are so many stars. And so many possibilities. So all we can begin to~~

say is that it seems reasonable to posit a god for our universe.

ML: For our solar system.

NM: For our solar system. It may be that this God failed with other planets.

Prior to the earth. I don't even begin to get near that ^{approach} ~~because~~ it's all too easy

and too fanciful. But ~~what I say is I don't want to lose this now I would~~

~~I would~~

~~that~~
say it is far more difficult to conceive of our existence if there is no God.

Because then we are back to the trillions of monkeys writing Hamlet and that is hard to believe. It is much easier for me to believe, ~~suppose that~~ Hamlet is a part of

~~human~~ intelligent design. And if it's not a part of Intelligent Design, then if ~~it took~~

~~a~~ nano-trillion monkeys could also produce Hamlet, what a waste. Look at

~~the man hours, look at~~ there has to be the assumption, along with

everything else, ~~this is very important~~ that existence is moving toward

a goal. ~~It is certainly possible that~~ something. That existence itself in the deepest, most cosmic sense, is in

peril ~~and is moving forward toward something~~. It's as if we had a

a rendezvous with disaster if we don't reach a certain period ~~at a certain time~~, as if

and this sense of disaster that sits over the earth and the solar system may

fall upon the universe as well. There are certain things that have to be

achieved in order ~~to protect~~ the guarantee the continuation of existence.

This is the very ~~limited~~ reasonable paranoia. By reasonable paranoia,

*declines on
I want
outbursts,*
I mean it comes out without getting nervous about it, without having chills, ~~undergoing dinge~~ But if there is some reason to the ~~assumption~~, then reasonable assumption. So obviously, that feeling, Intelligent Design is a

crucial part of it. You don't want to just stumble forward with all one's

errors. If ~~when you think of the artists, the great novelists, even those~~

who wrote thumbing their noses, so to speak, at God, people ~~like~~ Dreiser and

M.L.: Fine. I want to take a chance (13) with this discussion. I want to take a leap, so to speak. You talking that if you think at all as a philosopher, it is because you have been a novelist all your life, I understand! I want to see what you can do with a parallel ~~that~~ that ~~of~~ ~~the~~ apparent to me. Novelist, after all, create worlds.

N.M.: Yes, we certainly try to, at times.

M.L.: Good. Let's take the notion of Intelligent Design in relation to the novel.

N.M.: It's true. You are right. As I said at the beginning two authors like Henry James and Hemingway were given over entirely to design. It's as if their words had to line up neatly by themselves, as if they felt less need as creators to come in contact with the raw breath of existence.

M.L.: All right, let me take another leap. Is there any relation between your assumption that Intelligent Design is confronted and altered by experience

Zola, had a great deal of Intelligent Design in their work. Then, of course, you get the artisans, the true artisans like James and Hemingway, and if anything, they were given over to design. It's as if their works live by themselves. They can't come in contact with the raw breath of existence, just the way certain of God's designs, if you will, because they were over-designed. I wish I knew more of botany and zoology because I'm sure there are other examples there.

ML: You've gone off in two very interesting directions but I want to talk about you mention Hemingway and James and over-design one of my questions relates to that and it's this: Is there any relation between your idea of a universe at war and Intelligent Design and your disdain for plot in your novels? ~~Does the latter reflect the former?~~

your own challenging
NM: That's a big question. Before I get into it, let me add one great writer on two about James Joyce unlike Hemingway who is greater than the first two and that's Joyce. Joyce is doing something and Henry James who is not only a great novelist but a great one of Intelligent Design. He's saying, "look entirely. Joyce is playing at the very edges of chaos. He's saying, 'look

how much you can do with what would be chaos in anyone else's hands."

Which is why it is very hard to get near him because we have an instinctive

sense *that* we want to avoid chaos, and *so* it's very hard to understand him. But he *did*

their works tend to live for themselves. They are not designed to be read by you with, but they are designed to be read by you with, and the very edges of chaos.

14

~~take~~
undertook to organize whole areas of chaos, it's just another way to do it

~~But when you start talking about Intelligent Design, then Joyce is there as~~
~~an incredible figure as an artist.~~

~~Now, to go back to your question if you'd rephrase it for me.~~

I don't want to lose my point.

ML: ~~Yes. So many times you have written in your review of Tom Wolfe's~~
~~books, in many essays, many interviews, that, look, I don't worry about plot.~~
you have said in effect

Plot is ~~just something that is much~~ less important to me than character.

~~Now, I don't mean plot as story.~~ You always have a storyline, but your
plots are not ~~Jamesian plots~~

NM: They're not clockwork.

No, so, I've

ML: They're not pieces of clockwork. I've wondered if for you to have a
~~is~~
plot that was very neat and tight and ordered would run counter to your
ideas of metaphysics.

Good. Plot, I mean well

NM: ~~When I speak of Intelligent Design, plot is Intelligent Design. It's~~
~~very well put that you can make that analogy.~~ ~~It~~ Plot is interesting to me—and
I thought about it a lot in the years I wrote about Harlot's Ghost because

⁶⁵ there's the CIA. And I thought there's a perfect example of plot — Intelligent

Design, coming into contact ~~with the world, coming into contact~~ and conflict ^{to prevent} with the world. And you see, ^{but} the reason I don't like plots is they don't allow

the figures in the book, the characters in the book, to come into the limits of

^{wholly pre-designed} the plot to the point where life rejects the plot because it's too neat and ^{life finds the plot} too unacceptable, and so ~~it~~ ^{it} throws them into another set of conditions that are ~~quite~~ ^{no longer as} determinable. For

~~me, the uses of plot are in those novels — maybe we'll think of a few while~~

~~we're talking — where one begins with the plot and then the plot gets~~

~~shattered~~ ^{Borges is the brilliant model of my process}
Now Borges spent his life writing short ^{4 wrote} 5 and 6 page short

stories that start with incredible plots, and then the plots get shattered. All in

^{5 or 6 pages}

Incredible stories. He, like Joyce, was fascinated with making attacks on

the nature of chaos. And to define and delineate chaos. Now Borges

showed ^{us} for all time — talk about a novelist's novelist — ~~he is the novelist's~~

^{he said to us} ~~novelist's novelist~~ ^{at} he said: "Look what you're all doing. You're ^{take}

yourselves too seriously. You're ^{miss} missing the fact that once a plot is

shattered, life ^{still} goes on. The demand continues. There's ^{another} another species of

^{beginning} life and you have to deal with it."

^{then} Now, take ^{that} back to Intelligent Design. God looks for Intelligent Design. ^{then} That Intelligent Design gets worked upon by existence. Orville

~~Don't we know that!~~
Wright designed an airplane. And after he designed it, he got it up in the air

~~for~~ and the first time, ~~and it~~ what? It flew a few hundred feet. ~~That was the~~ *he went back*

~~beginning of Intelligent Design going back to the drawing board, going~~

~~back going back~~, to refine the ~~first~~ knowledge that ~~was~~ received. ~~My~~

~~argument is~~ Intelligent Design cannot exist without experience. So long as

it remains Intelligent Design, *pure bad intentions*, it remains analogous to any number of very

talented young novelists who never publish because they never get their

book to the point where they want it *to be seen*. They will not ~~care~~ put their book out

on the waters. And so implicit in my notion of Intelligent Design is

~~whereas God I will obviously argue launches each~~ *experience*. You launch the Intelligent Design and see what happens to it

~~and that's how you learn, how you get to the next Intelligent Design. It's~~ *God learns, how God gets*

~~inconceivable to me God would not work that way~~

ML: What about a novel like One Hundred Years of Solitude?

NM: I don't remember it well enough—and maybe you can refine it for

me—I don't think he was concerned that much with plot per se. Well, he

has a family, and all sorts of things happen to this family, and there's a

wonderful sense of look at the chaos of life, and look at how people react to

it, and how quickly they react, and I just don't think this novel applies to the problem of plot.

Let me enjoy a wild aspect of the notion.
 Take Joyce. One of my favorite metaphors for Joyce ~~this is from~~
For my the book about Henry Miller, *I give the example* ~~three people come into a~~
~~room, a hostess's living room, Henry James, Hemingway, and Henry Miller.~~
~~And the way it went, each gives a tip of the hat and lo and behold, there's a~~
~~cow turd on their head. James would be so totally shattered he would have~~
~~had a breakdown, he might have died from an experience that awful.~~
spoke of when coming
took off his hat
I then go on to say
perished

Hemingway would have gone into a profound depression—he would have
couldn't be at ~~seen it as the nature of life, that unexpected disasters, truly, truly shattered~~
~~your mood that life was something you could enjoy. And Miller would have~~
~~said, "Good Lord, how did that shit get on my head? And the hostess, I~~
~~can't tell if it's her nostrils that are quivering or her twat! She is obviously~~
~~so excited and perturbed—what a wonderful moment!" Miller is an~~
~~example of someone who couldn't stay with a plot for five minutes because~~
~~he wanted ~~to~~ to smash into the world and reveal something new about~~
~~himself and the world. So he's one extreme, Henry James is the other. And~~
~~between them lies~~ *see effective use of* ~~(Intelligent Design).~~

ML: But what would Joyce have done?

NM: Joyce is so much of a genius I don't want to hang onto his coattails.

~~because I'll fall off. I don't know what he would have done~~ *with the*
construction.

ML: I think he would have appreciated it.

NM: He ~~would~~ *might* have looked for the 22 words *in different languages/* that were closest to shit, ~~and~~ *exhausted,*
~~those that were deviants in their meaning but nonetheless had to be taken,~~
~~the sound of shit.~~ *sound*
~~into account, and what would be the wonderful omnibus word he would~~
come up with? On the other hand, he would have been removed from the
situation.

~~ML: He was the first.~~

NM: It was not life he was interested in so much as language.

I disagree
ML: ~~(The first person to wipe his ass in a novel—~~ *is Leopold Bloom*
~~a description of wiping~~

~~your ass in a novel— he rips a page out of a book and wipes his ass~~

NM: You point. You are ad-in.

~~ML: It kept the book from being published~~ *in the end* *→ p 24*
p 20 is deleted

Delete p. 2
Change of venue
 ML: Yes, people were offended by it. I can't help from quoting the line of Edgar Allen Poe who said, "The universe is a plot of God."

NM: Well, that's Poe. "The universe is a plot of God"—what does it mean? Look into it—it doesn't mean anything.

ML: Poe had a sense that the universe would unfold itself—the universe would expand and expand, and then contract and contract, and then into one ball, and then it would be repeated.

NM: It's a species of fundamentalism to have ideas like that. The idea that the universe is part of a machine whose movements can be predicted is ^{exactly} what ~~it's~~ ~~totally~~ ~~against~~. It's why I'm so opposed to organized religion. I was listening to television the other night and one of those guys—and God, they are imitable—you know, Nietzsche abhors every ^{theologian—he says} priest and he meant not just every Catholic priest, but every reverend—he calls them all liars. He says the sine qua non for becoming a theologian is to be a liar. All right, so you have ^a this minister talking in that big, Southern voice that any impassioned fool can imitate, saying, "It's not enough to go to your death believing in the

~~to take along/ can you see~~
 Lord Jesus, you have to have all the people you brought (with you because
~~would like to~~ ~~you will be~~
~~you convinced them that they, too, must believe in Jesus, and then you'll be~~
~~measured how many you bring to Jesus.~~ ~~I guarantee and~~
~~certitude hand in hand~~ ~~And I guarantee it's right,~~
~~"where the hell does he get all this crap? Arrogance to speak with any~~
~~kind of certitude?" I never cease apologizing for speaking with any~~ ~~of my~~
~~certitude in this book. It's outrageous.~~

ML: Let me go back to Sartre. You recently criticized Sartre's existentialism for being "floorless." Without floor.

NM: Without a foundation.

ML: Because, as you put it, "It is, after all, near to impossible for a
 philosopher to explore into why we are here without entertaining some
 notion of what prior force might have been." Therefore, if we grant your
 limited God ~~is~~ ^{the} that prior force, ~~and I'm happy to grant that~~ then I'm
 compelled to ask what force preceded your God? I assume you would
 choose infinite regress rather than a Prime Mover?

NM: Again, I refuse to be trapped in ^{such} these kinds of questions. I mean, ~~That's~~ that's the atheist's last line of defense. There's a story you're probably familiar with, of Bertrand Russell and ^{an old} the lady—Russell is talking about how the origin of the universe is not knowable. And a lady, a distinguished ~~an~~ ^{in the audience - stands up and} old lady says, "On the contrary, Professor Russell. I know the basis of the universe." He says, "Well, ^u what is it, Madam?" She replies, "The universe is resting upon a turtle." And he says, "Well, ~~thank you, Madam.~~" "A giant turtle," she adds. ^u "Well, Madam, that's very helpful, but what is the turtle resting upon?" And she says, "It's turtles all the way down!"

ML: I do remember that.

NM: I'm not going to get trapped in ~~that~~ ^{that} The arguments of the atheists ~~that say ask me to~~ ^{I'm} they're saying because you can't explain what came behind the God you're talking about, ~~you have no right to talk about God~~

ML: But you beat Sartre over the head because he won't allow for a force behind humanity. Why can't we then try to find out—I'm not trying to refute you, but—

NM: ~~OK, let~~ me put it this way: we first have to become close enough to God and helpful enough to God—large questions we haven't even entered, ~~the~~ relationship of humankind to God is something we haven't even touched ~~upon~~—and until we're a great help to God, why should God trust us? You remember, at the end of Harlot's Ghost, I have Hugh Montague goes off on this wonderful ^{intriguing speech} to me, wonderful ~~speech~~ on how God, having decided ~~he gives his defense of Creationists~~ that God having decided man was ~~did create the world in six days~~ wholly untrustworthy, therefore created the illusion of evolution, and He put ~~and so he put right to~~ fossil remains in different places, created the entire notion that the universe ~~was created in six days~~

that in deed, the

ML: I remember it well—a beautiful piece of writing—

NM: ~~Maybe we could insert it—I didn't say it very well in here. Excuse~~
~~me—the universe really was created entire/immediately, ex nihilo, by God,~~
~~in six days, but then he laid in~~
~~but he then put evidence all over the place that evolution had done it so man~~
~~in thousands of years, all so that we could not get~~
~~would not get near God's roots. So, implied in all that is that when we get~~
 (40)

close enough to God to feel we are in some kind of alliance with God—

which I think has always been implicit in the relationship, ~~but may not be~~
~~actual, because as you know from my novel, I believe in the Devil to an~~

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why then we might begin to have some knowledge
 extraordinary degree—so the answer is we don't begin to know who the God
of who But that *can't happen until*
 (is behind God, ~~we~~ we get nearer to God.

ML: But you see that as a possibility.

NM: ~~Yes. Ultimately.~~ Ultimately. If things go far better than I expect they will.

ML: ~~Here's something.~~ I don't know if you're familiar with the philosopher David Hume—

~~All that~~
 NM: ~~Vaguely.~~ I had him in college.

ML: Well, he ~~actually~~ got into the Intelligent Design argument way back ,
~~when because~~ ² one of the proofs of St. Thomas Aquinas for the existence of
 God is the argument from design. It goes back that far, a thousand years. ~~A~~
~~different way of putting it,~~ Aquinas has many proofs of God's existence but
~~the fifth one was the~~ ^{think} design is so perfect in the universe—he didn't even see
 beyond the solar system—

Right)
 NM: ~~But~~ there, you run smack into the ^{ugliest aspect} ~~ugly helmet~~ of Catholicism, that

~~ugly helmet with all those projections that smash your face when you try to~~

~~embrace it—you know, the insistence of Catholicism on perfection and~~

God's perfection, ~~is one of the things—I feel as if I run into a magnetic field~~

~~that just repels me when I come near that. Because precisely what~~

~~characterizes Intelligent Design is that it's partial. And that's so important to~~ ^{it's} ^{it's} ^{it's}

grasp the notion that these are partial attempts. I'm so glad ~~we~~ ^I have the

novel to fall back upon; it's ^a ^{So this} ^{it's} the metaphor. When you write a novel, ~~a novel~~

~~is an exercise, an attempt to come up with a piece of intelligent design and~~

~~but~~ it's never perfect, ~~never~~. Some parts of the Intelligent Design are better than

others and ^{than} ^{It goes into existence, and} the way you find out is by publishing. And then the returns come

back ^{and} ^{the} ^{the} very often the returns have no relation to what you had written.

Occasionally, they do. ~~And~~ ^{So} slowly over the years you learn more ~~and more~~

~~and more, and by the end of your life as a novelist you are wiser than when~~ ^{maybe as a novelist}

you started. ~~And~~ ^{So} the heart of one of my notions ~~in all this~~ is that God is

always looking to become wiser. That notion ~~we mentioned way back is~~

God the Father does not always necessarily understand ^{his} the children all that

well. ~~And~~ that is also in the nature of existence, ~~that what you create, you~~

do not necessarily understand ^{all so well} ~~completely~~

ML: Now, ~~listen~~ to this collision between Aquinas and David Hume:

Hume criticized the argument from design. In particular, he emphasized there is no legitimate way ~~now this is a paragraph, so bear with me~~ there is no legitimate way, Hume said, ~~we can~~ ^{to} infer the properties of God from the qualities of the world, ~~this~~ ^{his} creation. For instance, Hume questioned, how can we be sure the world was not created by a team? Or this ~~is~~ ^{may be} ~~one~~ ^{possibly} of many attempts at creation, the first few having been botched? Or, on the other hand, ~~that~~ ^{could be that} our world is not ~~the~~ ^{the} first attempt of an infant deity who afterwards abandoned it, ashamed of his lame performance.

~~NM: I want to see where we are. I can't read these numbers.~~

~~ML: We're fine.~~

NM: It's excellent. If I'd read it, I would have quoted it. ~~These are various possibilities, they're all possible logically. It's perfectly possible God has deserted the universe.~~ I think it's a little weak to say it was a lame performance and He moved on. That doesn't fulfill my notion of the passion implicit in the artistry of God. I can't conceive of a great artist ever junking a work and moving on because it's lame, if that has been ^{has} the major

opus. I do lean to the notion that our world ^{is} was God's major opus, certainly
~~for this solar system.~~ But Hume ^{did} put it ~~very~~ well. The argument of a perfect ^{day}
 universe is ^{near to} almost intolerable. All it does ^{to} is scramble people's brains and
~~say to the deans of the church that they believe for a certainty the priests are~~
~~over them.~~ Which is not fair. ^{Even} And then the priests suffer prodigiously. I
 really think an absolutely great novel could be written about the Catholic
 Church and the people who work in it. ~~many times I wish I were a Catholic~~
~~as a novelist, as a greedy novelist.~~ Man, what material is there, what
 material! But the training is such that it's almost impossible for ~~someone~~
 who's a priest to become ^{great} a novelist. ~~a great novelist.~~

ML: It's a fabulously successful institution—and probably because of that.

NM: Fabulously successful, yes, but you could also say the Jewish religion
 has been fabulously successful in that the Jews didn't perish—but what a
 price they paid. And I'd say what a price Catholics have paid. To have
 created a Church that brought so much architectural beauty to the world, so
 much musical beauty, so much ritual beauty—and then be locked into a set
 of notions they can't let go of ^{notions} that explain nothing ^{clearly and}
 magnify spiritual and moral confusion.

The services of) there are
 You know, ~~organized religion~~, when ~~it's~~ beautiful moves me to the
~~extent that~~ I feel "How tragic. How painful." All this ~~thought~~, *pondering,* all this
~~devotion~~, all this loyalty, going into a sump, an intellectual sump because it
~~explains nothing~~. *you are finally asked to* All they believe is that God will be there to hear *your*
~~prayers~~, *if your nose is clean enough God will* welcome us when we die—as if that's all God has to do, as if God is
 a couch potato—sighs when He has to get up to answer the doorbell to
 welcome a new devotee.

what about Heine's
 ML: So the idea the universe might have been created by a team--?

NM: Not impossible. Not impossible. It explains one of my basic notions,
 in that ~~the team soon fell out of sorts with one another and you ended up~~
 with God and the Devil, ~~one leader was called God and one was called the~~
~~Devil. I think it could easily explain the book I'm working on now—it was~~
~~created by a team. It could have been started as, as~~

ML: A joint endeavor—

NM: Like those South Seas Companies in
 the 1700's, the 1800's. They started to
 fight and have been at odds
 ever since.

~~NM: A joint endeavor means two totally separate parties come together.
Like those South Seas Companies in the 1700s, 1800s. Absolutely. And
then they fought and have been fighting ever since.~~

ML: Well, that's all but we can handle Judith's questions

NM: —although we don't have to do it all today. Up to now I've felt fine—

ML: They go in all different directions—

NM: Let's see what happens—I may not be able to answer her questions.

~~start a separate play~~
*seen Judith's Questions
on answers*
ML: Here's one: "If, as you say, the Creator is an artist, and not all creative
works are equally successful, wouldn't this lead quite easily to racism—i.e.,
the "inferior race"—however one's defining it, whether the non-Aryans
scapegoated by the Nazis, or the "ice people" of the Afro-centric extremists,
wouldn't that "inferior" group simply be one of God's early, inferior drafts?"

NM: Well, I reject the language of the question. But I think that all of the
~~dangers, one of the absolute disasters that Hitler and Nazism brought to~~

human understanding was an abuse of the concept of race. Because *of race*

offers ~~us~~ great clues. It is perfectly possible—and here again, one can only speculate—but it is perfectly possible that races, in the beginning, were

Intelligent Design for different situations. In other words, for people in the tropics, God was saying, "well, how can I design the heating system of their bodies so they can bear the heat?" *a little more easily* Ditto for the north. We're discovering

that living in ~~these~~ separate climates produces different relaxations and strictures of the throat, *languages reflect that* and so there are changes in language. Mind you,

God is ~~discovering~~ *is* as the artist, discovering within the material itself, where

the continuation is. *would be* Certain sculptors talk about how they know nothing of

exactly what the work may become *about* ~~what they're essentially going to do until they, in the marble~~ *until they begin to cut into the marble* it's as if the marble reveals to them what they must do with the next stroke.

is Well, maybe *is* the same thing is true with fashioning human designs, *or* animal

designs, what have you, and as you work with these designs and attempt to

~~work with them and refine them,~~ *returning* the environment plays a great role.

Returning Going back to Hume for a moment, it could be that God came in after a semi-inchoate universe was shaping, and had to deal with the given. That is absolutely within the realm of possibility. There I have to say Hume points the way.

~~ML:~~ ^{mean} Good, very good. ~~Next one:~~ Your conception of God as artist assumes that God is both vastly-but not all-good, and vastly—but not all-powerful. But why couldn't God be not very compassionate at all and instead immensely curious? In other words, He is fascinated by, but not especially compassionate toward creation, much like a child who winds up toys and watches them slam into each other and chortles at the smashup. You say, "In other words, why are there volcanoes? Because God was not a perfect engineer" Or because like a two-year-old, God found the noise and fury fascinating and amusing. Maybe even the shrieks of the dying fascinating and amusing. You keep assuming God is a nice person, so to speak, but that seems a bit arbitrary. Your reaction?

^{you}
~~MM:~~ It is arbitrary, and it could be my conditioning. I grew up in a household that was as religious as the next—it wasn't a dogma-driven household, but I remember my mother on Friday night praying before a lit candle, praying to ^{her} Shekhina, who is, of course, the wife of God, and there were tears in my mother's eyes and a feeling of great tenderness ~~and~~ ^{came from} ~~compassion was coming off her.~~ And from that, I think I always ~~assumed~~ ~~and~~ took it for granted that God is compassionate in relation to us.

Now, ^{the} those arguments raised ^{above} ~~cannot be denied. I cannot refute them.~~ ^{is stated}

I cannot say, "No, God is not going in for capers. He's not going in for ^a ~~mean streaks.~~"

Of course, God could go in for ^{mean acts.} ~~that.~~ But to me—maybe

because I too am searching for an orderly existence to some degree—the

notion that God and the devil are in conflict with one another makes more

sense to me ~~than that we've got this one God who has good and bad, as~~ ^{is more} ~~than not's~~ ^{is} ~~compassionate as Jesus and a mean little prick in the corners. That I find~~

really goes nowhere. That doesn't mean it doesn't exist. That question is

~~not refutable.~~

ML: Well, your mother's father was a rabbi.

NM: Yes. ~~He was a kosher rabbi, he was a back-bencher rabbi. He'd~~

~~done a lot of scripture-reading into the game. What happened was he~~

~~studied to be a rabbi in Lithuania but by the~~ ^{time he} ~~he came over here, the only way~~

he could make his living was ^{as} ~~a peddler.~~ Then he moved ^a ~~to~~ ^a ~~small town~~

called Long Branch, New Jersey, where he opened a butcher shop. [Side

~~there he worked as a butcher but~~ ~~One Ends.) So when he came to Long Branch, he was a butcher, but he had~~

~~the education to be a rabbi, so occasionally, when the rabbi was ill there~~

~~there~~ ^{and} ~~was only one synagogue in Long Branch so when the rabbi was ill or off~~

my grand father stood in for him, / (this)
 on vacation, he was the rabbi. And my mother was very proud of him. ~~in~~

The fundamental snobbery of the Jews, ~~she was very proud~~—it was much better to be a rabbi than a butcher. I was delighted, it gave me two different ~~sets of~~ *uninherited* strains to develop. ~~the set of~~

ML: Well, I'm thinking of your mother's devotion and the tear in her eye—obviously, she must have come from a pretty religious household.

my grand father began
 NM: He was very religious—he started studying the Talmud when he was four years old. The best thing to be said about the Talmud is it's very hard to become a fundamentalist *while studying it* reading the Talmud. It's all too easy reading *to do* the Bible but *fundamental of when living with it* very difficult reading the Talmud, *It* because the Talmud is the opposite of the Old Testament, *when* it inquires into the nuances of things. For instance, in the Talmud, ~~the~~ people brought animals *to the temple* to be sacrificed *to the* temple. Very often there were small disasters—a poor man *must have defecated* wanted to sacrifice his prize heifer because his child was ill *But on his way* and he wanted to pray to God so he's sacrificing his heifer into the synagogue and the animal would *with the* defecate. Well, the Talmud *does focus on* gets into where did it defecate? *Did it do it?* on the patio? *?* did it defecate on the steps? *?* in the vestibule? *?* in the aisle? *?* at the altar approach? *?* was it on the altar? *?* could there be a sacrifice where it

~~defecated~~ all these are different proximities and therefore there are
 different punishments. In certain cases the animal can still be sacrificed.
~~At other sites~~
~~perhaps, partially.~~ In other cases, the animal is lost completely—if it
~~defecates close enough~~ ^{too} to the altar, it has to be ~~thrown away~~ ^{disposed of} completely. It
 can't even be eaten, ~~and so forth.~~ ~~So~~ in the Talmud there are all these efforts
 to find zones of relative compatibility between God and humans—^{see it is} the exact
 opposite of the Old Testament ^{on the New Testament} in that sense. The Old Testament and the
 New Testament are completely—I use the word rhetorical. In other words,
~~both lay it out~~ ~~they lay it out. they say "This is the way it is. Don't argue with it." Then,~~
~~they, of course, they contradict themselves two pages later.~~
 skip

ML: Well—~~and there is a certain measure, which you yourself recognize,~~
 of Orphic ambiguity in the utterances of Christ.

NM: I wouldn't call it ambiguity. I ^{see it as} would call it the wars of the
~~committees.~~ ^{Analogous} And, you know, ~~it's exactly equal~~ to what's going on between
 the Sunnis and the Shiites in Iraq, to wit, I'll ^(RT) give you this, ^{must} and you give me
 that.

ML: Did your mother talk much about her father?

NM: ~~Only~~ ^{once} with a kind of gentle reverence. She adored him, and he was a very kind man. ~~She told~~ ^{one} story I loved when I was a kid. She said, "My mother worked so hard in the butcher shop, and we as children worked hard, ~~too~~. I worked hard—we'd get angry at my father because ^{whenever} ~~when~~ a poor woman would come in and he'd be weighing the meat she bought, he'd put his finger under the scale so it cost less. And we thought, That's all very well, but you're taking the money away from us."

ML: So he was a compassionate man.

NM: Most people seemed to think he was a lovely man. ^{I was only four when he died.} ~~Who knows? I~~

~~But~~ ^I like to think so too.

¹⁴²

~~ME~~: Here's a question on ritual: All your ideas have an underlying assumption that God has a continuing, even a profound interest in at least some individuals, and certainly in the ultimate fate of the human species and the rest of His creation. This is completely at odds with some of the earliest recorded religious expression, namely from the Sumerians, whose prayers were always begging the gods to "Remember!" Prayer and ritual were a

constant attempt to engage the attention of forgetful and indifferent gods who had created and abandoned humanity. This, by the way, wasn't a notion emerging from disasters and dislocations but could be found even as their civilization flourished. Can you comment?

NM: Well, ~~I can attempt to comment.~~ It's the other half of the equation, ~~I think one of the reasons American fundamentalists who've invaded us en masse these days—you know, there's a close war going on between Texas Hold'Em Poker and fundamentalists. Night after night, the fundamentalists skunk the Texas Hold'Em Poker players, in that there'll be five fundamentalist shows on in a given hour and two poker shows—all right, I'm joking, but~~ the obverse side of prayer is that it ^{rarely} ~~never~~ gets answered. ~~So rarely is it answered.~~ So rarely that people cite these things at these ^{at such events} religious meetings as miracles. [in a southern accent] "I prayed to God and I didn't know if I was answered ^{or not}, and then, to my astonishment, I fell to me knees and I began to weep, I began to weep for the sores of Christ because my prayer had been answered." Prayers are not answered. I always felt the Lord has enough to take care of without having to listen to a ^{all these that} ~~bunch~~ of repetitive prayers. To use a modern assumption, ~~it's like people who get on the internet because they want to be part of what's going on and they~~

~~discover that thousands of boring messages come to them that they have to~~
~~wade through.~~ Think of God wading through those prayers: "Oh, God, let
 my team win the game!" "Oh, God, let me get some money, let me sell this
 old heap that's no good and get something better ⁴ because ~~I need it to drive~~
~~the children to school, you understand,~~" all that, all that.

I don't think God listens to prayer. The Sumerians—I don't know
 anything about them. *As you describe them, they* ~~I think they~~ were relatively sophisticated people who
 recognized that they prayed and they prayed and they prayed and answers
~~didn't come very often.~~ *did not* In fact, talk about the mega-million monkeys typing
~~Hamlet, some of the same could be applied to prayer~~

Now let me ~~say there are~~ ^{have} some people with a child who's ill, and they
 pray to God with great sincerity for their child to live, and usually the child
 does live—I'm willing to accept the idea that that's not something to sneer
 at. I'm not saying it helps or it works but humanly speaking, we can
 certainly feel for the parent ~~who weeps in that manner.~~

ML: You wrote once about the time you prayed.

NM: Yes.

ML: Yes. Bobby Kennedy.

NM: Well, there was another time I prayed—well, I don't want to get into it, I'll tell you off the record.

ML: Let's go on to another question.

NM: The reason I don't want to get into it is it's a long, comic story and has nothing to do with what we're talking about. It's not a revelation, or I'd tell you about it.

Salem?

~~ML:~~ When you were talking about Gandhi, you said: "But there are a few

[oxymorons] that are vital and immensely valuable. One of them is "heroic passivity." That's where ^{has to} One's wisdom ^{then we can} (becomes the arbiter, ~~There can be~~

~~be encountering/only the variety and the~~
(heroic passivity, or quasi- heroic passivity. The latter might be a disaster."

Along that ~~same~~ line, what would you say about ~~any possible value of~~ the contemplative life? By that I mean the cloistered orders who don't run hospitals or schools, just pray for the world. This is a strong Christian tradition, ditto for the Buddhists and some Hindus, and probably the Jews have some variant of that.

NM: The Twelve Just Men. . .

ML: Do you see a value in this kind of passivity?

NM: I would answer yes. I'm not opposed to that. ~~Yeah, we haven't talked about the relation of God to humans and humans to God.~~

ML: ~~We have.~~

~~NM: Yes, but if we're going to get nearer to God to find the God behind the~~
 God, ~~in that sense,~~ it's perfectly conceivable to me ~~there could be a God who~~
~~really pays attention to transcendental sincerity. And I have a crude~~
 analogy to offer, ~~which is occasionally,~~ after having worked on a novel, you
~~get a review that's so intelligently written and gets to close to what~~ ~~was~~ ~~you were~~
 attempting to do, or shows me new ways I didn't see in the book, that ~~book~~
 it ~~does~~ ~~really~~ ~~well,~~ ~~I can~~ ~~estimate~~
 (illuminates the book for me, I love that critic and I do feel better about the act
 of writing. And I think ~~taken~~ ~~through~~ ~~many~~ ~~orders~~ ~~of~~ ~~magnitude,~~ I think
 there are people who contemplate existence, who pray to God ~~in their sleep~~ ~~in depth~~
~~and on their knees~~ ~~and are qualified to do so,~~ ~~who~~ ~~are~~ ~~not~~ ~~petty~~ ~~greed-bags.~~ ~~they~~

What I hate about prayer is most of the time ^{it's} so greedy, I'm trying to get

~~on an undeserved advantage~~

~~an edge~~ (I'm a mediocrity, I'm kind of stupid, God, but maybe you'll help

me because I'm praying to you.

~~JACAL:~~

~~ML:~~ That does fit in. This is about Buddhism: what's your take on the

Buddhist notion of the bodhisatva vow? Reaching nirvana is a catch-22—

if you have achieved a level of deep compassion, enough to reach nirvana,

you can't go happily off into it while other sentient beings are still here

struggling and suffering. So, even though you personally have a free-pass

out of this far from perfect world, you VOLUNTARILY reincarnate as a

"bodhisatva"—a helper, a teacher, a way-shower—and KEEP

reincarnating until everyone has achieved nirvana. Devout Buddhists of

many persuasions—and all the monks and nuns, take the "bodhisatva vow"

at an advanced stage of their training.

NM: Well, I think it's a beautiful notion, ~~and~~ I subscribe to it—not

personally. I wouldn't make it; I don't have that kind of compassion. The

difficulty I've always had with Buddhism is nirvana—that the point of

existence is not to rise above all petty feeling, but on the contrary, ^{to point is} to be able

to struggle with those petty feelings in such a way that we alter them into

so were/
somewhat more vigorous feelings, you're more able to contribute to the best
of existence. ~~So~~ nirvana always struck me as a place I had no interest in. If
it existed or not—I had no idea—it didn't appeal to me. I remember talking
to a friend of mine who's a good Buddhist and scolding him, getting into a
~~polite~~
(rage over drinks: "You bastards always talk about nothingness, getting to
nothingness. I'm a writer, I live with nothingness every minute I'm working.

I sit at my desk and for the first half hour there's nothing—I have to pass
~~the nothingness~~
through it in order to get a few ideas. I said, why ~~the hell~~—you're not ~~even~~
talking about nothingness. Nothingness is an awful state! It's an empty
state. Why don't you talk about what it really is, which is the ineffable?
When you get into the ineffable, then you have something to talk about!"

I like to think he was struck with ~~it~~ ^{the thought} even a little.

Back to the bodhisatva: I think it's ~~an~~ ^a absolutely beautiful
conception. Whether true or not, I have no idea. In other words, ~~true or not~~ ^{have any}
~~I begin~~ ^{any human}
in the sense whether one has the power to say, I choose to reincarnate rather
than going into Nirvana, I think the Lord might say, "Reincarnation is not
your choice, it's mine." ~~And in that sense, I'm beyond my range. I can step~~ ^{obviously}
~~away from that question with the idea~~ ^{But} it is a beautiful notion.

John:

~~Mr. Look~~

that
At the end of your last interview, you said in many ways the Creator was like a Greek god—strong yet not all powerful, flawed but noble, well, you know Greek myths are full of incidents where the gods took human form, or animal form. Apart from the well-known stories of Zeus turning up as this or that to impregnate some human woman, there are also stories of Zeus turning up as a beggar. In one story, peasants take in a wretched beggar overnight, share their far-from abundant meal with him, treat him very well, and next morning, find his bed empty and a sack of gold in his place—Zeus came calling—and rewarded them for their kindness to the poor! God showing up on earth is an idea embraced long before Christian theology, but I see nothing in your writings of God as a swan, a river, or anything as possibly Jesus.

NM: I don't see any need to answer the question. I just take it for granted. If God wants to appear as a human, why not? And indeed, He would. But I think actually what's more interesting is the belief if you're good when you don't have to be good, something wonderful happens. Which I think is also part of human nature. Humans live for revenge—but they also live for a sentiment that maybe ~~we are~~ *we are* capable of goodness. So the brunt of those stories, the impact they have on me, is look at the human desire involved.

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gall, mess,
 if it defecates too close to the altar, it has to be disposed of completely. It
 can't even be eaten. In the Talmud, there are all these efforts to find zones
 of relative compatibility between God and humans—~~it is~~ so it is the exact
 opposite of the Old Testament, or the New Testament where ~~both lay it out~~
~~both lay it out~~
~~So never!~~
 "This is the way it is. Don't argue with it." Then, of course, ~~both~~ they contradict
 themselves two pages later.
~~Testaments are always ready to contradict~~

ML: Well—there is a certain measure of Orphic ambiguity in the utterances
 of Christ.

NM: I wouldn't call it ambiguity. I see it as the ~~was~~ ^{and negotiating} of the committees.
 "I'll give you ~~clear~~ to your family if you'll
 Analogous to what's going on between the Sunnis and the Shiites in Iraq, to
 give me, leave your family for me. 4 ~~etc.~~
 will if I give you this, you must give me that.
~~leave~~

ML: Did your mother talk much about her father?

NM: With a kind of gentle reverence. She adored him, and he was a very
 kind man. One story I loved when I was a kid. She once said, "My mother
 worked so hard in the butcher shop, and we as children worked hard, too. I
 worked hard—we'd get angry at my father because whenever a poor woman

JMcN: When you were talking about Gandhi, you said: "But there are a few

~~for more~~ ^{0x4400049}

~~for more~~ that are vital and immensely valuable. One of them is heroic passivity. One's wisdom has to become the arbiter then. We can be encountering heroic passivity, or only the quasi- heroic variety and the latter might be a disaster." Along that line, what would you say about the contemplative life? By that I mean the cloistered orders who don't run hospitals or schools, just pray for the world. This is a strong Christian tradition, ditto for the Buddhists and some Hindus, and probably the Jews have some variant of that.

NM: The Twelve Just Men. . .

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NM: I would answer yes. I'm not opposed to that. If we're going to get nearer to God to find the God behind the God, it's perfectly conceivable to me that the God of which I speak does pay attention to transcendental sincerity. I have a crude analogy to offer. Occasionally, after having worked on a novel, you come across a review that's so intelligently written and gets to close to what you were attempting to do, or, even better, shows

ways you never saw for the book, but it does illuminate the work, well, I can esteem that critic and I do feel better about the act of writing. Raise that up through many orders of magnitude—I do think there are people who contemplate existence, who pray in depth to God and are qualified to do so. They are not petty greed-bags. What I hate about prayer is most of the time it is so greedy, always looking for an undeserved advantage. I'm a mediocrity, I'm kind of stupid, God, but maybe you'll help me because I'm praying to You.

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

NM: Well, I think it's a beautiful notion. I subscribe to it—not personally.

I wouldn't make it; I don't have that kind of compassion. The difficulty I've

always had with Buddhism is nirvana—that the point of existence is not

— as the Buddhists see it — to
rise above all petty feeling, but on the contrary, the point is to be able to

struggle with those petty feelings in such a way that we alter them into

we look to ~~transcend~~ to come
~~some~~ what more vigorous feelings. ~~So we're~~ more able to contribute to the

best of existence. Nirvana always struck me as a place I had no interest in.

If it existed or not—I had no idea—it didn't appeal to me. I remember

talking to a friend of mine who's a good Buddhist and scolding him, getting

into a polite rage over drinks: "You bastards always talk about nothingness,

about
getting to nothingness. I'm a writer, I live with nothingness every minute

I'm working. I sit at my desk and for the first half-hour there's nothing—I

have to pass through that nothingness in order to *reach* ~~get~~ a few ideas. I said,

you're not even talking about nothingness. Nothingness is an awful state!

It's an empty state. Why don't you talk about what it really is, which is the

ineffable? When you get *to* ~~into~~ the ineffable, then you have something to talk

about!"

I like to think he was struck with the thought, even a little.

you illuminate
Back to the bodhisatva: I think it's a beautiful conception. Whether

true or not, I have no idea. In other words, how can any human choose to

reincarnate rather than going into Nirvana? I think the Lord might say,
"Reincarnation is not your choice, it's Mine." In that sense, I'm obviously
beyond my range. But it is a ^{splendid} beautiful notion.

JMcN: At the end of your last interview, you said that in many ways the
Creator was like a Greek god—strong yet not all powerful, flawed but
noble, well, you know Greek myths are full of incidents where the gods took
human form, or animal form. Apart from the well-known stories of Zeus
turning up as this or that to impregnate some human woman, there are also
stories of Zeus turning up as a beggar. In one story, peasants take in a
wretched beggar overnight, share their far-from abundant meal with him,
treat him very well, and next morning, find his bed empty and a sack of gold
in his place—Zeus came calling—and rewarded them for their kindness to
the poor! God showing up on earth is an idea embraced long before
Christian theology, but I see nothing in your writings of God as a swan, a
river, or anything as possibly Jesus.—jm note: I never wrote that last part!!
And it isn't logical!! Or even correct. Ancient Evenings is chock-full of the
Pharaoh as a divine presence.]

NM: I don't see any need to answer the question. I just take it for granted. If God wants to appear as a human, why not? And indeed, He would. But I think actually what's more interesting is the belief if you're good when you don't have to be good, something wonderful happens. Which I think is also part of human nature. Humans live for revenge—but they also live for ^{the} ~~A~~ sentiment that we are capable of goodness. So the brunt of those stories, ^{for} ~~the~~ impact ^{me is to} ~~they have on me,~~ is look at the human desire involved. One, that I can be capable of goodness and two, that there's ^{is} something in the universe ^{which} ~~that~~ rewards you for ^{that} ~~goodness~~. Prayer is the ugly stepchild of ^{such an} ~~that~~ emotion. What makes it interesting is the pot of gold—they weren't praying for the gold. That's far better than saying, "Hey, I was good—now reward me!"