

For Maggie

INTERVIEW I

Expansion of Universe

MICHAEL LENNON: Scientists now believe that the expansion of the universe is accelerating. Does this circumstance fit in with your ideas? Is the ever-expanding and accelerating nature of the cosmos reflected in your concept of a god who can grow and develop?

NORMAN MAILER: Let me say, it's not a topic I am drawn to.

I start from another direction. Having been a novelist all my working life, I may know a little about human beings. I should. They have been my study. You might say my theological notions come out of such questions as

who are we, what are we, how do we develop, why, indeed, are we in existence? And is there the presence of a Creator in what we do?

So the larger cosmic speculations are of less interest to me. In truth, I would hate to rely on the ever-changing state of advanced physics for my ideas.

ML: It isn't just the expansion of the universe; it's the fact that the expansion is speeding up.

NM: Yes, but that's not in my compass.

ML: In places, you've said that God and the Devil are lesser divinities in liege to larger powers who might be the ultimate creators. Who or what do you feel is the ultimate power in the universe? Who created the universe?

NM: I feel the same way about the ultimate Creator as I feel about the expanding universe: too large for my speculations. But I don't see any inherent logical contradiction in saying that I believe our God created the world we live in, and is in constant conflict with the Devil. That stimulates my thought.

ML: In "St. George and the Godfather," you say, "The world's more coherent if God exists, and twice coherent if He exists like us." I'm afraid this logic smacks of wish-fulfillment. God need not exist merely to satisfy your desire for order. Perhaps the world is incoherent, perhaps the cosmos is disordered. . .

NM: Look, I would answer: Where does my desire for order come from? Not only do we have a fundamental desire for order, we have an obvious tendency as well toward disorder—a true conflict between order and disorder. So I say, it may be worth an attempt to search for the source.

ML: OK. But in most religious systems, there is a relationship between cosmology and ethics, between the nature of the deity and humanity. The Puritans called it "God's Providence"—

NM: Wait a moment.

ML: No, I want to get to the relationship between the nature of the deity and codes for human living. In Judaism and Christianity, for example, God's nature is suggested in the rules for living provided to humans by God.

What is the relationship in your system between the nature and shape of the ruling forces in our sphere and the ways in which humans should conduct themselves?

NM: Oh, Christ, Mike, I don't really like these questions. I don't think in these formulae.

I want to get to something more basic to my thought, which is that much of the world's present-day cosmology is based on works of Revelation, the Old and New Testament, the Koran, yet, for me, Revelation itself is the question mark. Revelation, as such, is not God's words but ours back then, words debated back then, if you will, in committee, and assembled by working theologians with separate agendas. After all, why would God bother to speak in that fashion? There's no need. God could have imparted such thoughts directly to us. Revelation has always struck me as a near-ineradicable power trip for humans with highly mixed and often unsavory motives that enable them to lead the crowd. They and their followers quote from Scripture constantly, use it as their guide-rail and run

into intolerable contradictions which cripple their own power to reason. I will go so far as to say that to be a Fundamentalist is to exist as a human being whose reasoning powers have been beaten into inanition before every question to which they do not already have an answer.

I confess, therefore, I have very little interest in organized religion. When I study its practices, they make no sense to me. I've always felt that Revelation is a heavy impost upon our human condition. I see God, rather, as a Creator, as the greatest artist. I see human beings as His most developed artworks. I also see animals as His artworks. When I think of evolution, what stands out most is the fabulous study of the possibilities—the likelihoods for success or failure—that went on in God as an artist. So, I think of all the errors He made as well as of the successes. In marine life, for example, some fish have hideous eyes—they protrude from the head in tubes 10 inches long. Think of all those animals of the past with their peculiar ugliness, their misshapen bodies, worm life, frog life, vermin life, that myriad of insects—so many unsuccessful experiments. These are ways

the Artist was trying, this great artist, this divine artist, was trying to express something incredible—which is to say beyond one's artistic reach—and it was not, for certain, an easy process. Indeed, it went on forever! We'll get to the Devil in a bit but I would guess that evolution was interfered with by the Devil. I think there were false trips that God engaged in because the Devil deluded Him—or Her. Forgive me if I keep speaking of God as "Him," that's a habit that's come down to me from Revelation. Obviously, to speak of God as "Him" or "Her" is off-putting, but to speak of "Him/Her" or "It" is worse.

In any event, it makes sense to me that this war between God and the Devil has been present in evolution. Whether God had a free hand for quite a while or the Devil was meddling in it from the commencement, what we either way in evolution are endless mistakes, species that were badly conceived. Sometimes a young artist has to make large errors before he or she can go further.

I can hear the obvious rejoinder: "There's Norman Mailer, an artist of dubious high rank looking to give himself honor, nobility, and importance by speaking of God as an artist." I'm perfectly aware that that accusation can be laid. I have to admit that. All I say here could be declared no more than a projection of my own needs.

ML: Well, you have spoken of God as a novelist. . .

NM: No, I haven't. What I've said upon occasion is that God is a better novelist than the novelists—that's not the same thing.

I like to believe in God as the Artist, the Creator, because that makes the most sense to me. Whether I have a private agenda, or whether I am being an objective philosopher (to the extent that one can enter the state of that particular oxymoron—objective philosopher!)—so be it. Whether guilty or innocent, this is the argument I advance: God is an artist. And like an artist, God has successes, God has failures.

ML: Evil, you've said more than once, is growing in power—especially in the last hundred years.

NM: Yes.

ML: Do you think there was ever a time in the past, a golden age, when good was in the ascendancy?

NM: How would I know?

ML: Well, if you say things are getting worse. . .

NM: Let's say that in my lifetime, certain things have gotten much better and other things have gotten much worse, so much so that latter-day events would stagger the imagination of the 19th century. If, for example, the flush toilet is an improvement in existence, and you can advance arguments against it which I won't get into—but if it is an improvement, if the automobile is an improvement—again, huge arguments—if technological progress is an improvement, then look at the price that was paid. It's not too hard to argue that the gulags, the concentration camps, the atom bomb came out of technological improvement. For the average person in the average developed country, for the average or even poor person, life, if measured in terms of comfort, is somewhat better than in the middle of the 19th century,

but by the measure of our human development as ethical, spiritual, responsible and creative human beings, it may have gotten worse.

I can't speak for other languages, but I do know the English language has been debased in the last half-century. Young, bright children no longer speak well; the literary artists of 50 and 100 years ago are, on balance, superior to the literary artists of today. The philosophers have virtually disappeared—at least, any philosophers who make a difference.

ML: I take it, in your view of history, the Enlightenment and the rise of science were not steps forward.

NM: Mixed steps forward. Forward and retrograde. It all depends on what God intended. I could give you a speculation—a rank speculation: Perhaps God intended that human beings would get to the point where they could communicate telepathically. To the degree that one wished to reach certain people in small or large numbers, one could transmit thoughts at them. One could create operas in one's mind if one were musically talented, and beam them out to all who were willing to listen. All the means and modes we

have of modern communication may be substitutes, ugly technological substitutes, for what was potentially there.

For, mind you, ask the average person, myself certainly included, "How do we see the image on television, how does it work?" It's an absolute mystery when you get down to it. The best engineers in the world can't tell you how it happens, why waves of sound striking the auditory nerve produce specific pieces of hearing. No one, for instance, can tell you what light is—they're still arguing over whether it's a wave or a particle or both. I could go on with that. My fundamental argument is whether the Enlightenment was for good or for ill. To assume automatically the Enlightenment was good means you automatically have to say, yes, the Enlightenment created marvelous things and marvelous freedom for many, many people. It also created the worst abuses of communism and fascism—so much worse than the Divine Right of Kings. It also helped to foster the subtle, insidious abuses of technology.

I've said before in other places, technology represents less pleasure and more power. It may be that we are supposed to arrive at our deepest achievements through pleasure and pain, rather than through static, interruption, mood disruption, and traffic jams.

ML: What you said about communism and fascism—I can see communism as a fruit of the Enlightenment, but isn't fascism a reaction against it? The fact that it cites the blood, the blood-consciousness, all that?

NM: One of the cheats of Nazi-ism was their implicit claim that they were going back to the blood when in fact they were abusing human instinct.

The extermination camps were an absolute violation of any notion of blood.

The Nazis were cheating people of their deaths. They informed the camp inmates they were going to have a shower. Into the chamber they all marched, took off their clothes, happy to have a shower what with all those lice on them, hoping the shower would be hot. In they went, and were gassed. Their last reaction in life had to be, "you cheated me!" They die in a panic. That's not going back to the blood, to instinct, to preparing oneself

to enter the next world. They were obliterated by their own excess of reason. They were ready to assume that even their vile guards were capable of sanitary concerns for them, the imprisoned. How wrong they were!

Reason, ultimately, looks to strip us of the notion there is a Creator. The moment you have a society built on reason alone, then individual power begins to substitute for the concept of a Creator. What has characterized just about every social revolution is that sooner or later several leaders go to war over control of it, and quickly turn cannibalistic. Only one leader is left, an absolute dictator. Once you accept the notion that there is no god, the ultimate station for the Left, the Right, or the Center is totalitarianism.

ML: Are you saying that the Enlightenment was a time of victory for the Devil?

NM: It's considerably more complicated than that. We have to ask: What is the relation of God, the Devil, and the human to one another? I think it is a warring relationship among three forces who are separate yet intertwined.

Let me assume there's a Devil always present in human affairs, very much present. Why? Because the Devil is another god who wishes to preempt the god that exists. The Devil has other notions of what existence could be. I'd go so far as to assume that technology is the Devil's invention. Like God, the Devil wants to have power in the universe. God wants that power to satisfy His vision of what the universe could be.

ML: Do you ignore the presence of Christ?

NM: Christ may well be God's son, a physical and spiritual entity that God decided was necessary for humanity. Jesus may well have been real. If I wish to argue against revealed dogma, that doesn't mean my passion is for all of it to go. Jesus does make a kind of sense. Jesus as a principle of love, compassion, forgiveness and mercy is something we can all comprehend. We feel it in ourselves. We feel it as the best part of ourselves, the gentlest, richest, most generous part. But Revelation in company with organized religion repels me because of the philosophical inconsistency of their God as the Almighty, God the All-Powerful. I think

that's where the philosophical trouble begins. It's in the idea that God is All-Good and All-Powerful. The twentieth century demonstrated the contradiction to that, and most dramatically. How can we not face up to the fact that if God is All-Powerful, He cannot be All-Good? Or She cannot be All-Good. If God is All-Good, then God is not All-Powerful.

To answer this contradiction, theologians have been tying themselves into philosophical knots for the last ten centuries.

ML: Much of your thinking seems to be premised on the event of the Holocaust. I wonder if there had never been Hitler, would your notion of a limited, embattled god have been conceived? Is Hitler the final thing that pushed you into that belief?

NM: Being Jewish, the fair answer to that is probably yes. But there still would have been the gulags. And the failure of Bolshevism. The noblest social idea to come along, the most intense form of socialism, proved to be a monstrosity. That alone would be enough. Then came the atom bomb, the fact that 100,000 people could be wiped out at a stroke. And this in the

early stages of nuclear development. So if you eliminate all three of those, Hitler, gulags, atom bombs, then maybe I couldn't have come to these ideas. But historically speaking, you can't perform such an excision. Those three horrors dominate the 20th century. Not to mention the trench warfare of the First World War.

ML: The whole problem of evil—Voltaire heard about the earthquakes in Lisbon in 1755 and said the destruction proved there was no God.

Throughout our history humans have questioned God whenever there was an earthquake, a disaster—of course, many of these were natural disasters.

That was bad enough. But, of course, why would God allow a natural disaster? You can't blame any of that on humans. That was Voltaire's point. At least we can blame the Holocaust on human evil or the Devil. In part, at least. We can't blame an earthquake in Lisbon in which 100,000 people were killed—we can't blame that on human beings.

NM: No.

ML: So that forced many philosophical thinkers of the Enlightenment into their—they said, "That's it. God can't possibly exist. This is ridiculous."

But if you take a step back, you can say: Maybe we're looking at too small a scale. Yes, six million people were exterminated with untold suffering. The suffering is so great it's impossible for us to conceive of it. It's horrifying to an extreme degree to anyone who's ever looked at the photographs or read the accounts. But maybe, in the larger scheme of things, God was allowing this to happen to send a message to humanity on how far it had slipped, and he was even willing to sacrifice his Chosen People, or a great number of them, in order to send a message to humanity that it was time to embrace Christianity, embrace love, do whatever had to be done.

NM: Let me interrupt here—

ML: Let me finish—

NM: Wouldn't God be quite a dolt to keep doing that if it didn't work?

ML: Strong medicine, I'm saying. More and more—the earthquake in Lisbon doesn't do it—OK, we'll have trench warfare. And then we'll have

gulags, the Holocaust, then the threat of the atomic bomb. And indeed, the atomic bomb was dropped but after all, we have not had a nuclear holocaust—we backed away. Maybe we've learned and we've backed away from the brink of a nuclear disaster and spared the world.

NM: I think we have. It's possible that even the Devil was appalled by the bombs. Nuclear warfare could destroy all of his technology.

ML: So maybe it worked.

NM: Let's go back to the Voltaire's earthquake in Lisbon. Let me give you my notion of God as the artist—that is, a God limited in power. For example, why are there volcanoes? I would answer: Because God is not a perfect engineer. That makes as much sense to me as God punishing us and punishing us without compensatory result. It's very hard to argue that these acts of nature engender more than a temporary frisson of religiosity in most people.

ML: Well, then, returning to your triangle of God, the Devil and the human being. You've talked about God but you haven't talked much about the Devil.

NM: Not as yet. The notion I have of the Devil depends to a good degree on Milton. I think he fashioned a wonderful approximation to what the likelihood might be. In one way or another, there was a profound argument between God and very high angels—or between God and gods, and the result was finally that one god won—the God we speak of as our Creator, God won, but it was a Pyrrhic victory. Because Lucifer, if you will, did very well indeed. Thereafter, the war was on. And this war has gone on ever since, gone on in us.

Whatever the form this takes, my understanding is that God and the Devil are intertwined in all our actions. Even as I'm speaking, I could have the best of motives and the worst of motives working at the same time. As I've said many times over the years, when we work with great energy, it's because our best motive and our worst motive, or to put it another way, God

and the Devil, are equally engaged in the outcome, and so they're collaborating with us for a period. There can be collaboration between opposites, as well as war. This collaboration can consist of certain agreements—"The rules of war will be. . ." And of course, the rules can be broken. The Devil can betray God. Once in a while, God also breaks the rules—with a miracle. But my argument is that when we act with great energy, it is because God and the Devil both have an interest in the outcome. Whereas when we work with little energy it's because they're not only at odds, but are dampening or countermanding each other's impact upon us.

ML: What if God happens to be dominating us? Wouldn't that be better? Couldn't we argue that it would be better to have God motivating us more than the Devil? Many heroes in history have been so motivated by the good that they have gone on to achieve great things. Like Constantine—"in this sign, conquer—in hoc signo, vinces!" and goes on to—

NM: You can't argue that way. Claim, if you wish, that Constantine was a fabulous person who helped Christianity to triumph—indeed, he did. You could also say he may have helped to destroy something more fertile than Christianity which was the richness of pagan belief. Our latter-day troubles might have started on the instant that Constantine decided to become a Christian.

I'm not going to accept a discussion that allows you to moor your philosophical vessel at any point alleged to be a rock in the historic stream.

ML: Let me put it this way: if schizophrenia is on the rise—I don't know that it is—but if it is on the rise in human affairs—

NM: I'd be surprised if it weren't.

ML: All right, would that be an indication that the collaboration between God and the Devil was not working well?

NM: Let's not emphasize a "collaboration" between God and the Devil. I've spoken of it as "the accepted rules of the game." Take an average contest in professional football. Two teams who fight each other on the

field with skill and bestiality, each side laboring to win. Nonetheless, there is a whole set of laws that prevail. After they tackle a guy, they don't kick him in the head. I'm saying that in order to keep it flowing, God and the Devil have certain understandings with one another. What they are, I couldn't begin to try to say. We don't come very close to the nature of mysteries but sometimes we can obtain a sense of their relations. The only clue I have is that when there's great energy available—then I expect They are in a temporary collaboration. I would assert that we do have God and the Devil within us in varying degrees. Perhaps one can be—just guessing—as elevated as 70% good, 30% evil. Or, the reverse, 70% evil and 30% good. Maybe once in a great while there's a saint—90/10.

But generally speaking, we are mired in good and evil. Mired because we spend most of our time in trade-offs, in the exhaustion of efforts because one part of us wants to do something and the other part is opposed.

Very often our good fights an offensive battle against our evil—that does go on. We know that. The Christian churches are built on that: fight the evil in your soul.

ML: St. Michael the Archangel.

NM: Yes. But my argument is that it has become a three-way situation. It isn't that we're passive onlookers while God and the devil wage their war within us and we, in our turn, have nothing to offer. We are the third force and don't always know which side we're on in any given moment, or when, sometimes we are independent of both.

If you'll accept my notion that technology may be the most advanced, extreme, brilliant and dazzling artistic creation of the Devil—for technology, of course, does incredible things—then you get a real sense of why some people would be more leagued with the Devil than devoted to God. Half the human universe must by now be on the side of technology. Maybe more than half.

ML: Let me push your idea a little further. You are saying that when you have the most energy, when you're moving forward, it's because your good and your bad motives are in synch—wouldn't that argue, then, that when everyone felt like that more and more, and we had this great sense of energy, that we're moving forward, accomplishing positive results: happiness results—

NM: War also results. It's not simple. What I want to get rid of, if nothing else, is the fundamental notion that Revelation will simplify our existence. I say the human being has to take several steps forward into living with the notion that there are no answers, there are only questions, profound questions, and that that is ennobling. It is ennobling to face existence with the recognition that you're not going to have answers, but hypotheses that you can test most imperfectly for validity by the ongoing inner experiences of your life.

ML: The Manicheans see God and the Devil as brothers who fight until the end of time but at the end, good will defeat evil. Is that where you depart from the Manicheans?

NM: Absolutely. We don't know the end—we could end with the failure of the good. Because if the good is guaranteed to win at the end, then all we're in is a fixed wrestling match. "Where are we, which city? Atlantic City? Or is it Pittsburgh? Oh, Pittsburgh. Good. That's my turn to win tonight." If goodness is assured an ultimate victory over evil, then we are in a comedy, an ugly comedy considering how we suffer in the course of the contest.

Go back to football—no football team ever assumes it is written they will win a big game. A victory brings the joy that it was not predetermined in advance—it was achieved. I'm saying existence consists of a continuing set of achievements and defeats, achievements and defeats,

ML: Forever and ever?

NM: No. But certainly up to the point where humankind enters into some definitive metamorphosis of existence, arriving perhaps at the notion that God is not the most powerful deity in the universe—but can succeed, nonetheless, in promulgating His vision into other worlds. It may be that our vision can join eventually with God's vision. Perhaps our mission is to travel out across the stars—not necessarily in space ships, but by our spirits ready to seek to make a better universe. But, of course, we can certainly fail. Who knows what other forces are out there in the galaxies? Dare I mention black holes in space?

ML: OK, but you started by saying all this was too large for us.

NM: It is, but I've strayed from the points I planned to talk about.

ML: Let me take up then the "four last things" of Christian eschatology—death, judgment, heaven, hell. You have commented, at least obliquely, on all but one, heaven. Why have you given heaven such short shrift?

NM: Because I don't believe in it.

ML: Without a vision of heaven, your belief system is unlikely to draw many adherents.

NM: I'm not trying to found a religion. I think if these ideas of mine have any value, a great deal of time will go by before there are adherents. First of all, our child-like notion of heaven has to be relinquished.

ML: But not hell?

NM: I don't believe in absolute hell any more than I believe in heaven, certainly not in hell as a place of eternal punishment. It strikes me as prodigiously wasteful. I remember a lovely religious lady named Anne Freemantle, a fine writer, once said, "I think God looks for a very tidy universe." I thought about that for a long time

ML: You set The Deer Park: a Play, in hell. Hell is something you refer to all the time. It's a constant reference. Heaven is absent. But you talk about judgment and death, of course.

NM: It was perfectly legitimate, I felt, to put my characters in hell because hell's a point of reference for everyone. Everyone believes in hell, and

much more readily than they do in heaven. Heaven is harder to conceive.

What we all know is that the most perfect moments in our lives don't last for long. Extraordinary moments are perishable. Whereas we can be in hell for months, then years, we can live in towering depressions. Hell, therefore, is much more available to human beings as a set of imaginative propositions.

It was easy for me to situate the play of The Deer Park in hell. It gave a springboard to the drama.

Yet, I still don't believe in hell as eternal punishment. I've always felt Dante is the most overrated great writer of all, because he is—we must face this dire fact—Dante is Johnny One-Note. Hell has dimensions. Some parts of it are critically worse than others. We can approach that when we talk about reincarnation.

But my notion remains that the only heaven and hell we ever receive—the only judgment that comes to us—is by way of reincarnation. To wit, we're given a better possibility in our next life as a reward, or we are born to a worse one.

In other words, I'm not interested in absolute moral judgments, eternal heaven, eternal hell. To the contrary. Just think of what it means to be a good man or bad. What, after all, is the measure of difference? The good guy may be 65% good and 35% bad—that's a very good guy. The average decent fellow might be 54 good, 46% bad—and the average mean spirit is the reverse. So for that—say, I'm 60% bad and 40% good—for that, must I suffer eternal punishment?

OK, you as a Catholic may come back to me and say there are such places as purgatory and limbo, but they are temporary conditions before one goes to final judgment.

The argument I would advance is that heaven and hell make no sense if the majority of humans have such a mixture of good and evil within us. There's no reason to receive a reward if you're 57/43—why sit around forever in an elevated version of Club Med? That's almost impossible to contemplate. You remember the fun George Bernard Shaw had with his expectation of heaven as a prodigiously boring place where Don Juan

nonetheless wished to reside because at least you could think there. That was the best Shaw could come up with as a concept for heaven—at least you can think well and carefully in heaven. But my notion is that your partial reward or partial punishment, which I do believe exists—is meted out in your reincarnation. How else account for the ongoing feeling of conscience that we all seem to have? Conscience is there for good cause; conscience is vital—if, for nothing else, it's there because it gives us a clue to what is likely to be our next future. Will we be reborn in a situation that offers more opportunities? Or, for punishment, will there be fewer good chances? Will our next life be easier or more painful?

Now, this notion is simple, but people who are fixed entirely on notions of eternal hell and eternal heaven can't come near to it. They cannot comprehend what I'm talking about. Yet, for those who are wondering if there is a viable scheme to the afterlife, these assumptions can become meaningful. Why do I strive to become a better person? Can it be because I wish to have a somewhat better life the next time out? If I am going to be

reborn, I want to be able to do more with my next incarnation than this last one.

I have a joke to tell at this point: I die and go up before the Monitoring Angel. He says, "Oh, Mr. Mailer, we're so glad to see you. We've been waiting. Let me tell you I consider it an agreeable assignment to serve as your Monitor. Now, tell us—we ask everyone this—what would be your idea of a proper reincarnation for yourself? Because you've been certified for that. Which is very nice—not everyone passes on to reincarnation. So, tell me, what would you like to be in your next life?"

I say, "Well, you know, everything considered, I think I'd like to be a black athlete. I won't argue with where you position me at birth—it can be under poor, ugly circumstances, I'm willing to take that on—but I would like to be a black athlete."

The Monitor's face clouds. "Oh, Mr. Mailer," he says, "everyone these days wants to be a black athlete. Right there we're over-subscribed dreadfully. So, let me see where you have been put. . ." He looks it up. He

says, "I'm afraid we've got you down for cockroach. But—there is good news—you'll be the fastest cockroach on the block."

All right—we're going to be reincarnated. Whether we know what our reincarnation will be, I doubt. I expect it will be full of surprises, some most unhappy.

ML: Whenever you've spoken of reincarnation, you've done so in an ironic manner. You talk about directives in the Bureau of Karmic Reassignment. But I don't recall your ever talking about the likelihood of the reassignments. In your mind, how does reincarnation work? Who controls the process?

NM: God.

ML: Let me talk in these inascertainable concepts. Does it tie in to God's need for humans to be soldiers in His future cosmic war? Is it an operation run altogether by God? Are all souls recycled? Are new ones created?

NM: Let's see if we can work through these one by one. First, I would assume that God has ultimate hegemony. I am sure there are any number of

monitoring angels. It's a bureaucracy, if you will. We don't have to be precise about it. Where did our human bureaucracy come from? I feel most of our social forms derive from celestial forms. In other words, bureaucracies could be human representations of the notion of how it might work—and not work—in the heavens. We can't stand bureaucracy because of the boredom, repetition and slowness. But it may be that there are elements in heaven that do work more efficiently. Angels at the switchboard rather than humans. Heavenly bureaucracies may affect their work in more lively form than our earthly ones. Still, I see that part of the procedure as comparable to bureaucracy.

ML: You said not all souls are recycled.

NM: I believe the soul is a gift from God. Of course, you can abuse any living gift to the point where it does not survive. Any number of people may end up by saying, "All I want is a little peace. Let me sleep forever." They may be given just that.

ML: So, such a termination is not necessarily a function of evil. . .

NM: No, not of evil—but it is giving up. If the complications of life and the exhaustion of contending with all the little gods and devils in yourself burn you out, there can come a point where the soul loses its desire to exist. You see, reincarnation is a gamble. You could do worse the next time. Fear of an even more painful existence may convince you to throw in your hand. On the other hand, I think there are also humans who commit physical suicide because they feel they're in danger if they don't—that their soul will expire before their body. Gary Gilmore was a perfect example. Why did he so desire to be executed? Because he expected his soul would expire in prison and he was a great believer in the value of his own ongoing soul.

ML: You are saying that when a soul does expire, it doesn't go to heaven, or to hell—it just ceases to exist.

NM: Yes. It's gone. It's in a true cemetery.

ML: Are new souls being created?

NM: I don't talk much to people who believe in reincarnation because I don't like the jargon. But, yes, people who believe in reincarnation do talk

about new souls or "young souls"—and, yes, I would expect God creates new souls. That doesn't mean a new angel comes to visit us on earth. To the contrary. God may say, "I've been reconsidering the terrible propensities of the Devil. Let us see if we can conceive of a soul who will be able to war with the Devil a little more effectively, a new soul who will have many of the qualities of the Devil but can transmute them, transform them, elevate our sense of spirit even in the dirtiest, ugliest, foulest places. We can call on Dostoyevsky at this point. God may have decided that an iota of goodness in an evil soul can be immensely important.

ML: You hardly speak of the casualties in this war between God and the Devil.

NM: While the soul is a separate being from the body, I would suppose that the soul also has its period of existence. A particular soul might expire after a single earthly existence, another could be reincarnated a number of times, but doubtless, there's a limit to it, yes, souls do expire, I must suppose.

ML: Wear and tear, so to speak?

NM: Wear and tear, so to speak. Indeed. Just as God may finally expire, or the Devil. There are forces out there completely beyond us who wouldn't mind seeing the total collapse of one, the other, or both. We may be speaking of a force that consists of the drive to nothingness. Nothingness may be a huge power out in the great cosmic universe. It may desire the extinction of the universe. To repeat: We have yet to explain black holes in space.

ML: You've always said you're on the side of being.

NM: Yes, but it's like saying, "I'm a Yale man," or "Loyal to Harvard."

The built-in pitfall of these conversations is sounding hollow. I nevertheless presume to take this route is because I am weary of the philosophical paradoxes and evasions that good Christians tie themselves up in, those mutually exclusive conundrums, where they simply don't have an answer they can explore toward the root. The set of beliefs I offer here makes sense at least to me. Be it said: Having a view of the universe that

makes sense to yourself is, I think, Jung's finest prescription for mental health. One of his profound conclusions was that nobody could be cured of their neurosis until they found their own vision of God. That is a fabulous idea. I believed it before I could articulate it so I was naturally excited when I came across that thought in his work.

ML: Many people who believe in reincarnation would say they have retained some sense of their previous life. You've always said that you don't remember.

NM: My feeling is there's a very good reason why not—I believe there's a psychic mechanism in us that shuts off recollections of any previous existence. Think what your life would be if you knew about your three or four previous lives. My memory is already failing for the one life I'm aware of. How could I handle the confusion of other lives that were also mine? I do think, however, that we retain deep instincts about previous incarnations. Sometimes we have reactions to events that are inexplicable. Something inside says, "Don't take another step in this direction." Or "I will

pursue this course even if it makes no sense to me whatsoever." Some people are maniacs on motorcycles—what do they get from it? Something profound. Partly from this life—they're curing hostilities, aggressions and rages they can only solve on a motorcycle that is going fast on a wet road. But maybe it derives from a previous life when they were terrified of any commitment to danger and endeavor.

ML: So many people who believe in reincarnation have self-aggrandizing memories of the past. "Oh, I was in Cleopatra's court."

NM: I can't stand that.

ML: It kind of put me off reincarnation.

NM: Yes, that particular vanity is atrocious. Devil-driven, probably. It's unpleasant in the same way people who are devout Christians believe they're going to heaven because they're steadfast in their belief. Either way, it is self-aggrandizement.

ML: At the end of Ancient Evenings, which I've been re-reading over the last few days, Meni the Second, the young Meni, says, "Purity and goodness

are less to Osiris than strength." Which is a restatement of what Cherry says in An American Dream: "God is weaker because I didn't turn out well."

Add to that Rojack's belief that "God was not love but courage; love came as a reward." You return to this idea many times in your books. Especially in Harlot's Ghost. I can see the force of this idea, but couldn't it be argued that love can create strength just as courage generates love?

NM: Yes, it can be argued. It is still a question, however. Does love have as powerful and vital an effect as courage? There are any number of men and women who are full of love but are nonetheless timid and cowardly and hate themselves for being cowardly—it poisons the love in them, even if, essentially, they are loving creatures.

ML: In Christian belief, love can move mountains. But for you, love seems to be more of a passive quality, not active like courage—love comes as a "reward"—so it isn't seen as an active principle. It's the emolument you get for being courageous.

NM: Let me tell you how I got to that point.

It struck me that everyone I knew, including myself, was always looking for love. "Ah, if I could find love, I could solve my problems." Some years ago, however, I found myself saying to my children, "Don't go searching for love. Love is not a solution but a reward." So long as you go searching for love directly, you will fail. Because love is a grace and you don't pursue grace.

Now, mind you, I'm not a macho maniac on courage. Many, many times I've said that an old lady who crosses a busy street in terror, feeling she hardly has a 50/50 chance of making it safely across, is exhibiting courage that might be more intense than a professional soldier attacking a machine gun nest if through all his young manhood he's been ready to die in such an action. Odds are such a soldier is braver than the average old lady, but we can't put an inflexible hierarchy on the scale of courage.

Still, my own experience tells me that to the degree one is brave, one finds more love than when one is cowardly.

ML: But I'm not talking about romantic love, rather about what Christianity calls "charity."

NM: Charity comes when you're brave. How many cowards are full of charity? Cowardice is a poison.

ML: It's a question of precedence. You always put courage as the more active, the more powerful—

NM: I often find when I'm feeling weak that I'm also very nice, and when I'm weak I feel the weakness in others and am sympathetic to it. But it's not nourishing. It can be just another form of emptiness passing back and forth. Whereas when I'm feeling strong and also feel compassion or charity—on those rare occasions—there's real goodness in it. It's of real use to the other person.

ML: Well, to get down to basic ethics: when someone does something that's an act of real generosity done at a cost to themselves, it's because they love the other person. I don't mean in a romantic way—it could be devoid of sex.

NM: I'm not putting that down but I'm not ready to elevate it. Because as a novelist, I know better. Forgive me for putting it this way, but most often when you have an act of great generosity, there's a tangled skein behind it of good and bad motive. Don't forget that I believe in this tripartite base to human nature: God and the Devil to either side of us, ourselves in the center. Contemplate the number of compromises, relations, treaties, surprises and rebellions—people are perfectly capable of rebelling against both God and the Devil, shutting them both out of one's existence as far as possible. That's one attitude: Damn their eyes, I'm doing what I want to do! There is the human ego—the notion that neither God nor the Devil know what they now want of me as well as I know. So I do call it a tripartite relationship, and by that I certainly don't mean that the humans are subservient in it. What terrifies me at times is that humans may become dominant over the others. I just don't trust us to go traveling across the universe on our own.

ML: You mean there may have been some individuals in history who were so powerful at a certain moment in time, they equalled God and the Devil?

Constantine, say, or Charlemagne—

NM: Constantine, again!

ML: Churchill, Napoleon—

NM: Napoleon, yeah. I think certain humans can free themselves to the point where both God and the Devil are both working for them for a brief period. But, again, please take us back to speculations I feel closer to.

ML: You've eliminated heaven and hell from the Four Last Things.

NM: As absolutes. But hell can be very real—take some proud society lady who is unpleasant to her servants. She is all caught up in money and her jewels—we all know people like that—she's willing to sell herself to the Devil but the Devil also rejects her because at bottom she's a silly ass and the Devil doesn't need her. So there she is, ready for judgment, and God's judgment is: "You'll be a scrubwoman in your next existence. And if you complain once, you'll clean latrines—provided you still have any soul left."

Most conservatives believe that the poor man has as good a chance or better of getting to heaven as the rich man because the temptations among the rich are so awful that they can easily go to hell. And that's what enables conservatives to function. They can put up with inequity for others in this life because they feel there's a better existence waiting for those poor who are patient and good in horrible circumstances.

Well, I believe there's an element of truth in that, just as there's an element of truth in the implicit liberal faith that every soul, every human, is terribly important and must be protected in this life. These are not only warring notions, but may be warring notions within God. Because where is the artist who does not have such profound disputes within? The Creation may have come out of these warring notions in the Creator.

It isn't that God is only fighting the Devil. He's also debating within Himself or Herself what the next proper course might be. I wish to suggest that it is in experiencing the play of this complexity that future theology could find its nourishment rather than the churchly insistence that God's

words are actually in the Book. No, I do not see the laws of existence as etched in stone with no deviation permitted. No absolute heaven or absolute hell. Such concepts are devilish ways to confuse ourselves profoundly. Because they don't add up. In terms of our experience, they make no sense. Our experience is that everything in life is more or less shaded. On certain days, certain things are better. Certain of our acts give us more pleasure than on others.

Sometimes evil acts—what we see as evil acts if we believe in Revelation—give us pleasure that we find ungodly, devilish. Yet acts that we think are evil may have been inspired by God who decides, "This poor soul is going to expire unless there's a breakout. This poor soul has to do something unpleasant before this soul can feel any life again." In this sense, God's compassion can also be present in an evil act.

Never forget Engels' immortal three words: "Quantity changes quality." Petty evil is one thing. Massive evil is another. I'd never use an

argument like this to arrive at a justification of Hitler or Stalin. They embodied massive evil.

ML: Considering your belief in various states of grace and the idea of dying in a state of grace, it seems to me that if there's any pathway to formal religion open in your mind, it's to Catholicism.

NM: I probably do feel more connection with elements of Catholicism than to any of the other formal religions. But that's as far as it goes. I was talking once with a Catholic theologian who said, "well, so much of what you say seems almost Catholic."

I said, "Yes, but I could never be a Catholic."

He asked, "Why? Would it be the transubstantiation in the Mass?"

I said, "No. I could believe that. Why can't God be present in a wafer? That would not bother me. Why can't wine become the blood of Christ? I wouldn't believe it in a hurry but that wouldn't keep me from becoming a Catholic."

So we went through various hurdles and obstacles and finally he asked again, "Why, then, can't you be a Catholic?"

"Because," I said, "I don't believe in the omnipotence of God."

And he said, "In that case, I can understand why you're not a Catholic."

ML: All right. Let's return one more time to reincarnation. I can feel that you have more to say on that.

NM: Yes. One matter we've not gotten into is my supposition that the atom bomb, the concentration camps and the gulags were mighty efforts by the Devil to foul up reincarnation, to choke off all subtlety of the judgment within reincarnation. I hope I've suggested the delicate dispositons of God, the care with which the question is asked: "What shall I do with this soul?" That is at the core of reincarnation—delicate, responsible, artful, deliberate judgment. If the process is overloaded, it can break down. God, I repeat, is not all-powerful.

ML: So mass slaughter fouls up the divine bureaucracy?

NM: Contemplate the mess in eternity when so many human creatures were being slaughtered en masse.

ML: Not if you can go back to an omnipotent god. Most people believe God can handle anything and everything

NM: No, God's energies are also limited. Everything I say is based on that. We may live in a universe that is expanding but there is not always endless energy available. No. No.

ML: Are you saying that the Devil does have a purchase on the process of reincarnation?

NM: Through marring it, mainly. Or overloading it.

ML: It was Herman Melville who said—in a line I could never forget—when he was, if I recall, writing Moby Dick—he said, "Lord, when shall we stop growing?" In your theological belief, there's a paradox, to me at least, in that on the one hand, growth is something you're always seeking and it is the summum bonum—

NM: Not all growth is good.

ML: But good growth is good, positive growth, growth of some kind is better than stasis.

NM: Good growth is good; bad growth is bad. The growth of suburban shopping malls has been prodigious in America—does that mean it's good? Does it mean that because the old family store gave way to the corporate chain, that it was inferior humanly? Not necessarily.

ML: Let me ask you about evolution. You accept evolution. You know, the traditional Catholic belief in evolution—the Catholics were quick to embrace evolution even as many Protestants—at least fundamentalist Protestants—were not. The Catholics were among the earliest to embrace the notion of evolution and they didn't have any trouble with it. They said: People coming from monkeys—no trouble at all, that's how the body was created. And at a certain point God put the soul in. Is that--?

NM: I happen to believe that dogs have souls.

ML: Well. . .

NM: Mind you, in reincarnation you may not come back as a human. You could come back as a dog, and, just as a parenthesis, that makes a great deal of sense to me because so many dogs, I find, are closer to the human than humans.

ML: Stretch evolution back—people from monkeys or dogs is no trouble at all. That's just three million years. But going back—50, 60, 100 million years—when the creatures were coming out of the slime, do you see that at a certain point God puts—

NM: I don't think it's answerable.

ML: Well, what doesn't have a soul?

NM: It makes more sense for me to believe that God was in the slime from the beginning and God was less in those days. God has grown with us. God has grown with evolution.

ML: Well, God created the world—

NM: God may have been developing along with evolution. Why must a god be independent of time?

ML: Well, if God created the world—at that point, He wasn't slime.

NM: Wait: we create our children. That doesn't mean one is able to create children on the day one is born. I'm not talking about an omnipotent, all-powerful God, but one who grows with us.

ML: I'm assuming that in the course of human history, God at some point began the process of creating souls.

NM: These souls also developed. The soul of an amoeba would be primitive, but still a soul that gave the amoeba some intimation of direction, some sense that it must do its best under its own limited circumstances.

God, obviously, was superior to the amoeba from the beginning, but God was also developing as the Creation went from the amoeba to the paramecium to the multi-celled creature.

ML: Here's where I have a problem with reincarnation—when did God create such a process? .

NM: There is no close answer for me. Perhaps at a point when God had endowed a great many higher animals and people with souls, He or She then

decided, "This is wasteful. I, as an artist, can do better. Certain of my creations could have turned out a lot better but they lived their lives under the worst circumstances." So, God said, "Let's give them another chance to exercise their free will. Maybe they will be wiser."

ML: Best deprive them of all memories of the past?

NM: Who knows? Was it worked out in discussion with the angels? Or in argument with the Devil? Did the Devil say, "No, they must remember every last thing they've ever done," and God said "No. That's messy. I want a tidy universe."

It comes down to something basic. God's notion is: Let's make the Creation better. The Devil's is: let's wreck the Creation. I have, says the Devil, something else in mind that will supplant and replace the Creation.

ML: What would the Devil want? Total destruction? Nihilism?

NM: For the sake of argument, let's say the Devil would want to fashion a universe on His or Her terms.

ML: Have we any idea what those terms would be?

NM: Well, given my taste for rank speculation: it could be an immensely technological universe where the need for existence—individual existence—and the concomitant need for soul would be less. That would be more to the Devil's taste: Individual units that function in relation to other more or less individual units. More spiritually mechanized. That seems to be the prevailing tendency in the 20th and early 21st century—more and more interchangeable units, ready to serve a corporate machine. At the other end of it, you have the maniacal intensity of the most extreme Muslims whose only feeling is there's something so wrong with this approach that it all has to be destroyed, and don't ask questions. The Koran has all the answers. Once again we are at a point in history between the rock and the hard place.

INTERVIEW II

Purgatory

MICHAEL LENNON: I want to ask a question about purgatory, which we didn't get into last time. It seemed to me that you felt some sympathy for that idea.

NORMAN MAILER: Some sympathy—and some uneasiness. I will say that I expect there may be some sizable difficulties present after death, a universal hell of waiting we may all have to go through before we are born again—those of us who will be born again. I will add that there's an automatic assumption in most people who are religious that God is not only all-powerful but instantaneous in His action. There's an Irish saying: "When God made time, He made a lot of it." So God could be instantaneous—but why would He want to be? Nevertheless, this expectation of quick reception and quick designation for one's afterlife is at odds with our own experience—which is everything takes longer than we

think it will. That is the accrued wisdom of most men and women after many decades of life. In the economy of human experience, there are always time-consuming episodes you didn't anticipate. To assume that once you pass into another realm of existence things will be perfect and more instantaneous is no small assumption. It's as ungrounded as to expect that there are no other difficulties in the hereafter than purgatory, limbo, or hell. Another, after all, might be God's need to judge whether a particular soul should be reborn, or might as well expire. So purgatory might sit there as a species of possibility, an unhappy holding tank. God may look at three-quarters of us and say, "I don't want to make up my mind just yet," and drop us into purgatory. Temporarily, that is.

Now, what the form of this purgatory might be—whether it bears resemblance to a Palestinian refugee camp, I have no idea.

One of the beliefs I hold is that the hereafter is less different than we assume. We may have the same frustrations and difficulties in the after-life, overcrowding, for example, even, conceivably, waste. After the Holocaust, we were forced to recognize there was something absolutely murderous in our species—obviously, it was not just reserved for the Germans, there was something vastly destructive in our nature. We received this knowledge over and over again, in Russia, in China, in Africa,

in some of our own actions, indeed, in Vietnam. The point I want to make is that the Holocaust may have exacted a great price from God, even greater than from us. At the core of karma is the notion that it is composed of wise judgment. What if that is not always true? In the godly assessment of each life, in the reading of the soul, so to speak, that takes place after one dies, can it be that God sometimes says, "I'm too weary to think about this now?" After all, if God is an artist, is it always necessary to make instantaneous judgments? Under certain conditions of overcrowding, literal overcrowding in eternity of the sort caused by the Holocaust or Hiroshima, purgatory becomes a vast way-station.

Let me try to expatiate a little on that. Given the number of people exterminated in a day during the Holocaust, the number of souls arriving in tumult, is it possible they became too great in number for God to measure with calm and justice? It may be that karma has been in a species of uproar ever since the Holocaust, the atom bomb, and the gulags.

The moment you postulate that God is not all-powerful, but is striving to promulgate His vision across the stars, you are also postulating that the nature of the Beyond—to use another word than the Hereafter—is existential. Not fixed, but changing with cosmic circumstances.

ML: Well, you have certainly touched on my next question. You see God as an artist. I think all too often your visions of the Hereafter or the Beyond are built on your own experience of this life. Couldn't God just as well be an engineer or—

NM: Absolutely.

ML: Or a general?

NM: Yes.

ML: A public administrator? Or a diplomat?

NM: Yes, yes.

ML: Those are all human occupations.

NM: How can God not be all those things? God is certainly an engineer. An engineer would see it all in terms of future construction. How do you organize the Hereafter? How do you arrive at the best levels of spiritual sanitation? Yes! Heavenly comfort stations for psychic waste are not necessarily to be taken for granted. When I speak of God as an artist, I don't pretend to mean that God might be a novelist, as if that is all God is up to. Finally, the word "artist" has hegemony over other professions because whatever else, it is creative. God is a creator. A Creator. So I think of God as an artist. I don't like the word "mega," it's been used too often, but God is, all right, at the least, a mega-artist. All the faculties of engineering, war,

social building, art, music, sport, painting, science, philosophy, medicine, herbology, are His or Hers, and at a level more highly developed than we can begin to conceive. But God is still an artist. A great engineer is an artist. So is a great general. So are the best in all human categories. We point to that in our own speech. We speak of Clausewitz—we say, "He was an artist at war." That is the sense in which I want to use the word. I don't want to diminish this projection of what God might be. Let's think of the size of the Creation. Even if God is not all-powerful, we have only to contemplate the vast extent of flora and fauna, the painterly touches—to offer one example—revealed in the scales of a butterfly's wing.

ML: Well, the thing that did appeal to me about your notion of God as an artist, and indeed, as a novelist, is novelists have to conceive of and judge the destinies, the paths, the forked paths that people take through their lives, and so create the second phase, the third phase—in a sense, that's very much like God presiding over reincarnation—the second, third, fourth phase. There is that parallel. The novelist is portraying his or her conception of the metamorphoses in each character's destiny.

NM: Well, we are parts of God's vision certainly. I believe that, yes, lively but seriously tainted parts of God's vision. That, I would add quickly, is because the Devil is also present. I don't presume to say exactly what part

he plays in cosmic affairs, or local earthly matters—but in any event, we are not pure representations of God. We are tainted, warped, even treacherous to the divine projects offered us. We are torn between God and the Devil and our own vanity can be counter to both of them. Across the centuries, human vanity has become a factor, a prodigious factor. The human ego, which has always been fearful of God's power, and fearful of the Devil's power—that ego can even separate itself into a simulacrum of omnipotent confidence. There's nothing more irritating to most of us than the feeling that we are not completely under our own power, that other forces are pushing us, external forces which are stronger than we are. "Oh, God, here comes that awful compulsion starting up again." Whatever it is. Some impulse we consider unworthy of ourselves or too risky for our adventurous capacities, or opposed too magnetically to our spiritual inclinations.

ML: Still, in Advertisements for Myself, you take sides, you say that humankind is roughly more good than evil.

NM: No. That was my assumption about the faith some of us have in democracy, our belief that it will work because there's more good than bad in us as a human multitude. That still remains to be proven.

ML: Still, if we are roughly more good than evil, would that signal the ultimate victory of good?

NM: There is no guarantee. This is an existential question—a not-yet-determined answer. To say existential means you are in the midst of an activity to which you do not yet have a final result. Rather, you are living in the midst of an intense question. I think existentialism can only be understood in that manner.

The fundamental question in this case: are human beings more good than not?

ML: It becomes more and more clear to me all the time why courage must be the cardinal virtue in your cosmic scheme. If the forces of good are brave, strong, and daring, then there's a chance that evil will be defeated. Would the pacifism of a Gandhi or a Martin Luther King play into the Devil's hands, then? Would he applaud its use?

NM: Everything plays into the Devil's hands. We live in an immensely complicated mesh of cause and effect. I can make an argument for Gandhi and against him—that's no problem. One can also take either side for some great general: pro-Napoleon, let's say, or anti-Napoleon. Gandhi, finally, was a man of significant courage. He did something no one else had ever done before. He was a genius. So in that sense, he was searching for the answer to the same question I'm searching for, but at a much higher and much more dangerous level: are we more good than bad?

In India, the answer that came back to him before he died was, we may be more bad than good. The immense riots as he came to power—that had to be a spiritual disaster for him. So I certainly don't sneer at Gandhi nor would I wish to systematize him by declaring, "Oh, he brought on so much that was bad because he advocated passivity." After all, this kind of passivity demanded huge courage. And discipline. Heroic passivity. One of the things we might do well to begin to try to understand as humans will be our future need to reconstruct the essential energy contained in oxymorons. Certain oxymorons are absurdities, so many indeed that we feel free to dismiss them all by saying, "It's an oxymoron." But there are a few which are vital and valuable. One of them is "heroic passivity." There, one's experience must serve as the arbiter. There can be heroic passivity, or quasi- heroic passivity. The latter can be a disaster. And we've all seen that. Stubborn, frantic passivity—certain pacifists we'd like to throw down the stairs.

ML What came first in your scheme of things? Belief in courage as the cardinal virtue? Does your vision of the universe ask for a cosmic law that requires courage to be the cardinal virtue?

NM: I think you're approaching this too schematically. I would rather go back to God's experience as He or She was creating the flora and fauna of

existence, all those incredible biological experiments that went on over millions of years. Plus, most crucially, the percipience gathered from the failures. Think of the excitement of God when the dinosaur came into being, the immense excitement that He had something pretty big and pretty formidable. Then it proved too big—badly designed. Badly designed. The record of bad design in evolution could stuff the racks of many a great library. Yet what became obvious was that animals who had courage, or those plants which had a kind of odd integrity, if you will, in terms of their environment, seemed to do better for the most part than those who didn't. Of course, there are animals—we can see this directly—there are animals who had too much courage. This notion of balance underwriting courage is what God began to search for.

The notion that God made multitudinous errors is crucial to understanding evolution.

ML: Let me shift a little bit over to the dark side, to the Devil. If things are indeed getting worse, if Satan, as you seem to fear, could be winning—why would the Devil wish to destroy the world, rather than run the world as an ultimate tyrant? Wouldn't he wish to rule humans, convert them to his evil slaves and minions, rather than destroy them?

NM: Let's start with the Devil's point of view—the word evil is not even present for him.

ML: Evil is his good?

NM: He would see it that way. It's such a blatant speculation, let's have a little fun with it. My guess is that the Devil sees God as incompetent. After all, the Devil is a fallen angel, that I assume. Why? Because certain geniuses have come along who had intimations of what our origins might be. Milton was certainly one. I think Milton is as good a rule of thumb for approaching this matter of God and the Devil as anything I've come across. Homage to Milton. So, I propose that the Devil's belief is that He or She could end up with a better world, a better form of existence, a more sophisticated, more intelligent, well-run notion of things. Now, what are the Devil's means? Well, our fear is that he could destroy the whole world in order to start over again. There, I'm out on the end of my mental belay—does the Devil have the same creative powers that God does to create animals, plants, humans, a system? Or is the Devil a parasite, essentially, upon God? That's a question I wouldn't presume to answer.

That's why I have more trouble dealing with the notion of the Devil than with God. It's relatively more direct to deal with the notion of God as the Creator.

ML: But if you see the Devil as capable of defeating God, he must have equal powers.

NM: Well, well—finally, at the highest level, there's such a matter as mindless destruction. When you can't win, you destroy the game. The spoiled kid who picks up the marbles comes in all forms. If the Devil feels that He or She cannot gain those powers that are needed to form a new universe, the rage generated may be so intense that the next move is to destroy the whole thing.

Talk about "rank speculation," let's suppose the Devil is treacherous and has sold his birthright to some other god in the cosmos, and will do His or Her best to turn over a paralyzed, inane, stupid, mainly-destroyed world to someone who can build it up. The Devil could be a lieutenant, rather than a major-domo. In that case, the game starts all over again.

These notions of what the Devil might be are not nearly so comfortable as assuming that God is an imperfect creator. That makes sense to me. But the Devil could be this, that, anything—I don't know. One guess: Is technology the arm of the Devil? Which I think is probably true by now—I think I believe that. Still, technology could be a third force, ready to destroy both God and the Devil. Is technology man's special development? Man's assertion against God and the Devil?

The questions are wide open. There is no way to propose answers to them yet, but perhaps they'll become somewhat more focused as the new century goes on.

But, all right, as an immediate assumption, as an hypothesis with which I can live until I find a better one—let me repeat, there are no answers, only questions, but we can move from one question to a higher one, and thereby seek a better hypothesis to test with our experience. As of now, for example, I would assume technology is indeed the Devil's force. Why? I feel it viscerally. That's the best I can offer. I think of all the things I've detested for all these years starting with plastic. It seems to me plastic is a perfect weapon in the Devil's armory. For it desensitizes human beings. Living in and with plastic, we are subtly sickened. And the Devil looks to destroy God's hope in us. Whether the Devil strives to attain a world that he or she can take over, or whether the Devil, on the contrary, acquires a ruined world, or works toward a world transferable to some other god—these, I repeat, remain questions far beyond our reach right now.

ML: So you're not sure whether the Devil is ambitious, or nihilistic?

NM: Why must you see that as contradictory? As a novelist I would say some characters in Dostoyevsky are both nihilistic and immensely

ambitious. The two go together. Frustrated ambition can turn quickly to nihilism. A rotten fruit can grow poisonous.

ML: You seem to be in agreement with some of the other religions of the world on the role of saints.

NM: Saints?

ML: Do you see them as intermediaries, or do they play a larger role, a prophetic role, do they actually see themselves as instruments of God, or, conversely, are demons on the other side? I wonder if you could say something about the saints and monsters.

NM: Hagiography is not my strong point. I know so little about the saints. I would guess, given my general hypotheses, that very few of the saints were wholly bona-fide. By that I mean, vastly more good than bad. I would think many of them had incredible powers. I believe some of the saints were perfectly capable of small miracles—that doesn't bother me a bit. I would almost take that for granted. There are such things as psychic powers and they can be raised to a very high degree in certain humans.

But the idea that saints are as good as the hagiographers have made them does give me great pause because, finally, the Catholic Church may be the most complex and powerful and amazing and intricate power system in history. But from what we have learned about history, we also know that

most powerful people rewrite history to their own specifications. Many a saint must have been built up into much more than that saint deserved—the Church needed him or her at the moment. Still, the idea that some people become so good that they represent the best elements in God is not a concept I would scorn. I believe there were, and are, saints. I would just approach them with a more critical attitude than the devout Catholic.

ML: I guess I agree with you. In each period, the Church has to attract saints of a certain kind. But one thing that struck me about your scheme is your declaration that most of us don't know most of the time whether our actions are ultimately for good or for ill or, indeed, which side we're helping, which hindering. But saints struck me as those who might have greater premonitions, greater knowledge of what was to come and what certain human actions could do to advance the cause of good. And, a similar faction on the side of the Devil—those who asked, "What can I do to bring down, hurt, or destroy some strength of the Lord?" In that sense, the evil would also be more aware of their mission. In other words, I'm positing that the saint is not just someone who's a better person in the conventional sense, but someone most aware of his or her mission.

NM: Yes, imbued with the fundamental belief that what they're doing is absolutely right—when it may not be. There's many a saint who might

prove to be a devil on closer examination. And many a devil may have been working perversely to undermine the Devil.

ML: Kierkegaard.

NM: Kierkegaard is the best single point of reference in these matters of anyone I know.

ML: I want to challenge your idea about things getting worse—with a couple of brief statistics. I chose these carefully. 1900, the average American lived to be 46 years old. Six percent of Americans graduated from high school. 14 percent of homes had a bath tub. Six percent had a telephone—some technology here. The flush toilet was a rarity in 1900. And so on. Perhaps, as you have said, the level of language was higher among the intelligentsia. But most people had hardly any books in their homes at all. Today, a thousand books, I believe is the figure, are published every day over the world.

So technology with all its drawbacks has changed everything in our lives. I take it you would argue these are just local effects, short-term gains and in the long run, despite any of these specific advances, technology is yet going to overwhelm us, even destroy us.

NM: All the modern assumptions about progressivism are present in what you just defended. But progressivism has yet to prove itself. Of course, all

those things you cited made life easier. I don't want to be a bore about this, but nuclear warfare also came along. And we live in a more diffuse state of general anxiety than people did in 1900. People were locked up then in all sorts of terrors, intimations, and huge fears, but it was all sort of local. More particular. Now, you have general anxiety. Of a very large and pervasive sort.

The argument: Did we really improve anything spiritually? I don't want to get into it because we would have to take on some very unpalatable stuff. For instance, were people better off when they had to squat over a hole in the ground and so could smell their own product? Maybe they were a little closer to themselves than they are now. It's analogous to my argument about contraception which always gets me into tremendous trouble. It's interesting that women did not seem to conceive as often or as easily in the Middle Ages as they do today. And, in that time, many of the babies died in their first year. But the ones who survived may have been hardier than the mass of us now. If we proceed further, we have to get into all the complex arguments over whether modern medicine is a blessing or a vitiator of human potentiality. Because today, it is not only the strongest who survive. Nobody will go near this argument because it's so Hitlerian. It may be that Hitler was not only the Devil's greatest achievement, but, in

fact, one of the things he did was to destroy any possibility of thinking along the lines he laid out. People shrink the moment you say courage is important. They think, "Start saying that and you end up a Nazi." Hitler did more than anyone to spoil the possibility of exploring our time—the world was left with no more than conservatism and progressivism. The more interesting human philosophies, like existentialism, were cut off.

To this day, people don't like existentialism because it's not comfortably grounded. They hate the notion that their philosophical feet cannot always be placed on a familiar floor. Well, keep living in the familiar contexts, and it can prove stultifying. Liberals can be most stultifying. That dreadful remark—"It's a human life you're talking about"—as if all human lives are equal, as if no human life should ever be extinguished—these are the staples of political correctness and political correctness is the fierce, unruly, and manic child of progressivism. So, when you present these things, I would prefer to come back with a gentle, broad answer, to say, yes, life is certainly more comfortable than it used to be, and there are more opportunities for most than there ever were, although, of course, they may be used in more mediocre fashion than similar opportunities were used a hundred years ago. But lives may also be more drenched in anxiety of a sort we can't locate, an anxiety that lives in us in

such a way that we don't even have nightmares any longer—what we have are various stretches of poor sleep and uneasiness. And whether the human creation, psychically speaking, is stronger than it was a hundred years ago—I don't think so. I think we're weaker, we're more confused, and I think we wander all over the place—we're also louder and more loutish.

You can ask yourself: Is this society better when it has every creature comfort that's been developed up to now, and has a president like George W. Bush, as, say, opposed to Abraham Lincoln 140 years ago? Perhaps. Or perhaps we have less progress than we supposed. Those are my rough answers.

ML: In our first interview, you said you believe in God's existence and in His limited nature. It's also true that many, if not most humans, have an inherent, or an imprinted, or intuitive belief in God as all-powerful. They can't think of God in any other way. We have lots of people who could say, "My intuitions are as good as Norman Mailer's, and I can't imagine a God who isn't all-powerful."

NM: Their intuition may be more powerful than mine. Let me, however, go through my beliefs—sketchily—when I was a child, I believed in an all-powerful God. Of course. Most children do. Then there was a period when I was a fierce atheist. For many years! By now, philosophically speaking,

atheism is more incomprehensible to me than the notion that there's a Creator. And to this day, if I were arguing with an atheist, I would suggest: "The burden of proof is on you. You have much more to explain how we're here if there's nothing behind it."

But I would certainly never argue that fundamentalists don't have intense feelings. They're immensely intense. Too intense. But I think what it is—if I may presume to speak in such large terms, I think it is their defense against how really terrifying the whole thing is. The horror for all too many would come down to this: If it all ends badly, we humans are also responsible. You see, the beauty of the all-powerful God is finally, you're not responsible. Just keep your nose clean, observe ritual, and you'll be taken care of after you die. I think fundamentalism is a reflection of the true fear people have about dying. They feel if they follow all the rules, they won't go to something worse. They take to fundamentalism because it pulls in the boundaries of their responsibility.

I remember in my play, The Deer Park, at the end, its hero, who is dying, says, "Where I go, I do not know. It may be for worse." And that is the terror supporting fundamentalism. Police systems are built on it. The phrase "keep your nose clean"—that is an aspect of fundamentalism. And the true believers' dependence on Revelation is also immense for just that

reason. I would go so far as to argue that fundamentalism is one of the Devil's strongest tools: the Devil adores fundamentalism because it keeps people from thinking. So long as people don't think, then they can't begin to carry out God's notions. The irony is that by subscribing (they think) to God's will, they become insensitized to God's will. They freeze themselves out. They cannot collaborate with God's will even if they long to.

ML: Do you feel as negative about the revelations of other religions—Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Gnosticism—as you do about the revelations of Judaism and Christianity?

NM: I'm less familiar with them, so I feel less negative. I still feel wholly suspicious of them. If I were a serious theologian, which I am not, I would devote my years right now to studying the Koran and reading up on Buddhism, but I don't, because there are other things I wish to do with the remaining years. Still, my suspicion is great that I would find the Koran as difficult to live with as the Old and New Testaments.

With Buddhism, it's another matter entirely. That's the opposite of fundamentalism. It's a trackless universe which I don't pretend to understand. I get irritated sometimes by Buddhists saying, "well, you're very much a Buddhist whether you know it or not." And I don't know what they're talking about.

ML: I think you're really a Gnostic.

NM: That has no meaning for me either.

ML: I know. It's loose. A loose set of beliefs.

NM: Let's get into it, at least in passing. I've been called a Manichean, a Gnostic. The Manicheans, we agree—I'm not a Manichean because I don't believe there's necessarily a happy ending built into the end-game.

ML: It's the Zoroastrians who really believe in the happy ending. The Manicheans believe good will win but it won't be a total victory. They believe that evil will have stolen some of the light.

NM: I can go along with that. I can't believe in a total victory.

ML: Nor do they.

NM: Precisely for the same reason I can't believe in Heaven and Hell as absolute forces. We can have hellish experiences and heavenly experiences, but I don't know that we have the right to postulate such conditions as eternal entities.

ML: Well, what happens if God does win? Suppose the Devil is totally vanquished. . .

NM: God, at that point, after such a war, has been seriously wounded. And whatever happens, whatever goes on, it's not going to be God, fully resplendent, awaiting us in heaven.

ML: That makes you close to Manicheanism. Evil loses, but evil takes a considerable amount of good with it as it goes under.

NM: I can believe that. Absolutely. Remember, I'm a novelist. We tend to think that way. For us, it's a natural way of thought. Nothing is one hundred percent. The point of writing novels is to show what the costs are in human activities. If I may quote myself again, at the end of The Deer Park, Eitel is told by a former wife, "Charlie, you have real dignity now," and he thinks it's a nice compliment. "Because what was dignity, real dignity, but a knowledge of the cost, the frightful cost, of every human desire?" I've always liked that line because for me, it's the essence of the novel, the frightful cost of human desire.

So why not extend that to the frightful cost of divine desire, where the loss is greater? God might have had an earlier conception of human existence more beautiful, much more beautiful than the one He's left with now.

ML: Let me give you another model. A friend of mine has been sending me stuff on Simone Weil. I don't know if you. . .

NM: I know her work slightly. Dwight Macdonald used to write about her with adoration.

ML: Well, she's not afraid to think in bold terms—but I don't know if you'll agree.

Here's one of her ideas: she believes that God became limited in the course of creating the universe. She saw the act of creating the universe as an act of renunciation, one of power-sharing with humans.

NM: I accept the power-sharing; that's implicit in everything I've said.

ML: Because God existed alone in His endless powers, so on. Then suddenly He created something—He's giving something away. She believed that humans had a role to play because of this power-sharing, as did the Devil who profited immensely by God's creative act.

NM: She also believes in the existence of the Devil?

ML: Oh, yes, and she believes the Devil gained when God created people.

NM: I think that's true, but I think it's also a sterile image. There's God in the empyrean and He decides to come down and mix with us—it's a little bit like the rich boy who decides to spend some money on the street and see what happens. And so I find that a tiresome notion. I take it for granted that everything has its cost.

ML: Well, she's saying God lost by doing this.

NM: God lost and God gained. God gained knowledge by creating us that God could not have had without creating us. So it's not that God lost. That

gets us into reverential notions of God again. Ideally, what I'd like to keep is huge respect for the fact that we were created by something or someone marvelous, who is not wholly unlike ourselves. Therefore, we can identify with that God, identify with God's drama as well as our own and thereby feel larger. Not, "Oh, God, oh, God, don't punish me, please!" Or, "God, dear God, please help me!" The reason I've never found Islam the least bit attractive, is, you know, the prayer ritual. Kneel down, present your buttocks to the sky, and recognize that you are totally weak before the wrath of God. Well, we're totally weak before anything and everything that is vastly larger than ourselves. If this is what religion consists of, our recognition of being totally weak, and God taking care of us, provided we never, ever, ever cross any one of a thousand carefully laid-out lines—then I think existence is knotted up. And, of course the unspoken root of the nightmare in so much of Islam, is precisely their present deep-seated fear. "What if we're wrong?" they must be thinking. "We've been doing it this way for 1500 years—and now, where are we?" It's like someone who's been married for 50 years saying, "Have I been with the wrong woman all this while?" Conceive of the hate people could have for a church or a marriage if they left it after that many years.

ML: Let me shift our subject. What are the reasons—as far as you are able to surmise them—that a soul is chosen for reincarnation? Does God or His aides choose to extinguish some hideous souls, or must the souls acquiesce, give up and, in effect, commit eternal suicide?

NM: Suicide?

ML: Yes. Give up, go out of existence.

NM: Let's start with that. I think certain people can lose the desire to keep their soul alive. They've suffered too much, one way or another. The soul is weary.

ML: Gary Gilmore.

NM: His soul was not too weary. On the contrary, he didn't want his soul to die. He was the exact opposite. He wanted his body to die so his soul wouldn't be extinguished. He felt if he didn't seek the death penalty but stayed in jail for his remaining 20 or 30 years, that his soul would expire from the sheer misery of living in jail, the emptiness of it, the ongoing, endless, emptiness of living in prison if you'd used up all its few vital possibilities, as he had. But there are other people who say, "Let my soul expire, it doesn't deserve to go on." Which, by the way, is a thought that can also come to the rottenest human alive, a part that says, "You really are a swine; you don't deserve to live any longer. You're much worse than you

think you are." We all have comparable sentiments (in lesser degree) when we arrive at a reckoning with ourselves. But for some, it's terminal. They are drenched in a mortal weariness of themselves, of their soul. So, certain souls expire; they are ready to.

Generally speaking, however, I don't think most souls die that easily. On the other hand, the soul may not have the capacity to pass through endless reincarnations. If a cat has nine lives—what does a human soul have? Three or four lives? It's boundlessly speculative. One human has two lives, one has 22? All that is beyond us. Cosmically so. But then, you are asking: How does God choose? How do God and His aides choose?

ML: Can God execute a soul?

NM: Why not? How not? God can create us, God can end us. Which is part of the huge fear people have of God. God can terminate us.

Absolutely.

But I think the vital notion is to go back to the notion of God as the great artist. God hates to give up on an interesting artistic possibility in a human. So let's say He might take very bad people and have them reincarnated. Why? Is it to fill out the picture, to have a certain darkness, shadows for a certain corner? That is one of the clerical responses to explain why God tolerates evil. Of course I would argue with that. I would

say God sees wonderful potentialities in some awful people. One of the reasons they were so awful was because they had wonderful potentialities that became frustrated early (or late) and turned into their opposite. So, concerning this particular soul, God wants to try again. Oppose such a choice to the case of someone who is perfectly bland and pleasant, good and decent, yet God is not interested. That soul has done about what it's going to do and it is no longer interesting to divinity's higher purpose. God might then decide, let's reincarnate him or her in someone or something much lower and see if it responds to the stimulation of a tougher life. (Whether it's a slum, a pig-pen, or a beehive.) Or God may decide—not worth repeating. Just as an artist can be ruthless, so can God be ruthless to humans with mediocre lives. In reincarnation is, I think, situated the nexus of judgment. We are judged by the specific choice God makes for our next incarnation. It could be for better or for worse.

By better, I don't mean easier. It could be more challenging. For example, if someone has an adventurous soul, but physically they were weakened by early childhood illnesses, they might be endowed with more strength next time out. God could send them to stronger parents. But that could also produce larger demands. To justify God's new intention, you might have to become a skilled heavyweight. Think of what you'd have to

endure to get there. Does this soul, interesting at present, have such capacity or not? God is experimenting. God is looking to find out. God, like a parent, learns from what the children accomplish and from where they fail. Why not assume that we are all part of an enormous spiritual laboratory.

ML: I'm still having trouble understanding how evolution and reincarnation—which are both part of your scheme, mesh. Evolution and reincarnation, did they begin simultaneously? Did evolution with its attempts to make species stronger, better, more durable, fits your scheme well. And reincarnation is often seen as an upward ladder, although souls can often go down as well as up. The idea of reincarnation, after all, is improvement, moral progress. Are both reincarnation and evolution completely controlled by God? Are their purposes intertwined?

NM: I've been saying all along—God does not control our destiny.

ML: No, I understand, but. . .

NM: God can move in and control our destiny in special cases.

Economically speaking, it is not economic to look to direct every one of us. God does not have those kinds of resources.

ML: Well, that's why He has evolution.

NM: He learns from us—We learn from God and God learns from us. This is a family relationship of the deepest sort. The parent can be enriched by the child, the child acquires strength and wit from the parent.

We can't think of God in terms of age, but we can certainly see ourselves in that manner. There are periods where we may get more from God, when we're young, for example. When we're old, we may be obliged to give more back. Not necessarily to God, but to the way we influence other people, the way we amplify His or Her vision or worsen it.

God is not the football coach, He's not the band director. There are some things God can only learn from contemplating our direct experience. So God may be with us much of the time. With certain people, I think God and the Devil are there much of the time. Certain kinds of highly dynamic people, certain kinds—just to take a flier on it—certain kinds of entertainers—may be full of God and the Devil every moment they are on stage because there's such charisma in them, and such lightning changeability. It's so difficult to know if you're dealing then with someone who's good or evil or just impossible.

Then there are other people who get a nudge from God, or from the Devil, once a month. I won't try to systematize this.

ML: You still haven't told me how reincarnation interacts with evolution?

What is their relation?

NM: What would it be? We're talking about the macro-economic and the micro-economic. Reincarnation is micro. My point is, that to the degree that careful attention is given to one particular reincarnation, finally, it's not perfect. There are times when God is better at it than at other times.

It may be that after the double blow of the Holocaust and the atom bomb, reincarnation was mucked up badly. There was just too much to do. One example would be the ugliness of cities that were flattened by the war. The way they were rebuilt was necessary and dreadful. By-the-numbers architecture. It may be that people are finally much less interesting today than they were 100 and 200 years ago when they didn't have flush toilets.

Do we have anyone around today who's as wonderful and marvelous and god-awful as Baudelaire? No, the modern equivalent would probably be Andy Warhol.

INTERVIEW III

Authority of the Senses

MIKE LENNON: You've spoken of the authority of the senses many times, quoting St. Thomas Aquinas, quoting Hemingway. What exactly is this authority based on? What empowers it? If God is your answer, then to complicate the question a bit, can't we say that evil in all cultures has almost always been associated with the flesh and the senses?

NORMAN MAILER: My basic premise which I'll look to return to again and again, proposes that God and the Devil are both in us, are now part of us. I assume that eons ago, the Devil entered the relationship. By now, I would suspect there's a mixture of God and the Devil in every one of us. In different ways. Some of that variety creates the shape of our character. You'll hear one person say about another, "He's a good guy, he's stand-up, but he sure can be a son of a bitch." In ourselves and others, we find this constant interplay of good and bad.

Now, the organized religions, particularly the fundamentalists, have preempted the prevailing public notion of God and the Devil. The two incredible committees who first put together the Old Testament set up the parameters: this is good, that is evil—just look to the Book. Every question was to be referred to the Book.

But if we are going to talk about these matters, I think we have to approach them with the confidence that humans have the right to explore anything and everything—at our spiritual peril, but we do have the right. It seems to me—how to put it?—I see no reason for a divinity to put everything into a Book and expect that to be our sole reference, our only guide. He gave us free will. Or She gave us free will. Once again, let's leave gender out of it. If we were given free will, then the Book is the first obstacle to it.

ML: What's the role of the senses?

NM: I haven't gotten there. . . The point is that we're a complex mix, each of us, of God and the Devil. So when we come to discuss the senses, a huge question presents itself.

I would say the senses were given to us by God. If I'm ready to go in for speculations such as these, I would even go so far as to say that mind may have been the contribution of the Devil. Or, at least, more so than God.

How can I justify such a remark? Animals seem to function extraordinarily well on their instinct and their senses. To a large degree they have community—ants, bees, we change all the way up to dogs and primates. There is an extraordinary amount of communication we can witness in animals and they are undeniably superior to us in one manner. They don't go around slaughtering each other in huge numbers. If, in every other way of moral judgment, we see ourselves as superior, still we know that animals left to themselves are not going to destroy the universe. But we could. So, it may be a true question: Did the Devil invent mind? Or is this still God's domain? Or, more likely, it belongs to both. It is their field of battle.

There is no question in my mind that the Devil did enter mind. And not being the first Creator, did His or Her best—again, let's avoid gender; I don't want to say "Its," so let's say "His" for convenience—did His best to invade the senses as well. To corrupt the senses. If fundamentalists see sex as a corruption of the senses invented by the Devil, the question is more complex than any of us can resolve, but the key may be this: never assume that the senses are wholly God-given or Devil-ridden.

ML: But the line you quoted, which has puzzled me for decades, is "Trust the authority of the senses."

NM: St. Thomas Aquinas said that, and Hemingway, in his way: "If it feels good, it is good." I've never read Aquinas in depth but I was taken with the notion that the most formal of the Catholic philosophers had pondered this rule of thumb. I never explored it. At this moment I might wish I had in order to give more of an answer.

But what I think it means—leave Aquinas out of it—is that we must trust the authority of the senses because that is the closest contact we have to the Creator. However, it is a most treacherous spiritual investment. As anyone who's ever enjoyed a drink knows, the authority of the senses on a boozy spree, is exceptional. You feel so much, see so much—and that's even more true on marijuana. You trust the authority of the senses until, perhaps, they become so intense that God and the Devil seem to be there working with you full time. We've all had the experience of an extraordinary trip on drink, and/or pot, but what I know is that the end result ends as often in disaster as happiness. I won't pretend that every time you get drunk beyond measure, nothing good will happen. It occurred to me at a certain point in my life that I had never, up to that moment, gone to bed with a woman for the first time without being drunk. Since some of the most important experiences of my life occurred that way, I can hardly wish to argue that drink serves the Devil alone.

Given the rigors of modern society, it's possible we'd never get anywhere without liquor, or pot.

ML: So it makes me think of Blake's line—and it makes me wonder how you'd respond to: "the road of excess leads to the palace of wisdom."

NM: It's implicit in what I just said, but I think I'd be happier if the line had gone: "the road of excess might lead at times, rare times, to wisdom." I'm not in favor of excess because I've ruined too much of myself in just that way. Blake did have an apocalyptic mind that he served manfully. Full-time. It's one of the reasons his remarks inspire the highest flights of fancy. But on the other hand, he is seen by our modern spirit as impractical.

ML: The other thing you said that gave me pause was how the Devil invades mind. On more than one occasion you have suggested that scientific thinking undercuts metaphoric, intuitive thinking, and I wonder if that is what you see as the invasion of mind by the Devil. Scientific method, logic, linear thinking, is opposed to the leaps of intuition in metaphor.

NM: Often. It seems to me our minds work on two disparate systems. One is based on the senses. Metaphor, for example, is almost impossible without being somewhat attuned to nature, to the often subtle shift of mood. That depends so much on one's senses. But then there is another faculty of mind

that can be as cold as the polar cap. Indeed, it is a readiness to repel the senses, distrust them, see them, even calumniate them as powers of distortion. This readiness to free oneself from the senses may be exercised most by the Devil.

Almost everything I dislike in the modern world is super-rational: the corporation, the notion we can improve upon nature, to tinker with it egregiously, dramatically, extravagantly. Nuclear bombs are one example. All this came out of reason. It's not that a scientist filled with an acute sense of his or her own senses brought those intimations to the atom bomb. On the contrary. It was an abstraction away from the senses, a pure flight of mind that came to the conclusion that it was possible to make the bomb, and then, that it had to be done. Not only to defeat Japan, but for the furtherance of science itself.

ML: This may be related. I'd like to talk about Thomas's Gospel where it's made clear that human beings have the obligation to bring forth what is within.

NM: You had better say what this particular gospel is.

ML: Thomas's Gospel is, of course, not in the Bible, but is a suppressed gospel, discussed most recently by Elaine Pagels. In her book, Thomas's Gospel states that as human beings, we all have the obligation to "bring

forth what is within." And if we do, it will save us. If you keep in what is in, repress it, whatever it is—it will destroy you.

NM: I used to believe that entirely. I now think it is generally true, but risky. Because what does it mean to bring forth what is within? I work on the notion that there's godliness within us and diabolism as well. So to bring forth what is within you, it is necessary, very often, to expel the worst elements of yourself. Because if they stay within, they can poison you. That is much more complex than saying, "Get it out! Act it out. Be free, man! Liberate yourself." Because very often what comes out is so bad that it injures others, sometimes dreadfully. You could say that every crime of violence is a way of getting the ugliness in oneself out, acting it out, doing it. You could even advance the argument that there are people who will contain what is ugly within them—and that's their honor. It's a complex matter—often there are people who will sacrifice themselves in order not to injure others. For example, if you act out something dreadful in yourself, if, for example, the need to get falling-in-the-gutter-drunk thereby intensifies the miseries of everyone in your family, it is doing nothing good for others. Or excessive gambling. Or beating children. To the degree that certain ugly emotions are acted out, others are injured terribly by your freedom to do so. I could argue that it is often a Devil's urge you are expressing.

You have to ask yourself at a given moment, "Who is speaking within me? God or the Devil?"

ML: How do you answer that?

NM: Well, I can give you one story: It's fascinated me for years. At a certain time in my life I was feeling pretty rocky. My third wife had decided she didn't want to go on with the marriage and I had been thinking, "Finally, this may be the time I can start to build a life." She was a very interesting woman but easily as difficult as myself. So when she broke it up, I just didn't know where I was. And I remember one night wandering around Brooklyn in the semi-slums—not the hard slums but some of the tougher neighborhoods a mile or two out from my house in Brooklyn—not even knowing what I was looking for but going out, drinking in a bar, sizing up the bar, going to another bar—looking—this is ironic but in those days, you actually would go to a bar and look for a woman. I think they still do, but it's been so long now since I did it that I can't speak with authority. Anyway, I found no woman. I went into an all-night diner—because I realized I was hungry, not only drunk but hungry—and ordered a donut and coffee, finished it. Then a voice spoke to me. I think it's one of the very few times I felt God was speaking to me. Now, of course, one can be dead wrong. I go back to Kierkegaard—just when you think you're being saintly,

you're being evil; when you think you're being evil, you might be fulfilling or abetting God's will at that point. In any event, this voice spoke to me, and said, "Leave without paying."

It was a minor sum—twenty-five cents for coffee and a donut in those days. I was aghast. Because I'd been brought up properly. One thing you didn't do was steal. And never from strangers! How awful! I said, "I can't do it." And the voice—it was very much amused—said, "Go ahead and do it." Quietly, firmly, amused at me. So I got up, slipped out of the restaurant, and didn't pay the quarter. And I thought about this endlessly. If it was God—as I said, this was the closest I ever came to trusting the authority of my senses—my senses told me this was a divine voice, not a diabolical one. It seemed to me that I was so locked into petty injunctions on how to behave that on the one hand, I wanted to be a wild man and I couldn't even steal a cup of coffee. To this day, I think it was God's amusement to say, "You little prig. Just walk out of there. Don't pay for the coffee. They'll survive, and this'll be good for you."

Now, I've thought about this often because it's a perfect example of how difficult it is for us to know at a given moment whether we're near to God or to Satan. Which is why fundamentalists drive me up the wall—constantly, dependably, predictably. To me, the certainty they have is the

single most misleading element in their lives. It demands, intellectually speaking, spiritually speaking, that one must remain at a level of mediocrity, never reaching beyond the given. It's a great irony. Because many of them who are good Christians, or Orthodox Jews, are compassionate. I don't know much about Islam but I'm sure the same is true there—you can have fine people, wonderful people, fundamentalists full of compassion but they attach that tenderness—which as far as I'm concerned is godly, is, if you will, Christly—I can say in passing if God was ever going to mingle in our affairs, Christ is more than a metaphor. Compassion is probably the finest emotion we humans can have. When tears come to our eyes for the sorrow of someone else, that may be as close as we get to reaching the best element in ourselves. But, there again, it's difficult to know how pure any moment of compassion is. And when it is manufactured by constant adjurations and so forced into the daily habits of fundamentalists, it becomes the opposite of itself, turns compassion inside-out, and is an instrument for power.

Speaking crudely, if half the fundamentalists in the world are truly compassionate, the other half use it for an egregious power-trip. And the Devil is immensely present.

ML: You know, this always stops me. I try to think how you would translate your metaphysics, your cosmology, into an ethical system. It's not

just the fundamentalists. Most religious systems say: OK, we have the theology, now let us show you how that translates into ethics. But what you tell me over and over again is, "We can't be sure." It would be very difficult to construct an ethical system by which to live one's life based on your scheme of beliefs. Have you thought of that?"

NM: I think your point is excellent. I do search for an ethic I can believe in. And that is where I go back to trusting the authority of my senses. They can also be—what's the word I'm looking for?—traded. To the degree that the Devil may affect our senses, they become a perfect place for him to get to us. That would be the Devil's aim exactly—to enter our senses, make us feel we're having a godly emotion when in fact, we're having an emotion controlled by the Devil—warped to a degree, distorted from the point.

Nonetheless, the toughest thing in my religious ideas is that I don't have any bones to offer. The worst that can be said about fundamentalism is that it reduces people to the reflexes of a good dog. If a good dog is upset, give it a bone.

ML: It's comfortable.

NM: It's comfortable, but it's immensely limiting. I keep going back to Kierkegaard, who, for my money, was probably the greatest Christian. He not only searched into the complexity of our relations to divinity but to

diabolism as well. He knew that we must take nothing for granted in the cosmos. We cannot sup forever on the pabulum is that is termed so conveniently God's mystery. "Don't ask, just obey!"

We can, of course, for the sake of this argument pay another visit to the subject of fundamentalism. After all, a good many fundamentalists do function with vigor. Their lives have been simplified. They don't worry over questions that are debilitating. They function very well—at a medium level. No great writer ever came out of fundamentalism. Nor any great scientist. To my knowledge, very few talented actors came out of fundamentalism—or stayed with it for long. Never a genius of any kind, not since Augustine and Aquinas.

ML: So perhaps fundamentalism is for the less daring, the less bold, the less gifted? But aren't you living on an ethical razor's edge, listening to inner voices to find the right word? That's not something everyone can emulate.

NM: Yes, people want to live in such a way that they will feel secure. But there may be no such security available. Right now, parenthetically, we are living in a time where we have to wonder if we will ever see the end of the 21st century. Or, will we destroy ourselves? In that sense, directly, there is no spiritual security.

So, the fundamentalists, beneath everything else, feel the same fears that existential thinkers suffer—that the whole thing can come to an end. Fundamentalists look to alleviate that fear by way of the desperate belief that it's "God's will." Well, once again, this supposes that God is all good and all powerful, and will take the righteous to heaven. Of course, that offers nothing to the idiocies of human history, particularly that the more we develop as humans, the worse we are able to treat one another. Why? Because we now have the power to destroy each other at higher, more unfeeling levels. This can be epitomized again and again by the concentration camps. Telling poor wretches that they're going to have a shower to get rid of lice—and instead they are given gas. They are even betrayed at the very last moment. They die with a curse in their hearts. That's more hideous, in a certain sense, than dropping a bomb on 100,000 people—on people you know nothing about. And yet you have fundamentalists carrying on and carrying on about abortion, speaking of it as thwarting God's will. What does it have to do with God's will if you kill a thousand people in one minute with gas? Or destroy hundreds of thousands in an instant of atomic man-made lightning from the sky? What does that do to God's will?

We might assume that God, like us, is doing what can be done under the circumstances. God is our Creator. God put us here. We are God's artistic vision, we are God's children if you will, and it's not a good parent who looks always to control the child. The mark of a good parent is they can take joy in the moment when a developing child begins to outstrip the parent in small ways. God is immensely powerful but is not all-powerful. God is powerful enough to give us lightning and thunder and extraordinary sunsets, incredible moments where we appreciate God's sense of beauty. But if God is all-powerful, then how can you begin to explain the monstrosities of modern history? There are theological arguments by great theologians that these horrors are to test us. But this reduces our concept of God to a narcissistic stage director who says, "Let the actors improvise for a while. Then I'll show them what to do."

ML: In one of our earlier conversations, you said humans were created by someone or something not that unlike ourselves. So we are then, in some way, created in the image of God?

NM: Yes. I believe that.

ML: Doesn't that suggest we are more good than evil?

NM: Potentially more good. When a good man and a good woman have a child, there's every reason to believe that child will be a good person. But it's not guaranteed. Good parents can have evil children.

ML: If we're created in God's image and we're potentially good, but then choose evil, perhaps we were evil all along.

NM Look—not evil all along. Obviously not. If, at creation, the Devil was present and entered us as well, then what we speak of as original sin can be seen as God's obligatory collaboration with the Devil. We were born good and evil.

ML: Fifty-fifty?

NM: Who knows? Who would presume to say? The point is, whether it's 50-50, 60-40, 70-30, the odds change in each of us because there's an intense war that goes on forever, not only between God and the Devil but—I've said this before—God and the Devil are within us. We make our own bargains with Them. God and the Devil do not have the resources to be in complete control of us all the time. It isn't as if we walk through a normal day and there's God on one shoulder and the Devil on the other—not at all. They come to us when we attract their attention because it affects Their interest as well as ours.

NM: What I use as the notion behind these notions is that divine energy is analogous to human energy—it is not inexhaustible. God and the Devil are each obliged to manage their economies of energy, which is to say that they will give more attention to certain elements of human behavior than to others. Very often they withdraw from certain people. Too much is being given, too little is coming back, at least in terms of what They are looking for.

Given this as my supposition, I feel a little more ready to make an approach to the question of ethics. It must be obvious in all I've said so far that I am not only an existentialist, but would go so far as to say that we do not know our nature. We only find out about ourselves as we proceed through life. And as we do, we open more questions.

Jean Malaquais once made a splendid remark—at least for me—during the course of a lecture. He was a brilliant lecturer and in the middle of a verbal flight—this was at the New School—some kid said bitterly: "You never give us answers. You only pose us questions." And Jean stopped in the full flight of his rhetoric and replied, "There are no answers. There are only questions."

The point is that the purpose of life may be to find higher and higher and better questions. Why? Because what I believe—this is wholly

speculative but important to me—is that we are here as God's artwork, here to influence His future as well as ours. We are God's expression, and not all artworks are successful. But we are here because God has a vision of existence that is at odds with other visions of existence in the universe. In other words, God is not a Supreme Being who reigns over everything—there may not be such a god. There we get into the real question of cosmic existence. There may be a major-domo at the core—maybe not. There may be gods—we may be back in pagan times and these gods are fighting for dominance over one another. And God's vision can be polluted, or distorted, or warped by the Devil. He would just as soon take over God's creation and pursue his vision. It's possible the Devil wishes to destroy both God and our creation together. Start afresh. All these questions are indeed so large that as one pursues them into answers, one has to go on into the questions they create.

Given that, we come back once more to "where is the ethic?" And again we return to trusting the authority of our senses. What do I mean by that now? Isn't it true that as we free ourselves of false conceptions of what life might be, as we free ourselves of the maxims and injunctions other people have put into us from childhood, as we come more to have a sense of "whatever I am, I am beginning to have my own ideas," you do develop

some sense that one is doing the right thing, or one is not. Or, all too often, one is not doing much. As we get older, "Not much at all" can take over most of our lives. If I am doing a crossword puzzle, there is no high motive necessarily involved. Instead, the activity might be modestly on the side of evil—I'm consuming time that might be spent in better ways. Or, to the contrary, I might be preparing my system to get ready for something worthwhile. It's not a large question: I do the crossword puzzle and I don't think about it as good or evil at the time. And I don't think of myself as good or evil so much as probably leaning slightly in the right direction or the wrong one.

So if you ask where the ethic is at any moment, it can be no more than that one is the resultant of all the forces that are in you as that vector confronts all the forces supporting you, and/or opposing you. It's as if we live in a triangular relationship with God and the Devil, trying to sense the best thing to do at a given moment, be it a good thing or a bad thing. Let me go back to what might have been my lone visitation from the Lord. What God might have been trying to tell me was "Get over this notion of good, right, proper. Because very often when you're moving in a direction you think improper, you might be helping Me more than when you're trying to be proper. Because when you're trying to be proper, you could be poisoning

yourself with frustrated annoyance that makes you a colder person and a more hateful person."

So what I'm offering to people as an ethic is to have the honor to live with confusion. Live in the depths of confusion with the knowledge back of that, the certainty back of that, or the belief, the hope, the faith, whatever you wish to call it, that there is a purpose to it all, that it is not absurd, that we are all engaged in a huge cosmic war and God needs us. That doesn't mean we can help God by setting up a set of principles to live by. We can't. Why not? Because the principles vary. The cruelest obstacle to creating one's own ethic is that no principle is incorruptible. Indeed, to cleave to a principle is to corrupt oneself. Of course, to shift from one principle to another can be promiscuous. Life is not simple. Ethics is almost incomprehensible, but it exists. It is there. There is a substratum of moderate, quiet, good feeling—generally, if I'm doing things in such a way that the sum of all my actions at the moment seems to be feasible and responsible and decent, that certainly gives me a better feeling than if I am uneasy, dissatisfied with myself and not liking myself.

Now, obviously, there is room for error. We all know about vanity. There are people who, when they like themselves, are dangerous. When they think they are extraordinary and fabulous, they can be awful. So I keep

coming back to this. One reason I know this putative theology of mine will never take off, will never be a religious movement, is that it's too difficult. It offers too little and demands too much.

ML: So it isn't so much that you have no ethical system. It's just an ethical system that cannot be abstracted, nor carved on tablets for people to carry around and consult whenever they have to make a decision. Life is always more complicated than any rule that can be laid down.

NM: What I'm asking for—this is an odd analogy, but not entirely—there are certain people who worship sex, good sex. I might be one of them. What I've noticed about good sex, when it's really good, is the extreme sensitivity with which you proceed. At a given moment, it's a creative dance. There is such a thing as a pure act of love when every moment is distinctive and lovely and fine. That does happen. For most people, it happens so rarely that they remember it—and then remember it and remember it. A sense of perfection does exist in sex.

In the same way, sometimes, for short periods in our lives, I think there's an analogous sense of perfection to all sorts of basic emotions—in love, in nurture, in caring for people, in grieving, in mourning—it's very hard to mourn, mourn openly and honestly. Mourning is an element in people's lives that can be duplicitous, even ugly. Take a wife who's been

married to a man for forty years, whatever—and in her mourning, what if she detects a secret spot of glee? "That selfish bastard is finally gone." So mourning can be shocking for people because they discover sides of themselves they never knew existed. Or the reverse. Sometimes people die whom you thought you didn't care that much about, and you discover you have lost something or someone valuable to you. So there is the constant element of discovering yourself—not in the awful way people do in psychoanalysis where every little act has to be analyzed and re-analyzed until the air in the room is stale. Rather, just like making love, it's a matter of being sensitive to the moment, reflecting the moment as best you can. And that is not an easy matter. You want a few general ethical principles from me? Remarks I'd even offer to a stranger? Well, then, if possible, give up smoking. Because that tends to block a good deal of sensitivity in yourself. It serves the will. I used to smoke two packs a day—why? Because it served my will, particularly when it came to writing. Took me a year to learn how to begin writing again once I did give up smoking. Perhaps I became a better writer. My point is, anything that will enable you to get closer to yourself, good or bad—in other words, being close to oneself can be much more unpleasant than being at a distance from oneself. That is why most people live do choose, indeed, to be a bit removed from

themselves. And so often—here's the dirty little secret—that's why they smoke.

ML: But you know, I remember something else you said about getting close to yourself. It's stuck with me. I don't even remember where you said it—you might have brought it up in conversation, but you declared: If you dig deep enough into yourself, you're going to come out your asshole.

NM: [laughs]

ML: In other words, yes, there are doors and you must open as many of those doors, and the ensuing doors within doors, but every once in a while, you want to be careful about what you open.

NM: Well, of course you have to be careful about certain doors. Anyone who flings everything ajar at once would be blown away. A mighty change could rage through all the rooms in your psyche. One of the most self-protective elements in human nature is protecting oneself from one's own dark corners.

So I don't think it's a real problem that we're going to open, by mistake, all the doors at once—we don't. We can't. What I meant by the closer you get to yourself, the closer you are to coming out of your own asshole has to do with something I'd like to attach to this discussion about the nature of defecation, shit, and waste. It may be worth getting into. As a

small premise, think of people who are terribly prudish about evacuation. They don't want to think about it, don't talk about it, it's beneath them, they hope it is terribly far away from them. I'd say ethically speaking, that's not a comfortable way to be. Far better that when you're sitting on the throne—parenthetically, it's interesting that we have that metaphor, "the throne," precisely for the toilet—when you're sitting on the throne, you do well to be regal about it and enjoy the sniffs of your own waste. Smell your own shit, and decide for yourself if you're a little more healthy or a little more unhealthy than you thought you were the last time you sat down. That's part of being close to yourself. You take this notion that what comes out of you may be unpleasant but it's natural. It can be the nearest we come to a fact. It's like hearing your own voice occasionally—so often it's too shrill, too arrogant, too peremptory, too spoiled, or too harsh. To the degree we can hear our own voice, we improve our relation with other people. Because if we find our own voice unpleasant, then if the other person starts shrieking at us, we don't have to think, "How unstable is the other." Not if we can recognize that our own voice was ugly enough to incite the response.

That's one of the elements in a decent marriage.

ML: This being attuned and listening and paying attention to the self—as you were speaking, I kept thinking, "This is positively Jamesian." James

would sense the tiniest shifts in perception. Now he probably wasn't interested in smelling shit very much—not at all.

NM: That may have been his one deficiency. [Laughter]

ML: A while ago, you were hammering on Revelation as something to be rejected by human experience. In your view, is there any merit, or value in the holy books of the great religions, or do you think they should be seen as historical artifacts, quaint, useless curiosities?

NM: No, no.

ML: What is their use then?

NM: Well, if they're seen as general principles rather than as absolute dicta, they can be of great use. The Ten Commandments—most of us do react within the framework of the Ten Commandments. The point is not to build up an inner sense of self-righteousness—"I obey the Ten Commandments and therefore I am nearer to God." No, they are rough guides. "Do not kill." Well, yes, do not kill. Does that mean you have to piss on your hand if you have a gun in your hand and you're face to face with Adolf Hitler in 1941? No, you kill him. At that point, I would not consider "do not kill" an absolute command.

Let's go through the ten commandments: most of them are so simple they apply to 90-95% of the cases. But you have some—"do not commit

adultery." Well, there it gets more complex. Because when people are engaged in miserable marriages, miserable unions, their lives are foul; their children's lives are poisoned. And at a given moment there's an impulse to escape, to commit adultery to avoid doing worse things.

Where the Ten Commandments fall down is that there are times you have to do something worse than what you're supposed to do. Because if you don't do that something worse, you're going to get into actions even more destructive, more evil, more unhappy, more toxic to others.

ML: So you're not interested in jettisoning the great holy books of the world, you just want to qualify them.

NM: Not qualify. I want us to cease looking upon them slavishly. Once one becomes a peon in any part of one's mind, one is then open to the counterpart of slavishness, the dark side of the moon, which is mass destruction.

ML: Your position is very much like Emerson's. He revered Jesus, he was interested in all the holy books, but he certainly wasn't going to be bound by them. His own quest for his own inner self, very much like yours, precluded that.

NM: I've read Emerson but only in passing, and that for a simple reason. One, I think he's a great writer, and two, I did feel close enough to him to

think, "If I study him, I could end up an Emerson didact, trying to write wonderful pieces about Emerson." My arrogance, my vanity, if you will, is that I am my own mental springboard. I've had that rare experience, probably analogous to Emerson's, of being successful enough at an early age so I didn't have to worry about making a living the way other people do. In return for that blessing, the least I could do was spend my time thinking. I have had that advantage, and it's an enormous one and I'm aware of it. I'm happy I'm aware of it because it keeps me modest rather than vain. There were years when I was much too vain and I have paid for that. No need to get into it, but vanity is corrosive.

There are a few generalities you can count on—vanity is immensely dangerous. But nothing is absolute. Vanity may be terribly important for people who don't have enough of it. Even as it's injurious to people who have too much. But then the notion of moderation that the Greeks had can also be stultifying. If you apply it to dangerous activities, however, it becomes interesting. What is moderation for a top-notch race car driver? What's moderation to a libertine? Well, you don't have to pursue every last fuck that's before you. What's the mark of moderation in a womanizer, a profligate? Well, he doesn't have to feel every woman's ass he's tempted to latch his hand onto. He looks to be discriminating. The road back to

balance is discrimination when action is high. That is precisely the meaning of cool.

ML: A phrase comes to mind—I'm sure you won't like it—that, crudely speaking applies to a lot of what you've been saying, and that's "situation ethics."

NM: You mean: do the right thing in the circumstances. It's Black. First, what does "do the right thing" mean? Blacks are talking about situations Whites have rarely considered in their full complexity. You're a drug dealer and you're cutting your stuff and there's a guy who, on the one hand is a fool—you can take him completely and give him plain talcum powder. On the other hand, you can see he really needs it, needs a drug at that moment. So "do the right thing"—don't cut his stuff to a ridiculous level. Lose a little of the profit.

At every level of human existence, no matter how evil certain activities may seem to others, there is a caution present along with the ugly impulse. (Except, of course, for those rare occasions when the impulse takes over entirely.) But short of such moments, I would say that even very unpleasant, especially ugly, nasty, horrible people will hold back on certain occasions because we all do have this sense of "do the right thing."

My basic argument is that ethics is not a system of rules. As you said, not something you can etch in stone. Ethics is a sensitivity to the moment and a sense of probably—and we don't always have it either—a sense of "this is better to do than that." This could even come down to calculation: you're bilking someone in a deal. But if you're going to bilk him, better to do it this way, not that way. Because if you do it in too ugly a manner, you'll create a desire for revenge in him, whereas this way, his feelings will be hurt but not as badly, it won't be as ugly. So what's your ethos at that moment? It's to reduce ugliness in the world system. By a little.

ML: In one of our earlier conversations, you spoke of a time in the distant future when, after "some definitive metamorphosis of existence, human vision would join God's vision—perhaps—and travel across the heavens."

NM: When did I say that?

ML: In one of our earlier conversations.

NM: Was that toward the end of Ancient Evenings or in Of a Fire on the Moon?

ML: Elements of that were there. You were looking around the corner, so to speak, you were anticipating, rare for you, how things might possibly turn out. "A definitive metamorphosis of existence," was part of the phrase, as I recall. Human nature would shift into a completely different level; human

vision would become married with God's and, I assume, would then split off from the demonic. At that point something would happen—we would "travel across the heavens. . ."

NM: Well, that's apocalyptic. I would not see any way we're going to separate drastically or quickly from the Devil as well as from God.

ML: So you would not see. . .

NM: At present, I am more concerned that we do not destroy ourselves.

ML: What would be the necessary conditions for this metamorphosis of existence to happen? What would human beings have to become?

NM: I wouldn't venture to say. Some of it may be obvious: more and then more self-awareness. More freedom from fundamentalism. More readiness for humans to accept the heroic demand that they stop leaning on God, stop relying on God, and start realizing that God's needs can be greater than ours, and God's woes may be more profound than our own. God's sense of failure could mock our own sense of failure. God, I believe, is, at present, so far from fulfilling His own vision, is so mired in our corporate promotions all over the globe, our superhighways, our plastic, our threats of nuclear warfare, our heartless, arrogant ethnic wars, our terrorism, our sweep of pollution all over God's environment. How can God's sorrow not be immeasurably greater than ours?

Before we can approach any thoughts of apocalypse, we have to become human enough, brave enough, to recognize we cannot rely on God. Rely too much on God, and we become comparable to a tremendously selfish child who drives a parent into exhaustion, deadens the parent through endless demands. "Save me! God, please, can I have that beautiful dress I want for the high school prom? Thank you, God, deliver it to me, God." Pause. "If you don't, God, I'll be angry at you," is the underlying element in the so many of the prayers. Or, the abject beseechment—"God have pity on me, I'm a poor worm."

I think we become a hint more heroic if we recognize that God needs us at least as much as we need God. We do have to stand on our own. In that way, I can feel a certain respect for atheists. I have huge disagreements with them—the first might be their absolute refusal to consider the notion of karma for even a moment. Or any kind of hereafter—their determined intensity that there will be nothing after life. You're gone, that's it. This creates its own sort of trouble. It fortifies the liberal notions that we have to take care of people we know nothing about and enter strange countries and provide them with democracy., etc., etc.

I have a tremendous distrust of what people think is the good. At any given moment, 90% of that is fashion. The war in Iraq is a perfect example

of fashion—the bright idea that we are there to inject democracy into any country that needs it. That was a political fashion; it had no real basis in political reality. Of course, it can be done, you can always inject one warped form or another of democracy into a country if you have enough troops and ignore the cost.

ML: I want to come back one more time to love and courage. Here I'm going to use Henry James—his idea of the greatest human act, one that required both love and courage is an act of renunciation—at the heart of all his novels is an act of renunciation, and usually it's a quiet act, not even an act you take credit for.

NM: It's suspicious in James. Because James's life is also a study in renunciation. I distrust authors, especially very good authors, when they lay out too full a program for their characters. They can be covertly supporting their own work. James had too little passion to get near to people he didn't understand. He worked out an immensely elaborate and beautiful art but it's full of renunciation. And we pay the price. If he had been greater as a writer, Americans would be that much better off. James is not much of a guide to the modern world. A marvelous guide when you're younger to understanding some of the subtly disproportionate things that go on in high society. He's a great guide to a very limited mountain pass that

most people will not traverse. But renunciation did him in. If James had had a few passionate love affairs and had been able to write about them—

ML: He saw them as antithetical. It's the life/art division. James believed that you can have a life OR you can have the art and I'm going to have the art.

NM: Look, I agree, and it surprises me to a degree, particularly now that I'm old. I've been on record as saying if you want to be a serious novelist, a large element of it is monastic. It's a dull life in the daily sense.

ML: That's very Jamesian.

NM: You don't have a lot of fun. You have to give up the idea of fun.

ML: Renunciation serves art. That was his dictum.

NM: In that sense, I do agree. But there is renunciation as a working sacrifice, a temporary renunciation, and there's visceral renunciation which can amputate a novelist's taproot.

ML: He should have broken off the reservation once in a while? Is that what you're saying? Gone off on a hoot?

NM: Yes. Once you've had a wild time or two, you can often support your imagination for a long time. In the harshest sense, you can say the trouble with Henry James is he never fucked another human.

ML: I have one last question which I think you've already answered. Your position on Jesus seems to be very similar to the position of the Muslims: they revere him as a teacher, a prophet, a guide—they do not recognize him as anything special beyond one in a long line—

NM: No. I wouldn't say I have that point of view. I would say I simply don't know. It's possible to me that Jesus is the son of God. If God wants to inspire humankind, which is after all His Creation, why couldn't He, why wouldn't He send a part of Himself to humankind? I can accept the miracle—miracles don't bother me. What irks me is the bric-a-brac put up to surround the miracle.

ML: So the incarnation—the Word made flesh is something—

NM: The Word made flesh gives me trouble. The Gospel of John makes me uneasy. I think John, more than Matthew, Mark or Luke, created some of the unhappier aspects of the church. The notion of the Word made flesh can be reversed—there's the danger. The flesh can be turned into the Word, can become injunctions, direct communication, usually from above straight down. What is totalitarianism but the word being implanted in the flesh?

ML: But John said you have to believe revelation, it's all there, there's no other way. Whereas Thomas said you have to look inside yourself. John

said "forget what's inside yourself, look to the gospels." So you'd have a natural animosity to John.

NM: I do—and say it again, the word is the flesh?

ML: The word was made flesh. The incarnation.

NM: The flesh was transmogrified into the word. Most of us by now are transmogrified creatures. We live with the word, not the flesh.

ML: But don't you find the Gospel of John superior in its writing?

NM: The writing is better, yes. Which is why people love John and follow John so much, and why he's, of the four, the most important. But he is tethered to the word that he helped to create—those loud-voiced lying Bible-thumping exhortationists on TV.

INTERVIEW IV

Saints

MIKE LENNON: I would like to take up again the question of saints. I think you need to say more. In most religions saints do play a tremendous role. They intercede for lesser humans, they give witness to God's greatness, they are models for humanity by their ability to withstand suffering. Indeed, some of their suffering is self-imposed. Do you see saints in the same way as in the traditional religions?

NORMAN MAILER: You reach me on a weak point. I don't know that I have a good deal to say on the subject. It does make sense to me that there would be certain people whom God would feel close to. I suppose the subtext to such a remark is that God may not feel equally near to each one of us. In truth, I would doubt that He does. After all, the Devil is always doing his best to obfuscate the divine venture. Most human beings are by now a complex mixture. We're Devil-infested and God-illuminated. So, it's

not easy to reach us. Very few of us ever get a message directly from God or the Devil. (Of course, hysterics receive several a day.) Most of us are obliged to live with a subtle smudge over our senses. Spiritually speaking, we inhabit a complex and contradictory environment. Theologically speaking, spiritually speaking, we may not be as near to ultimates as perhaps we were centuries ago.

Now there are people who succeed, one way or another, of divesting themselves of most of the Devil. It's hard for me to believe, however, that a saint can exist with nothing of the Satanic still residing in him or her. I can assume that saints are relatively pure, but the notion that they are absolutely so—well, given my temperament, it begs too many questions. It makes everything too easy. Because if a saint is perfect, why the hell do they fail so often? Does the Devil overtake them? Or—let me advance an essentially medieval argument—is the saint so good that the Devil has to use extraordinary and exhausting efforts to create a defeat, and so the saint serves God's purpose by wearing the Devil out.

ML: But all saints are not defeated.

NM: Give me an example of some triumphant saints.

ML: Saint Peter.

NM: Saint Peter! He deserted Christ three times.

ML: But then he redeemed himself and started Christianity.

NM: Yes, and Christianity may still be laboring under the fact that it was Peter who commenced it. You've got a three-time treacherous associate there. . .

ML: There are other saints. . .

NM: I won't say that people can't repent, that they can't restore their spirit back to something finer, but nonetheless renegades do have to remain under suspicion.

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

NM: Not limited but finite. Certainly not infinite.

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

NM: I don't think I'm in any danger of having my theology, such as it is, overthrown by that premise. Of course, there will never be a perfect human being. It's not in the range of our thinking. After all, I am going so far as to say there's no such thing as a perfect divinity. The nature of the universe is

provisional, existential, not finally determined. That is at the core of everything I present here. God's future is as open as our own.

ML: Let me return to saints. I can admit that Saint Peter was not perfect. But think of St. Francis of Assisi. . .

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

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

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

NM: I have no idea.

ML: You said that dogs have souls.

NM: Yes.

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

NM: For me to speak on these matters is equal to philosophical free-fall. I would rather rely on the sort of instinctive verdicts that humans come up with after centuries of dealing with certain problems. For instance, my belief in God and Devil comes to a good extent from the fact that the majority of people, through all of recorded time, have believed in both evil spirits and good ones and, finally, in a god and a devil accompanied by angels and demons. If the majority have such beliefs, one does well to keep some respect for such notions. Error is our human signature, but not a constant incapacity to perceive anything beyond ourselves.

ML: Do you relate any of your ideas to modern concepts of disease?

NM: Well, I hardly subscribe to the modern notion that all disease is evil, and is to be eradicated at all cost, so that we can all live for centuries and populate the globe with ten trillion people. Life and death, I will repeat, do have an intimate relation to each other. Just as we cannot conceive of an existence where there is only daylight and never night, so I don't care to think of life void of death and rebirth. Since I think some of us come back again, I will say that I don't have the remotest clue whom we may become in

our next existence. It's possible, it's perfectly possible, that some or all of us have to descend to the bacteriological level and return from there. My guess, however, is that it is not so elaborate a chain of reincarnation. That would propose a most complex universe in the after-life. I would rather assume there's a purpose to everything, including the biological agents that infect us and kill us. It may be there are agents of death with which God experiments as fully as God experiments with the development of human and animal life. ML: You've talked a lot about the moment of death and the state of mind one is in at the moment of death—this follows, I think from what you just said. Peace of mind, I think, is important to many religions—peace of mind at death, none more so than Catholicism. The Church actually has a sacrament called Extreme Unction, now called "Anointing of the Sick." It was created by the Church to give hope to people who were near death.

NM: How would you say that the Church arrived at such confidence in its power?

ML: Well, over millennia, the Church created seven sacraments. And the last one is Extreme Unction. I can't tell you which Father of the Church came up with the theology of it, but there is a sense of the Church reaching

out to the individual at the moment of death and applying all of its powers to giving that person peace of mind as they passed over.

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

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

NM: I can believe it's effective. Certainly for devout Catholics, it would be. Let me tell you a small story about a dear friend of mine, Eddie Bonetti, who was dying of cancer. I spoke to him a day before he went. He was a marvelous fellow and you'll see from the conversation what his positive qualities were.

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

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

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

I said, "I think so, I really do."

And the woman he was living with at the time told me he did die later that day with a smile. Which gave me heart because I loved the guy and so am tempted, naturally, to hope that my words had a little to do with his peace.

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

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

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

Tradition suggests there may well be something powerful behind it, but can it fit every human case?"

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

NM: Because I think it's our point of departure.

ML: So what? Everybody has a bad day. You could happen to have a bad day on the day you die.

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

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

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

But I'm not answering your question. I think at the moment we die, we are the sum of all the good and bad we've done, all the courage and cowardice we've exercised. And so, for example, if we die with a desire to be reborn, I think it means a great deal to God. If you will, it's almost like we reach into a litter to select a pup, and the one who catches our eye because he wants us is the one we choose to take home. Using that crude analogy, I would say that it's important to be ready. After all, that is the one situation we can't simulate, can't preempt. We can pretend to a huge number of emotions in our lives, we may well spend three-quarters of our lives being what we are not. I would go so far as to say that one of the reasons people get married is so that they can stop acting just a bit. They don't have to present a face to the world. People who live alone are always obliged to put on a face when they leave their room.

So, I would say that when one is close to death, that is, if one knows one's going to die, there can be a desire for another life, or a yearning toward peace or—and this is the worst condition—a wish to pass away altogether. The largest urge of the soul becomes, "I don't want to feel pain, so I will accept nothingness."

And really, suppose you're on high, looking people over, wondering which ones you'll refashion. Suppose there's a particular human being that

God is most interested in, but at the last moment that person is pleading for stupor. God says, "Do I really want to go through this again? Or will this person, be finally, a great disappointment again?"

You see, at the risk of being repetitive, I do believe our final judgment in this life is given by the form of our rebirth. The only divine judgment we receive is our placement in the next life. Often, God's decision may be, "No. No need to be reborn. Off the board." True death. End of existence. If you have no desire to live again, that could be determinative.

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

reach out, or, to the reverse, afraid you're going to be violated when you're lying on your bed. And I've seen that, the few deaths I've seen.

So people don't ordinarily die in moments of clarity like Eddie Bonetti. A lot of time when they die, they don't know who they are.

NM: I can't answer that. You can die spiritually an hour, a day, a month or five years before your death. I think the more your soul can remain intact up to the extinction of your body, the finer candidate you are for reincarnation. But that's just my notion.

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

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

But I do think that the soul—taking this intelligence from your lady at the hospice—if the soul leaves a week or two before the body, I think, speaking in terms of the transmigration of souls, it could make for a few

complexities in the travel schedule. You know, I have this feeling—so many talk about death as a vision: There's this wonderful white light, and relatives come out to meet you. I'm a touch dubious about that. For some people, yes. They were close to their relatives and their relatives do come out.

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

ML: Limbo can be for years.

NM: Well, I don't know. In the Catholic religion, there could be an eternity to limbo, but I think it could also be a matter of divine bureaucratic—dare I say it?—mismanagement. Because bureaucratic mismanagement on earth—I don't know that we necessarily have to assume all this changes in the Hereafter. I don't think angels are perfect any more than I believe demons are totally evil. I think the rarest condition in existence is absolute purity of any variety.

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

ML: What about people—we've all heard about people who die after living lives of greed and misery, rotten people, detestable in every way, but at the last minute, the last few weeks, they call in the priest, they get a seraphic smile on their face, they have money, perhaps, they're surrounded by servants, and they go off into the hereafter feeling very good about themselves. Deluded, perhaps, about their ultimate worth, but nonetheless, smiling, saying their prayers. They haven't gone to a church or done anything decent—

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

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

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

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

NM: No. No. I said people who are serious about their death don't act.

They may be acting for others, but not before eternity.

I'll give you an explanation why a truly rotten person can die happy, which is they were so rotten in their previous existence, the life before this one, that this life, bad as it was, proved to be a spiritual improvement over the previous one. They die happy because they feel, everything considered, considering how bad were their beginnings, and how absolutely loathsome the initial impulses they were born with, that they have, under the circumstances, gotten better than they were before. We all know people who were total pricks their entire lives who mellow a little bit at the end. That's another human quality.

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

NM: I think you're speaking too hypothetically. This person you're talking about—as a novelist I find him impossible to dray for a book. People who

are rotten all their lives rarely end up sweet at the end. If they do—there is such a thing as truly evil and ugly impulses wearing out, burning out. Just as good people can sour, ugly people may sometimes die in a more benign state. They've used up the ugliness in themselves. They've been rotten, but maybe they feel a bit of contrition at the end. Catholicism is based on that.

ML: Absolutely.

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

ML: Say a perfect Act of Contrition!

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

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

You spoke a little bit about limbo but I don't recall that you said much about purgatory—as an idea, as a place, as a metaphor. Of course, it's a wonderful metaphor, we all use it. What is your idea of purgatory as a metaphor?

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

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

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

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

NM: Absolutely meaningless and silly.

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

NM: Now purgatory. . .yes.

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

NM: I see purgatory in altogether different terms. The notion that if you suffer long enough you'll purge yourself—I don't see any reason to have that in the Hereafter. I would suggest instead that being reborn takes care of purgatory. For some people, life is, indeed, purgatory. For a few people, life is heaven—they're happy so much of the time. For more people, life is hell. I don't think we need these other structures. I think we pay our debts through our reincarnations. That makes much more sense to me than these immensely wasteful places called Heaven and Hell where nobody does

anything, where nothing's brought back into the divine economy, and people just mark time.

I see God as Faustian, as aiming to go further. God is not satisfied with His or Her creation, God wants it to become better. Therefore, wasteful procedure is anathema to God. So, I do see heaven, purgatory and hell, therefore, as wasteful procedures. Who can speak interestingly of heaven, after all? Shaw made the best single attempt and decided heaven was boring. And there is always the uneasy little feeling that people have that it could be like Club Med, a gated little tropical island. Whereas on earth, in life, we do experience heaven. We experience it two, three, or four times in a long life, maybe for a minute, no more, but we know what heaven is. There's a kind of luminousness to the joy. Most of us, unfortunately, come closest to heaven through drugs. But, all right—we know what it is.

We certainly know what hell is. Hell can be as simple as having a bad case of gout. Or a screamer of a drug trip. Or a nerve gone crazy in a tooth.

ML: There's conscience. . .

NM: Yes, indeed. There's also dread. When we feel dread, we may not be that far from purgatory. Something important could be taking place in our soul but we don't know what. We are full of fear at taking the next step that

we now believe is demanded of us. Most men encounter dread in terms of their personal courage. If they're afraid—if they're afraid of playing football, putting on the pads and going out to play can be purgatory.

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

ML: How limbo and purgatory came about, if I'm remembering correctly, was that Christianity began with notions of heaven and hell borrowed from previous religions that had both. Then the structure of the church became more complex and people asked questions. What if you've been bad but not so bad that you should be condemned to eternal hellfire—you've only been sort of bad. The Church said, "You're right, we have a place for those people where they have modest suffering." Then people said, "what about people outside the Church? We've been told they're condemned but what if they haven't done anything evil? They died at three years old—a wonderful little child but never baptized. . . ." The Church said,

"we have a place for them too." So the Church was trying to create—I'm sure they would have created another place if they'd had to. But ultimately, the Church began to see the folly of limbo—what a ridiculous idea for people to live in a big empty space forever and feel no positive pain but no positive joy although the Baltimore Catechism decided to offer these innocents "perfect natural happiness." No beatific vision would be available, but no unseemly suffering either. Just limbo.

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

NM: I won't get into it, Mike, because it takes too long to tell and there's no real point. I can certainly speak of succubi and incubi in the abstract sense. I think they would be useful instruments of the Devil. I only felt such a presence once in my life and it seemed to come out of nowhere, which is why I don't rush to talk about it because I don't understand why it was there. But I really felt as if there were some intangible creature fastened to my chest. I do have a story that may be worth telling about a poetess named Mina Loy. Something like seventy or seventy-five years

ago, she was staying in a small hotel in the Left Bank in Paris and one night in her room, she felt this hideous oppression, this monstrous, intangible creature, which seemed nonetheless most alive and had fastened itself to her chest. She lived in horror through the night and felt abominably wretched in the morning. To recover a bit, she went downstairs to drink some coffee on the terrace of the little hotel she was staying at, just across the street from the Seine. Alastair Crowley, the famous and notorious magician, was there, a table or two away, and was talking about a man he detested who was also staying at the hotel. And Crowley said, "You know, last night I sent an incubus to invade him, yet when I saw him this morning, he looked perfectly all right. I don't understand it." Mina Loy's comment was, "Let no one say Alastair Crowley is without powers. It is just that they are misdirected."

ML: Let me shift to talk about wealth and poverty. I've listened to the last interview we did and you never addressed this at all. Are they predetermined by God as karmic agents? How much of wealth and poverty is a result of what God gives you when you're born and how much comes from the accidents of the economic jungle?

NM: The poor believe they're going to be rewarded in the next life. The wealthy also believe—a good many of them at any rate—that they're going

to be rewarded in the next life. The Egyptians, for example, believed you had no chance whatsoever in the Hereafter unless you were truly wealthy. You had to be buried in such a way that you were prepared to travel through the underworld. The Egyptians believed that when you died you had to pass through the underworld in order to reach their heaven, the Elysian fields. And for that you needed all sorts of protection. Priests had to pray for you, amulets were sewn onto your burial garments, you also needed prayers said by your relatives, you needed a tomb that would protect you from evil spirits when you needed rest—you would go out and explore the underworld, and then you would come back to your tomb and your spirit would enter again into your embalmed mummy which rested, of course, in your highly decorated casket. After some rest, you would go out into the underworld again for another reconnaissance. Finally, you might make it through. Sometimes you didn't. Rich Egyptians used to have a prayer: "Oh, Amon, do not let me die a second time in the Land of the Dead." The Egyptians believed that the second death was final. The first was provisional, but if you were able to find a way through the underworld into the Elysian fields, you could live forever. So, for them, wealth was crucial. A poor man without the protection of priests, amulets, and a tomb had no chance at all. Which is why you have that long-lived phenomenon of an early civilization,

where most people live at a subsistence level, but there is fabulous wealth at the top and they certainly know how to protect it.

I think that belief carries over. People who are abstemious might look with horror on rich people who have gold plates under the serving dishes for dinner. But the rich obviously believe that the afterworld is structured to enable people who are rich to have more of a purchase on eternity. Not all rich people. Some rich people feel guilty. Late in life, they pursue philanthropy—they're terrified of the Hereafter. They know what they did to get that wealth and they are in terror.

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

We have these separate outlooks, and we have an ongoing question for those who believe in a continuance after death. At a guess—my guess—I would think there's an ongoing negotiation between God and the Devil over who travels where. I'm assuming that not only is God not all-powerful but the Devil is not all-conquering either. The two systems are in deep contest with one another. The Devil, therefore, would not wish to be excluded

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

So, I expect God to be perfectly willing to discriminate. Certain of the rich, yes, absolutely, let's send them out to be born again. They're interesting.

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

NM: Yes. Why not? It's a species of testing. People who were born in rich and favorable circumstances in one life and grew spoiled and had lives that were disappointing might be reborn as poor people. Others who were poor but never turned bitter or felt that they were deprived might be rewarded—a dubious reward is wealth and full of tests. Some had a touch of aristocracy innate in them. And there are rich people who have the

modesty of poor people. One function of reincarnation may be to give God further insights into us. I go back to the fundamental premise: God does not understand us completely any more than we understand our children. We can know them quite well in terms of their habits and attitudes, some of their virtues and some of their faults, but we certainly don't understand them in all ways. So God wants to know more about His Creation, whereas the Devil is attempting to muck up such clarity.

ML: I don't have any disputes on the individual level, but when I think of that phrase of Adam Smith's, "the wealth of nations," there are some peoples, some nations, who have lived in terrible, terrible misery. Take one nation I know a little about, the Irish. For 500, 600 years they lived under British wealth and power and now it seems just that the Irish are richer than the English.

They're now the wealthiest nation in the European Union.

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

intelligence because their own books, particularly the Talmud, were all that was open to them.

ML: But if you look at all the plusses and minuses of all the nations—great wealth in some and great poverty in others—how does that mesh in with the individual decisions that God and the Devil express by way of reincarnation? It seems God may have to give up a whole country or a whole nation or whole race of people for long periods.

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

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

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

ML: In nations.

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

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

NM: God learns. I keep coming back to my fundamental mnemonic—God learns. This is why I'm so opposed to those religions which assume that God knows everything.

ML: Last time we spoke, you said that God was developing evolution as He went along.

NM: Yes. God learns.

ML: Then in those early periods of time, when land had just been created, you indicated that God was in the slime of early creation, yes, in there evolving with everything else. Yet you also said with great assurance that God is the creator of the world and the solar system. I have trouble reconciling God in the slime and God as the creator—

NM: Suppose God is the lord of the solar system but at the same time, had to learn how to develop the system from the slime on up.

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

NM: The key to the notion is that it's all been a huge experiment, an ongoing, developing experiment with countless results, good and bad, but most of them were good enough so that evolution continued despite its

failures. God learns. And so God invests Himself or Herself in all sorts of creatures en route. Not only animals but flora as well.

I don't subscribe to the iron authenticity of the Old Testament and the New Testament. Both were written by committee. The Old Testament was put together over a long period by a series of very talented committees, much more talented than the latter-day Bible-builders who composed the New Testament. On the other hand, the people who wrote the New Testament were good enough scholars to be familiar with the best remarks that had been made up to that point in the Old Testament and by many a sage, prophet, and mystic. They used that. They were also attached to a concept that may or may not be true. Which is that Jesus was the son of God. They were serious men, but they were also a committee. So, as literary works, the Old Testament has some faults, and the New Testament a good many. To accept them, therefore, as the absolute map of our spiritual universe is comparable to using the kind of charts Christopher Columbus had before him when he set out for the West. For instance, even our present idea of the beginning as presented in the first three sentences of Genesis is a false concept.

In fact, one summer I studied Classical Hebrew on my own, and the first sentence of Genesis—have we discussed that?

ML: No.

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

ML: "The breath of God upon the waters. . ."

NM: It's not "breath of God" at all. The word used here for breath is "ruach." In Classical Hebrew there are three varieties of breath to signify God's presence. There's "ruach," "nefesh," and "neshamah." "Neshamah," if I recall correctly, is the gentle breath. And "nefesh" is a normal wind. "Ruach" is the fierce breath, the angry breath, God's rage. So the line really says, "and the rage of God roared over the waters." So to go back, the first two sentences can well be translated as, "Out of the pits came being, and

God created the firmament above and the firmament below. And God's fierce breath roared over the waters."

ML: Much different.

NM: Altogether different. I'm suspicious of committees. Even the great one who gave us the King James Bible.

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

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

creative. Being psychic as well, we would not have needed electronic communications. If I wanted to talk to you, I would be able to put my mind in contact with yours even if you were in a far-off place. We all have small intimations of that possibility. It seems to me such mental powers become more reduced with every advance in technology.

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

After all, the great strides that have been made in technology came from previous generations. Maxwell discovered some of the differences between electricity and magnetism. He and Farraday took imaginative, metaphorical leaps. Abraham Lincoln and Winston Churchill didn't have to study previous speeches to come up with the Gettysburg Address or "I have nothing to offer you but blood, sweat, toil, and tears—" They came out of a past that depended on independent human beings rising up to exceptional solutions at incredible moments. They were not dependent on electronic machines they did not really understand

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

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

NM: Wait a moment, there are crucial turning points in the advent of modern technology. The center of all that is electronics. Whereas the first wheel was made of wood, and sharp stones were used to shape it. These were things people could comprehend, they came out of the earth. Then people began to learn how to smelt ore. Dangerous business, tricky, but they found the means to get fire to melt the ore and so could separate the slag from the molten metal. The Iron Age began.

I say there's a profound difference between early and later technology. Early technology, lasting through to the 19th century, consisted of dealing with very powerful and explosive elements in nature and mastering them, so there was awe and excitement to it. Huge excitement for the railroad when it was developed—people loved to travel on them. They might be cramped and reek of their own foul coal smoke, but they were exciting. Now, traveling on airplanes is not agreeable. Everyone thought it'd be immensely exciting but it isn't. It's reductive. You don't feel like a voyager so much as a piece of transported goods. Electronics is the great divide—the watershed

between what I would call good technology and bad. Because no one knows what electronics is. I defy a physicist to reach my mind with an explanation I can comprehend. For that matter, we don't even know what electricity is. A current of electrons, yes, but do we know anything about the makeup of an electron? Does it possess its own consciousness or does it not?

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

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

the point where the ballgame was lost. If women with their finer sensibilities were adopting plastic.

ML: Very good. My last question: Great religious ideas have great followings and they last for millennia—some do fade, some die, but the greatest last for millennia. And I'm assuming there's a reason for that. Your faith in the theological and intellectual efficacy of your system is strong. I've observed it for many years and it's deep-rooted inside you. But you have also said your system is not going to be adopted by many other people.

NM: Not in a hurry. No. There's no immediate solace offered for our fears. Only an appeal to our human pride.

ML: Does this bother you?

NM: No. I suppose that if I had developed these ideas when I was 30 or 40, I would have wanted to become a religious leader. But that is not in my capacity. If there's any validity to any of these thoughts, if they take root in people to some extent, then, yes, these notions may yet be adopted by some. Because I do believe that there are two elements now on the horizon that can yet destroy the world as we know it. One of them is technology and the other is organized religion. The second drives people into stupidity. It can take intelligent children and deprive them of their ability to look at existence. They're obliged to force their thought to fit a mold that may

never have existed. And certainly doesn't exist now. That drives people to extremes. So I do feel that my existential sense of God as a Being who needs us as much as we need Him could yet reach many. But I feel no inner directive to convince people right away. I am just sure enough to recognize how far that is beyond my means.

INTERVIEW V

Ritual and Related Matters

ML: We have not spoken of ritual as part of religion. Recently my wife

and I went to the ordination of a priest. It was an extraordinary event.

Thirty or forty priests and bishops and deacons stood over the kneeling

aspirant, touching a shoulder or back or, if they could not reach the person,

they touched the shoulder of someone who could. All the while, a chorus in

the background was chanting "Veni, Sancte Spiritu, Veni, Sancte Spiritu."

(Come, Holy Ghost). While another singer, the lead singer, was singing

a capella verses about the glories of being a priest, of the holy

responsibilities and obligations, the special status that they had among

believers ending with the ancient pronouncement from the ordaining bishop,

"Thou art a priest forever." It was a very moving, a very powerful

experience. It made me think of one of our earlier conversations in which

you noted that fundamentalists believe that if they keep their nose clean and

observe ritual, they had a ticket to heaven. Does ritual have any significant

merit for you or do you reject it completely?

NM: Neither. I've thought about it a great deal. Put it this way: I have

high suspicions about ritual. It seems to me that at best, it's a mixed

blessing. You know one of my favorite remarks is that repetition kills the

soul. Well, obviously that remark has to be explored before we go further.

Any number of kinds of repetition are, I will admit, crucial to the human venture. It is, after all, one of the ways by which we learn. And there is such a thing as creative repetition. Nonetheless, I'm suspicious of ritual.

Where, after all, does my theology start? What occasions it? What stimulates it? I would answer that it is because I have worked as a novelist all my life. I don't want this to be misunderstood, but in a certain sense you are dealing with a few of God's problems. Judgment, particularly. If you're any good at your work, you've spent your life thinking about human nature. Since few good novels can do without a villain, you are, of course, soon living with the notion of Evil.

Now where in all this is the relation to ritual? Ritual is repetition and in writing a novel, you look to do the opposite. A good novel does not

keep repeating itself. That is exactly the hallmark of a bad novel. So, most good novelists are wary of repetition. Moreover, most people I don't like tend to be masters or monsters of mediocre repetition. The politicians we despise are one example. So one develops an understanding that repetition can be dangerous when used as a tool by mediocre people. Adjurations that are endlessly repetitive. Unimaginative parents often know nothing better than to repeat what they say over and over. I confess that worries me about the nature of ritual. I think it looks to set human nature into a form. TV evangelists seem diabolically inspired to me when they cleave and cling to repetition. Earlier, as a child, synagogue services left me bored. Most of it washed over me. I might just as well have been a shell on the surf's edge. But for a little wear and tear, I was the same shell at the end of the service as at the beginning, and this was true year after year.

I did experience one ritual that was interesting to me. It was my induction into Transcendental Meditation. That was a fashion thirty five years ago. I remember that for my initiation ceremony, I was told to bring a flower to the initiator. He happened to be a gawky kid who was absolutely wild about Transcendental Meditation which I had found no more than odd and boring. You were just supposed to empty your head for twenty minutes—not allow thoughts to come through. I said to myself, “I’ve been doing this for years as a writer. Every time one goes to work in the morning, the first thing to do is empty your head. So I’d been practicing Transcendental Meditation willy-nilly.

Now, in the initiatory ritual, they said a few words in an Asian language, and then gave me a mnemonic to repeat. I forget mine. It was something like Allan Gineberg’s OM. Alan Ginsberg’s old OMMMMM. I

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

Whenever an errant thought came into your head, you were supposed to use the mnemonic to wash the thought away. It was a very small ritual, but I did feel an effect. Something did take place. Obviously, then, in a deep and powerful ritual, a great deal happens. Let me move forward to make my next point. Given my fundamental notion that God and the Devil are at war all the time, I would go so far as to suggest that ritual may well have been first created by the Devil and God, recognizing its efficacy and determined not to lose any soul unnecessarily, entered ritual as well. I think ritual becomes an enmeshment of the presence of God and the Devil. It does have the demons and the saints marching in. There is a power to the repetitions; the music, the chanting, the ceremony, the concentration of the principals. So it may indeed be an important moment. One of my favorite notions is

that the Lord and Satan are there when major events occur. A general, on the eve of a great battle, gets out of bed and finds it very important to him whether or not he stretches out his left foot first or his right.

ML: A ritual?

NM: No, but that is a sense that powers are present. Anyone who reads Homer will find nothing strange about this. So, that I think would be my answer. I don't scoff at ritual, and I don't trust it. I would be happier if we lived without it, but I have to recognize that my upbringing, my tastes, my life has had little to do with rituals. Nonetheless, I can find it fascinating. Because there They are—cooperating! Keep in mind that there may be any number of occasions when God and the Devil have to cooperate—exactly because they each are trying to outwit the other. For that, they have, at times, to engage in formal contact.

ML: What about rituals concerning athletes? I'm sure professional boxers decide which glove is going to be laced on first and how many minutes they want to be alone before the fight and which jock strap they wear. I know professional baseball players have certain things they have to do. The center fielder has to step on second base when he runs in or you know, the forces will be against him. So athletes are particularly superstitious and they go through various rituals and preparations before and during the game. I know soldiers do the same thing. When I was in the Navy, I knew sailors who were tremendously ritualistic about how they tied a knot. It was a bad omen if you tied a knot the wrong way, or did something on the ship that was not done exactly in the right way. You felt like you were calling down evil things upon you. These are not religious rituals but they are often done with the knowledge that there is something in the air.

NM: Yes. I used to be very susceptible to that when I was younger. I do know what you are talking about. Back in San Francisco in 1963, I used to walk parapets which had sheer drops to the street below. I used to be full of dread every morning because I knew that before the day was done, I'd be walking the parapets. They varied in width between eight inches to so much as a foot and a half in width so there was no great risk unless you lost your head. But I would suspect that the spirit world if you will, does pay close attention to people engaged in unusual events. We started by talking about ritual. Now, we are involved with rote. Whenever people engage in rote, in other words, express a superstitious fear by going for repetitive moves when a good deal is at stake, that can draw the attention of the gods. So athletes who are going to be playing in games that will have a large emotional effect on many people, are going to attract such attention. One

does have the feeling that one is not alone, but is among accompanying spirits. At the least!

ML: I never told you this story, but when I was writing my Doctoral thesis on you, I had a chapter on your cosmology. I had to face two or three English professors plus a Philosophy professor on the Ph.D. committee. He argued with me about it. Wrote me long letters.

NM: Let me get this straight. While you were formulating the thesis, this happened?

ML: Yes, he was reading drafts. He said that your system, as far as he could understand it, was terribly incomplete.

NM: (laughs)

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

NM: He sounds like a major league ass.

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

NM: Let me just stress one point: I never heard of this before, that you have to have a beginning and an end to your philosophy. What about Logical Positivists? Do they have a beginning and an end?

ML: Well, he was an Aristotelian. That probably explains a lot. But he also felt that you had no clear definition of Being. What he believed and what a lot of philosophers believe, is the central question of philosophy: Being. What is being? What is the ultimate nature of Man what is the

ultimate nature of God? What is being? When he confronted me I kept saying, existentialism, existentialism. As much as I knew about it and I knew a little but not a great deal. One of my English professors on the committee said, "Look, Mailer is a literary man. He's not a systematic philosopher. He has ideas, he has feelings, but he isn't out to create a philosophical system." And that's what finally got the philosopher to back down. He goes, "You're right. This is a literature Ph.D., not a philosophy Ph.D." But I've thought about it for many, many years, this debate that we had. It kind of slowed things down although it didn't hurt me in the end, and everybody. After all, you had written about Marx, Freud, Kierkegaard, Sartre, Schopenhauer—it wasn't that you weren't familiar with some philosophy, you were clearly interested in philosophical questions—but finally, I guess, that any philosopher who won't propose any ultimates is a

very unusual philosopher. As I read it, there is no ultimate nature of God, no ultimate answer to any of these questions. And so, reading over everything that we have done so far, I keep coming to the thing, we don't know, we can't be certain. And from a philosophical point of view, there's usually one rock somewhere.

NM: What if the rock is in transit? In other words when we say rock we mean something that is eternal. What if eternity is in passage itself? The simplest response I could give is that no philosopher has ever come up with an answer to these questions that is satisfactory to us. No human, and I won't be the first either. What I will say is this. I have basic beliefs. I don't know what we've been talking about through these interviews. I thought I'd said it. God is not All Powerful and not All Good. God is comparable to a Greek god if you will. Zeus, if we need some model. I

don't need one. In other words, God is a warrior engaged in trying to shape some very large part of existence. How large is a question beyond our consciousness. I have no notion at all whether our God is a God for the solar system or includes some of the galaxies, or does not go beyond the earth and the moon. I have no notion whether God is in command of black holes in space or is terrified of them. My fundamental idea is that the cosmos is at war within itself and the God that has created us, the artist who created us, is not the emperor, but the artist. This is my most basic notion of God—of Being, if you will—is not a law-giver, but an artist. Being is doing the best that He or She can do to introduce Their notion of existence into the cosmos. There may be other notions out there as well—other concepts of what turn the cosmos should take. We humans are part of God's venture into the unknown. We humans are God's soldiers, God's ability to change

the given in the cosmos. To ask, then, that the end be posited is philosophically misleading, since we commence with the notion that the end is not yet determined.

When I say that I am an existentialist, I mean it in the absolute sense of that word. The purpose of existence is not known. It is open. God has a vision of existence, and we look to fulfill that notion even as we often proceed to deny it. In addition, given His war with the Devil, God cannot always affect His or Her notion of how things should be. Often, God must dwell in intolerable states of frustration. That makes more sense to me than that God knows clearly what He or She is doing and tells us how to do it. If that is the case, we are no more than extras in a huge opera. I've said this over and over. The end is open. Existence is open. This notion that there is a predetermined place that we all will reach, that there is a single point to

existence which we will achieve by fulfilling God's notion, is, if you stop to think of it, no more than a personification of God as the director of this immense opera where he is holding a full libretto in hand. But I am saying it is more complex than that, more difficult. More ennobling. We're not just serfs, not just children drawn in from the street to play a part in the children's chorus, but will not be allowed to sing. We are the base of such an opera. So to demand a philosophical presentation where I must say where we are going, is, given my point of view, an unanswerable demand.

All we can know at best is where we might be at the present. Everything in existence fortifies this concept for me. I know where I am at this moment.

Within reason. But do I know where I will be in a year? Will I still be alive? No. If I should remain alive for twenty years, can I have any notion of where I will be then? Can I have a concept of where society will be in a

hundred years? Hardly. We live in the present. That is all we are given.

We do have instincts and they can be powerful. I would go so far as to say I would go along with Goethe on this: These powerful instincts are God-given. We are embodying God's plans, but such plans are subject to change because the storms of the cosmos are not all prerecorded.

ML: The moment of death carries more weight in your theological thinking than in any other I know of, but I don't see any consideration of what happens to, I believe it's 20%, of all people who die of strokes, heart attacks, aneurisms. I have a friend who died, so the doctor said, before he hit the ground—you know, there is no time for them to prepare themselves, there is no time to reflect, project, anything. Are they just unlucky, is this just a flaw in the way God did things given the importance of our state of mind when we go into eternity? These people have no chance.

NM: To begin with, the answer here is the famous Catholic notion with which Graham Greene was obsessed. Between the stirrup and the ground! Time, after all, to anyone who has had experience with even minor drugs like marijuana will know that time can extend or compress. A tenth of a second in a dream can feel like five minutes. So they tell me. In that sense, the notion that you die without warning, no. But apart from that, even if you have very little time at the moment before your death, that's not where death takes place. It takes place within us as we live our lives. That is exactly where morality enters into everyone's consciousness. The question, "Am I a good man, or a bad man?" accompanies us from an early age. "Am I a good child or a bad child?" As you get older and commence to think more about death, so you also think more about judgment. Of course, not everyone believes in judgment. It is disheartening that so often you will

hear fine people say "Oh, there is nothing after this. All I want is a little peace." It is a sad remark, particularly sad to me because, given my notion that many of us look to the promise of being reborn, it is sad if life has been so corrosive that one does not care to be reincarnated. That suggests so deep a sense of defeat. If, as I presume, our human purposes look to align with God's purpose, we are then turning against God as well.

ML: I guess I'm not making myself sufficiently clear. We had a long discussion in which you emphasized how critical the final moments of one's life were. They were, according to you, extraordinarily important because that was the time you could really prepare yourself. You used the example of the people in the gas chambers who were cheated out of that moment and how terrible it was for them. But, you know, if you have a brain aneurism,

you don't have a tenth of a second. You have nothing. Your brain stops.

There's no thought.

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

ML: They do.

NM: All right. You are talking then about the one percent. And if I can't account for that one percent, then I can't. Everything I attempt here, if I may honor it with the assumption that it is philosophical, suggests that we don't look for one hundred percent in anything. I'm opposed to the notion that any kind of thought can be all that complete. It's one of the reasons I so detest fundamentalism. It insists on one hundred percent. What I have to say may be valid for 9/10ths of the people, or 99%, or 80%, but I do believe that, yes, our preparation for death is important. If you have just a few

minutes at the end, it isn't as if you are facing death for the first time; you have been facing it all your life. Let us say you are handing in the final submission.

Now, let me go back a moment. As I've indicated, I think reincarnation is a species of reward. To repeat, that's why I get depressed when people say, "Oh, I just want some peace." And mean it. Whereas others can feel with all the ill they've caused, that there is still enough good in them to want another chance. I believe that God is sometimes ready to give that chance to the most impossible cases. I go back to my basic notion: God is the artist. A fine artist is never satisfied with what has been created. The artist can look for another attempt to do it better. I even believe that the dullest human is still an intrinsic work of art beyond our measure. So, there

may be every reason for the Creator to want to see if this human can improve.

We are fascinated by the nature of God, but God, in His turn, may want to know more about many of us. God may want many of us to come back. God needs us. To repeat: He wishes to take His notion of existence and carry it across the stars. And for that, God needs humans to become more extraordinary. But you don't create people who are wonderful by an act of will. Often, such development can come only from rebirth. If you are put in situations where you failed in one life, but succeeded in the next, then, yes, to that degree, you have strengthened God.

Let me offer a crude scenario. If, in one existence, you were terrified of heights, well, then possibly for the next, you are placed in a family of mountain climbers. So the child may go through horrors. But now this

child has guides to carry him or her into an aerie they could not reach in their previous life.

To go back to your first question, I would say that maybe at the moment of one's death, one has a better sense of what one did or didn't do in one's life and what one might like to be in one's next life. Can that not give a coloration to the soul at the last moment?

ML: All right. Let us say that such a person does become a successful mountain climber. If you have a succession of such good reincarnations, what happens then? Does a person ever get to be as good as it is possible to become?

NM: No, no. We are so far from being anywhere near any kind of perfection. Most of us are so highly imperfect, so underdeveloped, so frustrated, so small in relation to what we could have been, every one of us,

even those of us who are relatively successful, that the question also becomes how much has God learned from us. It isn't that God understands us so well that all we need is a little tweaking. It's not like that. God learns along with us. Think of God as a protagonist in the cosmos. So, some of His divine decisions on reincarnation will work; others not. God's hope is that His works succeed more often than they fail.

ML: So most reincarnations would not show a clear improvement or a decline?

NM: Who knows? Who knows whether it is God who makes every single decision or if there are a myriad of monitoring angels. For that matter, karma itself may be embattled. When too many people die at once, when a hundred thousand souls are incinerated in one second, that may create great damage. Karma may not be equipped to deal with so many deaths in an

instant. Might this not be one of the Devil's most profound urges? To maim Karma grievously! Destroy reincarnation, destroy God's way of adjusting the balance.

ML: I don't see any reason why reincarnations can't go on for a couple of million years. Why not? No problem.

NM: The question here is how much time does God have. Are eons more of time available, or is it a cosmic race? There may be other visions of existence seeking to overtake us in the universe, or worse, speed far away from us. So, God may be in a great hurry. God may have less patience now than He possessed hundreds of thousands of years ago.

ML: Well, to go back to the Ph.D. professor, there is usually some teleological sense among philosophers about how it's going to turn out in the end.

NM: I would say that God has a vision of existence which He sees as more creative, and more useful to the future than other competing visions in the cosmos.

ML: What is that vision?

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

ML: OK

NM: Now give me another vision of existence. That we all are to sit in the heavenly fold and listen to hymns which are beautiful because God has put us in heaven? What the hell is more final about that?

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

And you just exist not in just sugar land, amusement park or Club Med, but exist in pure intellectual bliss having been completely purged of all weaknesses and corruptions and so forth. In many religions. The Hindus, for example.

NM: That assumes we're all here ideally to get to a certain place. If we keep our lives clean enough, we will reach such bliss. But I am saying that heavenly bliss is not guaranteed. Everything we know about the nature of existence also shows us that it's cruel, paradoxical, glorious, disappointing, tremendous, and often more modest than we expected. And so I believe we are part of a vast creative process that is attempting to go somewhere without being able to guarantee what the end is. In our lives, we certainly work without knowing the end. The only certainty we possess is that we are going to die. We don't know what will follow that. We can assume certain

answers, but we ought to know that we are only making an assumption. Let me add that if every one of our understandings comes down to uncertainty, why assume that God knows what the end is? That is also a large assumption.

ML: Does it fit or not fit in your theology that America has a special place in God's vision?

NM: I've written about that lately. The quagmire in Iraq can be blamed on American Exceptionalism. I would say that all of us, all humans, belong to exceptionallism. Not just Americans. All of the globe is part of God's exceptionalism. No particular country represents Gods basic sense of how to do it. It's vainglory to think we Americans have a purchase on exceptionalism. How, for god's sakes, could God put up with suburbs and malls and superhighways and plastics?

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

There were endless wars and corruption. And we were a new start.

NM: I won't argue. God may have had certain hopes for America. But I don't think He has had much hope since the Second World War. In the last five decades, we've cheapened the very surface of life. We've ruined the freshness of the air, the cleanliness of the rivers. At this point I would say that America is not a country whose spiritual goodness holds up under examination.

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

NM: It was John Updike.

ML: And that remark moved you. You thought he might be on to something there.

NM: Yes.

ML: Several times in this and other conversations I've had with you, you've mentioned the possibility that God might have intended human beings to develop their telepathic powers. In your novel, Ancient Evenings, some of the characters do employ telepathic powers. And modern novelists can, in a sense, read minds. Because they're exploring what people are thinking. One of the great advances is when the novel moved into the human mind.

NM: In which century would you say that was?

ML: Well, it really only started around a hundred years ago.

NM: Dickens enters people's minds.

ML: Not much. Not like Joyce. Or Virginia Wolfe.

NM: All right.

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

NM: Yes, but I don't think that I would lay claim to any more telepathy than is average. We all have the experience of thinking of a song and someone in the room starts humming it. People who are married for a while often find they're thinking of something at the same time. We phone someone just as they are about to call us. But in terms of practical novel writing, I think we study everybody from the outside. Once in a while, through love, we do enter literally the inner presence of someone else. But, generally speaking, we observe. We study society. We try to understand

how the social machine works. We try to understand characters different from ourselves. We work with the notion that there is a little bit of ourselves in the stranger. Certain characters do come alive even though they are vastly different from one's self. The best novelists can do that. All the same, telepathy is a very small part of it now. I do believe, however, God did want us to be telepathic. God did not necessarily envision electronics. Electronics, I suspect, are the Devil's contribution. God just assumed we would become more and more telepathic and in the course of that, there would be less need for technology. Technology stifles God's creation. Smog is not good for God's air. Static is not good for our ears. Or, our souls. I don't want to go through the old litany of all that is wrong with modern civilization. I will add one notion, however, which is that technology being now with us, we have to look upon human history as

God's attempt to deal with the Devil. If the Devil succeeds in establishing technological shoots and outbursts and venues and avenues throughout all of society, God must engage technology as well. But He comes in second.

The Devil is the pioneer in technology. So I would assert.

ML: Right. But one of the new phenomena of technology that is sweeping not just the US but the world—in fact, the united States, I understand, is behind great portions of the world, certainly Europe and Asia—is cell phones. Only half the people in the States use cell phones, but in Asia and in Europe it's much higher than that. It's sixty, seventy percent. Is this opportunity to call up people all the time, anywhere in the world, not creating a whole new set of communications in the world that never existed before?

NM: I see it as a mess. I'm not at all sure that instant communication with everyone alive is ideal. Not at all. Very often it is the hunt for information that shapes the development that we make of such information. We are stimulated by the hunt. The difficulty becomes a vital part of the intellectual process. Today, so many are talking about gluts of information. We are all being buried under mountain ranges of data.

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

NM: With television, back in the early days, everybody who felt positive about it was leaving the full effects of commercials out of the equation. TV commercials did a terrible thing to the American people. They introduced

the expectation that your powers of concentration were obliged to suffer a series of hits through every hour that you watched.

ML: You've made it clear that, to your mind, ideation may be closer to the Devil than the Lord. Which made me think, what about language which is perhaps the most complex and subtle creation of intellect. Where does language fit into this discussion?

NM: Language does not come only from intellect. Language is the marriage of intellect and the senses. Whereas, technology is often divorced from the senses. Plastic, for example. Most electronic machines are not agreeable to employ. Think of the cast-iron vise in an old-fashioned cellar workshop. It makes cranking sounds as you use it, and you do get a feeling as you tighten the screw whether the piece in the vise is being held properly. Not being crushed and not too loose. You obtain very little of that with

technological machines. At best you're reading dials, and your eyes might even find a little play in the subtlety of the dials. But you can't ask technology to do any large enriching of your senses. Whereas, language comes out of the senses. Half of language is onomatopoeia . We are drawn to different languages by their qualities. I love German for its guttural vibrations on one's larynx, and French for the emphasis upon the nose, the centrality of the nose. I love English for the mannered postures available to your voice, and Spanish for the fire you can feel within it. Ditto for Italian with its sense of bravura. Hebrew for its primitive roots. All such reactions come from our senses. So I separate technology and language—they exist at opposite poles of the intellect.

ML: I've never heard you speak philosophically about language.

NM: Well, I had all sorts of theories years ago which I tried to pursue in superficial fashion. I never got down to grips with it. I do have these notions still. I think certain consonants have associative qualities. I think “r” almost always has to do with anger, rage, ire, fury, redness, roar. “L” has to do with love—lassitude, leisure, likelihood, languor, libido. “S’s” are sibilant. They suggest displeasure, sinuosity. I tried to make up a rule for all the consonants, but R, L and S are the easiest. “B” is almost always impact. “B,” “K,” you know. Break. Sounds that implode upon your ear tend to have relations to B, K. F....

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

NM: That’s pretty far beyond me, I would say. Look, animals come close to speaking. I had a dog fifty years ago, a standard poodle. Immensely bright. I always felt that his greatest pain, his soul suffering—because dogs

in my opinion do have souls—and in fact parenthetically there is one very large but unascertainable notion that in Karma we may go back into the animal chain again. Who knows? In any event, this dog was extraordinary.

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

Sounds you couldn't begin to spell out. I could make them for the tape recorder but no one could transcribe them. And that dog wanted to speak.

So I think in a certain sense, God was discovering language through the eons of evolution and the sounds of His animals.

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

NM: I've felt from the word go that George Bush is one of the Devil's creatures. I suspect he's drenched with the Devil. And every time he feels

that Jesus is talking to him, Satan is speaking. One of the Devil's greatest talents may be to speak like Jesus. The war in Iraq has been steroidal for America. So in that sense—I think the Devil is winning right now in America, yes.
