

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 I'm not opposed to the thought. I know very little about super-physics. It's not a topic I have a basic interest in. Their conclusions seem to change all the time.

I start in another direction entirely. Having been a novelist all my life, I may know a little about human beings. You might say my theological notions come out of the question of who are we, what are we, how do we develop, why, indeed, are we in existence? And to what degree is there the presence of a Creator in what we do?

So cosmic speculations are of little interest to me. I have nothing to contribute there. I would hate to rely on the ever-changing state of advanced physics to form 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 it's not in my compass.

ML: All right. In one interview you gave in the past, you said that you believed that God created the universe. In other places, you've said that God and the Devil were 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 and who created the universe?

NM: I feel the same way about the ultimate Creator as I feel about the expanding universe: it's out of my scope. But I don't see any inherent logical contradiction in saying that I believe God created the world we live in.

ML: To repeat: On the one hand, you said God created the universe. But in other places, you speak of God and the Devil as lesser deities in liege to the—

NM: I shouldn't have used the word "universe." God created the world, I believe, and the solar system, but these are matters of speculation ~~to~~ so open and so windy—that's not what draws me.

What does stimulate my thought is the war between God and the Devil. That makes sense to me—that war between the gods.

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." Of course, you are right, there's no way to contest that, but 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, where does either desire derive from?

ML: OK. But in most religious systems, there's 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 is 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 is a huge question mark everywhere you look at it. For instance, Revelation, as such is not God's words but ours back then, words that were debated back then, if you will, in committee 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 without Revelation. Revelation has always struck me as a near-ineradicable power trip by now for the humans with mixed motives who lead the crowd, as well as for their followers who quote from Scripture all the time, use it as their guide-rail and run into intolerable contradictions which cripple their 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 are paralyzed before every question to which they do not already have a warped answer.

I confess, therefore, I have very little interest in organized religion. When I do study its practices, it makes 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 see animals also as His artworks. When I think of evolution, what stands out most is the fabulous study of possibilities that went on in God as an artist—I think of all the errors that were made as well as 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—the great artist, the divine artist—was trying to express something incredible, and it was not, for certain, an easy process—how it went on forever! We'll get to the Devil in a bit but I would guess that evolution was continually interfered with by the Devil. I think there were false passages 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 absurd, but to speak of Him as "Him/Her" or "It" is worse.

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

I can hear the obvious rejoinder: "Sure, there's Norman Mailer, an artist of medium rank who's got to give himself honor and nobility and importance by speaking of God as an artist." I'm perfectly aware that that accusation can be laid. All I say here can be no more than a projection of my own measly means.

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. God is better without even having to write the novels. He sees them pay off before Him; He's had a part in it; the actors are, to a great degree, His or Her people.

The point I want to come back to is: I believe in God as the Artist, the Creator, because it makes the most sense to me. Whether I have a private agenda in this, or whether I am being an objective philosopher to the extent that one can contend with that particular oxymoron—objective philosopher!—all right, 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: I don't know. How would I know?

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

NM: Let's say that certain things have gotten much better and other things have gotten much worse, so much so that our 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 and the concentration camps and the atom bomb came out of technological improvement. For the average person in the average developed country, the average or even poor person, life in terms of comfort is somewhat better than it was 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 all 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 and 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. It also created 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 and interruption and mood disruption.

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 the instinct. The extermination camps were an absolute violation of such a venture. They were cheating people of their deaths. They informed the camp inmates they were going to have a shower. In they all marched, took

off their clothes, happy to have a shower with all those lice on them, hoping the shower would be hot, went in, and were gassed. Their last reaction in life had to be, "you cheated me!" They die in a panic. That's not going back to the blood, to instinct, to preparing oneself to enter the next world. They were obliterated by an excess of reason.

Reason stripped of the notion there's a Creator. Because the moment you have a society built on reason alone, then you have to ask what substitutes for the concept of a Creator, and the answer is individual power. What has characterized just about every social revolution is that sooner or later the leaders take it over, and turn cannibalistic until there's only one leader, an absolute dictator. Once you accept the notion that there's no god, totalitarianism of the Left, the Right, or the Center becomes the ultimate tendency of the Enlightenment.

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

NM: No, it's more complicated than that. We have to ask: What is the relation of God, the Devil, and the human to one another. Because I think it is a relationship among three forces, 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: No. 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 it all has to go. Jesus does make a kind of sense that the rest doesn't. 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 that contradiction to us 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.

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

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. Obviously, if you're Jewish, you take it personally. 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. That's what history is. 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 1711 and that's when he stopped believing in God. For exactly that reason. 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 50,000 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.

ML: So maybe it worked.

NM: Let's go back to the earthquake. Let me give you my notion of God as the artist—my idea of God being limited in power—that is, God is the Almighty of this sphere, or, given the Devil, the semi-almighty of this sphere—it may be when the universe was formed, higher gods were forming it, and maybe in the course of establishing the laws of earthly existence—and whether God was present or not is obviously beyond our compass—but there may have been imperfections in that design that we can attribute to God the Artist. In other words, why are there volcanoes? Because God was not a perfect engineer. That makes as much sense to me as God punishing and punishing and punishing and punishing without good result. It's very hard to argue that these acts of nature do any more than put a temporary frisson of religiosity into 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: No, 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 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. He retained a great deal of power. 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 breaks the rules—with a miracle. But my argument is that when we act with great energy, it's 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 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 to create Christianity—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 bark on any given 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 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 when there's great energy going—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. On the reverse, the most evil, 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 are at war within us and we have nothing to offer. We are the third force and don't always know which side we're on in any given moment, or are, sometimes, independent of both for that moment.

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 be by now 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, merely hypotheses that you can test for validity by the ongoing inner experiences of one's 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 wrestling match. "Where are we, which city? Atlantic City? Or is it Pittsburgh? Oh, Pittsburgh. Then I'm selected to win tonight." If goodness is assured ultimate victory over evil, then all of us are in a comedy, a very ugly comedy considering how we suffer in 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, not to speak of those black holes in space?

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

NM: It is, but I've strayed from the points I planned to tell 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 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. Those extraordinary moments we feel are more perishable than the most delicate flowers. 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 me a springboard for 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's so 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 for ourselves the next time we're born, or a worse shot.

In other words, I'm not interested in absolute moral judgments, eternal heaven, eternal hell. No, quite the contrary. Just think of what it means to be a good guy and a bad guy. What, after all, is the measure of difference between them? 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 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? Will our next life be easier or more painful?

Now, this notion is simple, but people who are fixed entirely on the other notion of eternal hell and eternal heaven can't get near to it. They just can't 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 the slot in which you will be reincarnated? Because you've been passed for that. Which is very nice—not everyone passes on to reincarnation. So, tell me, what would you like to be?"

I say, "Well, you know, everything considered, I think I'd like to be a black athlete in my next life. 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 that precise about it. Where did our human bureaucracy come from? I feel most of our social forms derive from heavenly forms, if you will. 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 work more efficiently. Angels at the switchboard rather than humans. Heavenly bureaucracies may effect their work better than our earthly ones. Still, I see that part of it as comparable to bureaucracy.

ML: You said not all souls are recycled.

NM: I believe the soul is a gift, a great gift. Of course, you can abuse any gift to the point where it does not survive. 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. And then the opposite may be a physical rather than a spiritual suicide. I think people do 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 existence.

ML: So when a soul expires, it doesn't go to heaven, doesn't go to hell, it just ceases to exist.

NM: Yes. It's buried. 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 their 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 the new presence is an angel who comes to visit us on earth—to the contrary. God may say, "I've been studying the Devil and his terrible propensities. Let us see if we can conceive of a soul who will be able to war with the Devil 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 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} casualties in this war between God and the Devil.

NM: While the soul is a being obviously separate from the body, I would suppose that the soul also has its period of existence. One soul might expire after a single earthly existence, another could be reincarnated any 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. It may be a force consisting of the drive to nothingness. Nothingness may be a huge power out in the great cosmic universe and 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 "I'm loyal to Harvard." The built-in pitfall of these conversations is that you are always on the verge of sounding absurd. The reason I presume to talk this way is I am so weary of the philosophical paradoxes and evasions that good Christians tie them selves up in, those mutually exclusive conundrums, where they simply don't have an answer they can believe in down to the core. 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 Jung's prescription. 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 Jung.

ML: Many people who believe in reincarnation believe 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—there's a valve there to shut off any recollections of a previous existence. Think what your life would be if you knew about your three other lives? My memory is already failing for the one life I'm aware of. How could I handle the confusion of several other lives? I do think, however, that there are deep instincts in us 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. Can't stand it.

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. It's still 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 timid and cowardly and hate themselves for being cowardly—it poisons the amount of 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's 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 back and forth. Whereas when I'm feeling strong and 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 elevating 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 motives. 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—all caught up in not much more than her 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 too 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 be a scrubwoman in the existence after that, 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 easily can go to hell. And that's what enables conservatives to function. They can put up with inequity in this life because they feel there's a better existence waiting for those 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 comes 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 Himself what the next proper course might be. It is the play of this complexity that I wish to suggest is the appropriate foundation for theology rather than the manic insistence that God's words are in this Book or that. No, I do not see the laws of existence as etched in stone with no deviation from them. So, no, I don't believe in absolute heaven or absolute

hell. Such concepts are only ways to confuse ourselves profoundly. That's 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 be pleasant again." In this sense, God's compassion can 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.

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 elements 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 thing we've not gotten to is any supposition the atom bomb and the concentration camps and the gulags were mighty efforts by the Devil to foul up reincarnation. To mess up the judgments within reincarnation. I hope I've suggested the delicate dispositions 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 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, I would say. We may live in a universe that is expanding but there's 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 that mean the old family store being removed by the corporate chain store 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 parenthesis, that makes a great deal of sense to me because so many dogs, I find, are more human than humans.

NM: That's beyond me. I would assume at a point after God had given souls to a great many higher animals and people that God decided, "This as wasteful. I, as an artist, can do better. Certain of my creations could have been a lot better but they had to live in the worst circumstances." So, God said, "Let's give them another shot..."

ML: But 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 and better. The Devil's attitude 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: Let's say for the sake of argument the Devil would want to fashion a universe on His or Her terms as opposed to God's 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 soul would be much less. That would be more to the Devil's taste: Individual units that function in relation to other more or less individual units. 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.