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there was nothing to domicile our specters who careened down the two long streets of our town that curved together around the bay like two spinsters on their promenade to church.

Finally, a poem, one of Mailer's favorites. It first appeared in his 1962 collection of poems, *Deaths for the Ladies (and Other Disasters)*. He reprinted it in his huge retrospective collection, *The Time of Our Time* (1998), and again in his second collection of poems, *Modest Gifts* (2003). It is titled "The Harbors of the Moon."

*I know
a town
with
sighs
of
sea
smiled
the
white
witch*

*I know
a town
which
sails
the
sun*

*I know
a town
where
light
is dry
and
boats
come
home
with
silver
in their
hold*

immediately

PREFACE

In any
 I have always been an advocate of an amateur approach to weighty subjects. ^{yet} The perils are obvious, they hardly need to be cited, ~~but~~ there is one advantage—you do not need to be loyal to ~~all~~ the expertise you have

studiously, even vigorously acquired over many years. Your mind is free to *look for innovation, and you do not have to confront* be innovative, without having to weigh ~~the~~ the displeasure of one's learned colleagues, *at being forced to come* ~~or the loss of scholarly investment in hard earned erudition before~~ *face to (with)* the face of a radically new concept. Instead, you are free to move quickly.

amateurs
 Of course you miss often. I offer the interviews that follow as an example of working with ^{such} ~~the~~ intellectual tools of an amateur. I am obviously ignorant of most of the intellections required of a competent scholar. My colleague in these interviews, Michael Lennon, while not a formal theologian, is at least reasonably well-versed in the concepts we discuss. But what will be evident to anyone who has studied such matters is

how truly untutored ~~am I~~ in these subjects. I ~~have~~ ^{CLASSIC} nothing to offer but my own ideas—which is ~~classically~~ the prime error of the amateur.

How then can I defend ~~the~~ ^{THIS} venture? ~~My~~ ^{THE} answer may be legitimate. I have spent the last fifty years trying to contemplate the nature of God. If I speak specifically of fifty years it is because my pride in the initial thirty-odd years of my life was to be an atheist—how much more difficult and honorable I considered that to be than belief in an All-Mighty Divinity. I was a novelist after all (as will be repeated frequently in these interviews), so I was intensely, even professionally, aware of the variety, complexity and near unrecoverable nuances of human motivation and morality. It took a good number of years to recognize that I did believe in God—that is, believed there was a divine presence in existence and on occasion, even contemplated the philosophical need to approach the enigma of ^{such a Being,} ~~that~~ ^{my notions} ~~the~~ ⁱⁿ ~~existence.~~ Whenever I tried, however, to advance ~~such notions~~ by reading ^{the works} ~~works~~ of theology, I was repelled. ~~They~~ ^{undernourished} were studies, for the most part, of the unstated but dictatorial injunction to have faith. They were ^{ideologically dictated} ~~short of a~~ ^{in their} sense of inquiry. They were also full of command.

To repeat, I was a novelist. The best of us spend our lives exploring ^{what} ~~might be human~~ reality and morality. In consequence, the conviction grew that I had a right to believe in the God I could visualize; an imperfect, existential God doing

the best He (or She) could manage against all the odds of an existence that was not entirely controlled by our Creator. Note the possessive: Our Creator. God, as I could visualize such a being, was an artist, not a law-giver, a mighty source of creative energy, an embattled moralist, a celestial general engaged in a celestial war, but never a Divinity who was All-Good and All-Powerful. Since theology offered nothing to my intuitions, I *continued* to grapple with my speculations *until* ~~for decades before~~ Michael Lennon proposed these interviews. Of their shortcomings I am aware and, doubtless *also*, unaware, but *my* ~~these~~ philosophical reconnaissances are, after all, not so unique. A good part of humanity may also be devoted (usually in their own deepest privacy) to exploring what might be their notion, their intuition, of what God and the Devil might be all about. They, too, explore into all those aspects that no church seems ready to approach.

All apologies now delivered, I invite the reader to these dialogues. I hope (and expect) they will be rewarded with a few new ideas.

INTERVIEW I

MICHAEL LENNON: Scientists now believe that the ~~expansion of~~ ^{universe is} ~~the universe is accelerating.~~ ^{expanding.} Does this circumstance fit in with your ideas?

Is the ~~ever-expanding and~~ ^{this} accelerating nature of the cosmos reflected in your concept of a god who can grow and develop?

NORMAN MAILER: 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: ^{all that is} too large for my speculations. But I don't see any ^{do} 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:~~ ^{humans} 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 the attempt to search into such questions.

That does open may require hearing
 ML: ~~God. In~~ in most religious systems, there is a relationship between cosmology and ethics, between the nature of the deity and humanity. ~~The~~ *Says*
 Puritans called it "God's Providence"

NM: Wait a moment.

Let your thoughts run
 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 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 such works of Revelation as the Old and New Testament or the Koran, yet, for me, ^{slit} Revelation is itself the question mark. ^{after all} 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 ^{varying} theologians with separate agendas. After all, why would God bother to speak ^{such a} in ~~that~~ fashion? There's no need. God could have imparted such

thoughts directly to us. Revelation has always struck me as a ~~bear~~

~~incurable power-trip for humans with highly mixed and often unsavory~~

~~motives looking for a product that would enable them to lead the crowd.~~

~~Their modern-day followers quote from Scripture constantly on TV, 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 whose reasoning powers have been ~~beaten~~ ^{squashed} into inanity ^{by any}

~~before every question to which they do not already have an answer.~~

~~I confess, therefore, that I have very little interest in organized~~

religion. 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 drama that went on in

God as an artist. Successes were ~~mixed with failures.~~ ^{also marked by} ~~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 ~~of~~

^{many} 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 were also

^{modes} ~~ways~~ the Artist was trying—this great artist, this divine artist—trying to

express something incredible 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~~ ^{meddled} 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"~~ ^{"Him/Her"} is off-putting, but to speak of "Him/Her" or "It" is worse.

In any event, it makes sense to me that this strife between God and the Devil has been a factor in evolution. Whether God had a free hand or the Devil was meddling in it from the commencement, either way some species 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 ^{is there to} ~~can~~ be brought in. All I say here may indeed be no more than a projection of my own ~~needs~~ ^{egotistical preferences}.

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

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

Whether my motive is pure or impure, I do
~~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~~ *propose the*

existence of what may be an
 that particular (oxymoron—~~objective~~ philosopher!)—so be it. Whether

will be
 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: Let's say that in my lifetime, certain things have gotten ~~much~~ better and other things have ~~gotten much~~ *known* 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, life, if seen in terms of comfort, is 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 be worse.

I can't speak for other languages, but I do know the English language ~~has been debased~~ *hardly been improved* 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, those 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~~ *a man or woman* wished to reach ~~certain~~ *others* ~~people~~ *he or she* in small or large numbers, ~~one~~ could transmit thoughts to 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 ^{ongoing question} fundamental argument is whether the Enlightenment was for good or for ill. To assume automatically ^{that} the Enlightenment was good means you automatically have to say, yes, ^{it} 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~~, ^{statics} interruption, mood disruption, and traffic jams.

ML: What you said about communism and fascism—I can see communism ^{as unhappy} 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 ^{the} ~~that~~

lice inhabiting 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 ^{did} ~~die~~

^{in rage and} ~~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 revolutionary

leaders go to war with each other, and turn cannibalistic. Only one leader is

left, an absolute dictator. Once you accept the notion that there is no god,

then the ultimate direction for the Left, the Right, or the corporate Center is totalitarianism.

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

NM: *I think that I've been asking whether*
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~~

is not
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~~ ^{and} wishes to preempt the god ~~that~~ ^{who} 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~~ ^{seems} 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 ~~who~~ ^{whom} God decided was necessary for humanity. Jesus may well have been real. If I wish to argue against revealed dogma, that doesn't mean all of it ~~has to go~~ ^{seems} ~~invalid to me.~~
~~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

~~theologians~~ ~~the~~ ~~in~~
generous part. But Revelation in company with its organized religions

repels me because of the philosophical inconsistency of their God as the ~~before~~

~~without they prostrate themselves, God the~~
Almighty, God the All-Powerful. I think that's where the philosophical

trouble begins: the idea that God is All-Good and All-Powerful. The ~~history~~

~~of the~~ twentieth century demonstrated the contradiction ~~in those terms~~ 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, ~~and, after the~~

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 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 declaring, "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, in the concentration camps, six million people were exterminated with untold suffering. The suffering was so great it's impossible for us to conceive of it. To anyone who's ever looked at the photographs or read the

accounts ⁷⁻¹³ ~~as~~ horrifying to an extreme degree. But maybe, in the larger scheme of things, God was allowing this to happen to send a message to humanity on how far we have 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 love, compassion, justice, whatever had to be done. 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 ^{dubious} compensatory result. It's very hard to argue that these

Interview II

Metaphysical discussions I, August 29, 2006

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acts of nature engender more than a passing shiver of religiosity in most people.

ML: Are you ready to talk about the Devil?

NM: My notion ~~I have~~ 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 ^{some} 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 often present in our actions. ~~Even as I speak, I could have the best of motives and the worst of motives, and both present at the same time. As~~

A 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 for a period, working within us. 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

(Their differences will be settled later.)
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~~ ^{the same?} have an interest in the outcome. Whereas when we work
with little energy it's because They are not only at odds, but are
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 and have
gone on to achieve great things. Like Constantine—"in this sign, conquer—
in hoc signo, vinces!" and goes on to—

NM: Claim, if you wish, that Constantine was a ^{mighty king} ~~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.

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 this suggested collaboration
between God and the Devil ^{is} ~~was~~ not working well?

NM: Let's not emphasize "collaboration." I've spoken of it as "the accepted rules of the game." Take an average contest in professional football. Two teams fight each other on the field with skill and bestiality, each side laboring to win. Nonetheless, a whole set of laws also prevails. 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 say. We don't often come close to the nature of divine mysteries but sometimes we can obtain ^{some} sense of ^{which are} relations ^{to us} involved. The only clue I have is that when there's ^{is} 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, and, in the exhaustion of our efforts. One part of us wants to do something to which the other part is opposed.

Very often within us, good fights an offensive battle against evil. 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 contest between three protagonists. It isn't that we ^{are} passive onlookers while God and the devil wage a war within us. We are the third force and don't always know which side we are on in any given moment, or whether on another occasion, we are independent of both.

If you'll accept my notion that technology may be the most advanced, extreme and brilliant 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.

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 is 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. I would ^{also (that)} say it is ennobling to face

existence with the recognition that you are not going to have ^{clear} answers, ^{Rather} only

^{you can arrive at} hypotheses that you can test most imperfectly for their validity by the

ongoing experiences of your life.

ML: The Manicheans ^{did see} saw 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 we are

engaged in a wrestling match, a fixed one. If goodness is assured an

ultimate victory over evil, we are in a comedy, and I must say it is an ugly ^{farse}

~~one~~ 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.

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,

and other gods.
 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? But enough! I don't want to stray too far
 from the speculations. ~~I am more interested in~~ *al really* ~~the~~ *presented.*

ML: Let me take up 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 ~~even~~ *any* highly
~~critical~~ adherents. First of all, however, I believe that 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 tidy universe."~~

~~I thought about that for a long time~~

the play you made out of your novel, The Deer Park,
 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~~ ^{is} a point of reference for everyone. Everyone believes in hell, and
 much more readily than ~~they~~ ^{we} 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~~ ^{even} 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
 foundation 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.~~ ^{Rather,} 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. *as a reward we can be* Or, we can be To wit, we're given a better possibility in our next life, *as a reward, or we are* born into a worse one, *if that is what we deserve*

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 a bad one. 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?

The argument I would advance is that heaven and hell make no sense *are a complex* if the majority of humans ~~exist in~~ a mixture of good and evil. 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

But — who of
What — profess that
Judgment — bad? isn't god busy...

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~~ⁱⁿ my next incarnation than ~~this~~^{with} 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. Now, tell us—we ask everyone this—what would be your idea of a proper reincarnation for yourself? 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 up. "Oh, Mr. Mailer," he says, "everyone ^{now} these days wants to be a black athlete. Right ~~there~~ we're dreadfully over-subscribed. 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—here is the good news—you'll be the fastest cockroach on the block!"

All right—we are going to be reincarnated. Whether we know what our reincarnation will be, I doubt. I expect it will be full of surprises, some most unforeseen. *Some, given our vanity, are likely to seem out reasonably warped.*
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 try to ^{engage} ~~talk in~~ these ^{unverifiable} ~~inascertainable~~ concepts. Does this 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 me ~~attempt to~~ ^{your questions,} 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~~ ^{many} 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 ~~also~~ ^{not with high} elements in heaven that do ~~work more~~ ^{even when there are} 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~~ ^{did remark that} 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 falls apart~~. 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~~ ^{necessarily} 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
~~When the soul is completely burned 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 God could go decide for you. I have to~~
 On the other hand, I think there are also humans who commit physical

suicide because they feel ~~they're in danger~~ ^{that} if they don't ~~that~~ their soul will

~~die~~
~~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,~~ ^{a soul doesn't necessarily}

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~~ ^{speak of}

~~about~~ new souls or "young souls"—and, yes, I would expect God creates

^{spiritual lives,}
~~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.

presumably
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. Indeed.~~ Just as God may finally expire, or the Devil, *indeed.*

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 are on the side of being.