

INTERVIEW I

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: 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 the attempt to search into such questions.

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 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, Revelation is itself 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 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 into inanition 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. 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 were also 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 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 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 can be brought in. All I say here may indeed be 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 have 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: 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, 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 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 wished to reach certain people 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 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 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 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: 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 who 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. 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 its organized religions 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: 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 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 its 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 compensatory result. It's very hard to argue that these 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 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 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 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 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 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 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 a sense of relations involved. 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, 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're 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 say it is ennobling to face existence with the recognition that you are not going to have answers, only hypotheses that you can test most imperfectly for their validity by the ongoing experiences of your life.

ML: The Manicheans 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 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, 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.

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 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

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 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. 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 into 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 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 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 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. 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 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.

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 talk in these 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 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 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, 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. 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 are 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 how do you keep from sounding hollow? I nevertheless presume to take this route 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 down to 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 traveling back and forth. Whereas when I'm feeling strong and also feel compassion or charity—on those rare occasions—there's real goodness present. 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 or sexual way.

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. Not to ignore the possible presence of God and the Devil. Contemplate the compromises, relations, treaties, surprises and rebellions within any act. People are also perfectly capable of rebelling against both God and the Devil, shutting them both out of one's existence as far as possible. 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 equaled God and the Devil?

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 even the Devil rejects her because at bottom she's a silly ass. He 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 final intentions are all 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 ugly or even evil act.

Never forget Frederick 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 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 the subtlety of the divine judgment 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.

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 your notion of reincarnation—when did God create such a process?

NM: There is no quick reply. Perhaps at a point after 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.