

sickened. And the Devil looks to destroy God's hope in us. Whether ~~the~~ ^{such as} ~~the~~ ^{this effort looks} Devil strives ^{to} to attain a world that ~~he or she~~ ^{be taken} can take over, or whether the Devil, ^{to} on the contrary ^{aims to} acquires a ruined world, or works toward a world transferable to some other god—these, I repeat, ^{are} ~~remain~~ ^{that obviously remain} questions far beyond our reach right now.

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

NM: Why must you see that as contradictory? As a novelist I would say some characters in Dostoyevsky are both nihilistic and immensely ambitious. The two go together. Frustrated ambition can turn quickly to nihilism. A rotten fruit can grow poisonous.

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

NM: Saints?

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

NM: Hagiography is not my strong point. I would guess, given my general hypotheses, that very few of the saints were wholly bona-fide. By that I mean, vastly more good than bad. I would think ^{some} ~~many~~ of them had

incredible powers. I believe ^{many} ~~some of the~~ saints were perfectly capable of small miracles—that doesn't bother me a bit. I would ~~almost~~ take that for granted. There are such things as psychic powers and they can be raised to a very high degree in certain humans.

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

most powerful people rewrite history to their own specifications. Many a saint ^{may} ~~must~~ have been built up into much more than that saint deserved—the

Church needed him or her at the moment. ^{Nonetheless I also subscribe to the} ~~Still, the idea that some people~~ become ^{do} ~~so good that they~~ represent the best ^{and most magical} ~~elements~~ in God ^{that} is not a

concept I would scorn. I believe there were, and are, saints. I would just approach them with ^{by} ~~a~~ more critical ^{attitude} ~~attitude~~ than the devout Catholic.

ML: I guess I agree with you. In each period, the Church has to create saints of a certain stripe. But one thing that struck me about your scheme is your declaration that most of us don't know most of the time whether our actions are ultimately for good or for ill or, indeed, which side we're helping, which hindering. But saints struck me as those who might have greater premonitions, greater knowledge of what was to come and what

certain human actions could do to advance the cause of good. And, *if I can see a* similar faction on the side of the Devil—those who asked, "What can I do to bring down, hurt, or destroy some strength of the Lord?" In that sense, human demons would also be more aware of their mission.

NM: Yes, saints are imbued with the fundamental belief that what they're doing is absolutely right—when it may not be. There's many a saint who might prove to be a devil on closer examination. And many a devil may have been working perversely to undermine the Devil.

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

So technology with all its drawbacks has changed everything in our lives. I take it you would argue these are just local effects, short-term gains

and that in the long run, despite any of these specific advances, technology is yet going to overwhelm us, even destroy us.

NM: All the modern assumptions about progress ^{are} present in what you just defended. But progressivism has yet to prove itself. Of course, all those things you cited ^{have} made life easier. I don't want to be a bore about this, but nuclear warfare also came along. And we live in a more diffuse state of general anxiety than people did in 1900. People were locked up then in all sorts of terrors, intimations, obsessions and paralyzing anxieties, ~~and huge fears,~~ but it was all sort of local, and particular. Now, you have general anxiety. Of a very large and pervasive sort.

The argument: Did we really improve anything spiritually? For instance, were people better off when they had to squat over a hole in the ground and so could smell their own product? Maybe they were a little closer to themselves than they are now. It's analogous to my argument about contraception, ² that always gets me into ~~tremendous~~ trouble. It's interesting that women did not seem to conceive as often or as easily in the Middle Ages. And, in that time, many of the babies died in their first year. But the ones who survived may have been hardier than the mass of us now. If we proceed further, we have to get into all the complex arguments over whether modern medicine is a blessing or a vitiator of human potentiality.

Because today, it is not only the strongest who survive. Nobody will go near this argument because it's so Hitlerian. It may be that Hitler was not only the Devil's greatest achievement, but, ^{also destroyed} ~~in fact, one of the things he did~~ ~~was to destroy~~ any possibility of thinking along the lines he laid out. People shrink the moment you say courage is important. They think, "Believe in that and you'll end up a Nazi." Hitler did more than anyone to spoil the possibility of exploring our time—the world was left with no more than conservatism and progressivism. The more interesting human philosophies, like existentialism, were cut off.

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

opportunities ~~were used~~ a hundred years ago. But lives may also be more drenched in anxiety of a sort we can't locate, an anxiety that lives in us in such a way that we don't even have nightmares any longer—what we have are various stretches of poor sleep and uneasiness. I think we're weaker, ~~we're more confused, and~~ ^{and} I think we wander all over the place ~~we're also~~ ^{we're} louder and more loudish.

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

ML: Do you agree that many, if not most humans, have an inherent, or an imprinted, or intuitive belief in God as all-powerful. They can't think of God in any other way. Lots of people will say, "My intuitions are as good as Norman Mailer's, and I can't imagine a God who isn't all-powerful."

NM: Their intuitions may be more powerful than mine. Let me, however, go through my beliefs—~~sketchily~~ ^{sketchily} when I was a child, I believed in an all-powerful God. Of course. Most children do. Then there was a period when I was a fierce atheist. For many years! By now, philosophically speaking, atheism is more incomprehensible to me than the notion that there's a Creator. And to this day, if I were arguing with an atheist, I would suggest:

"The burden of proof is on you. You have much more to explain about how we're here if ^{you insist that} there's nothing behind our existence."

But I would certainly never argue that fundamentalists don't have intense feelings. They're immensely intense. Too intense. ~~But~~ I think this intensity reflects how terrifying the whole thing is to them. The horror for all too many would come down to this: If it all ends badly, we humans are also responsible. You see, the message ~~and the beauty~~ of the all-powerful God is, finally: "You're not responsible. Just keep your nose clean, observe ritual, and you'll be taken care of after you die." I think fundamentalism is a reflection of the ^{deepest fears} ~~true fear~~ people have about dying. They feel ^{that} if they follow all the rules, they won't go to something worse. They take to fundamentalism because it restricts the extent of their responsibility.

I remember in my play, The Deer Park, at the end, its hero, who is dying, says, "Where I go, I do not know. It may be for worse." And that is the secret terror ^{that} ~~which~~ supports fundamentalism. Police systems are built on it. The phrase, ^{police man's} "Keep your nose clean," ^{is one more} ~~that is an~~ aspect of fundamentalism. And the true believers' dependence on Revelation is also ^{but} immense ~~for~~ just that reason. I would go so far as to argue that fundamentalism is one of the Devil's strongest tools: the Devil adores fundamentalism because it keeps people from thinking. So long as people

and incapable of pursuing a thought to where it leads,
~~don't think, then~~ they can't begin to carry out God's notions. The irony is

that by subscribing (they think) to God's will, they become insensitized to the sensitivities of divine will. They ^{wall}~~freeze~~ themselves out. They cannot work with God's will even if they long to.

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

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

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

ML: I think you're really a Gnostic.

NM: That has no meaning for me either. But let's get into it, at least in passing. I've been called a Manichean, a Gnostic. I am certainly not a Manichean because I don't believe there's necessarily a happy ending built into the end-game.

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

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

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

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

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

NM: I can believe that. Absolutely. *Once again, I will say*
~~Remember, I'm a novelist. We tend to~~
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think that way. For us, it's a natural way of thought. Nothing is one
hundred percent. The point of writing novels is to show what the costs are
in human activities. If I may quote myself again, at the end of The Deer
Park, Eitel is told by a former wife, "Charlie, you have real dignity now,"

and he thinks it's a nice compliment. "Because what was dignity, real dignity, but a knowledge of the cost, the frightful cost, of every human desire?" I've always liked that line because for me, it's the essence of the novel, the frightful cost of human desire.

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

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

NM: I know her work slightly. Dwight Macdonald used to write about her with adoration, *in the years right after World War II,*

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

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

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

ML: Before ^{that} God existed alone in His endless powers. Then suddenly He created something—He gave something away. Weil believed that humans

had a role to play because of this power-sharing, as did the Devil who profited immensely by God's creative act. She's saying that God lost by doing this.

NM: God lost and God gained. God ^{acquired} ~~gained~~ knowledge by creating us that God could not have had without creating us. So it's not just that God lost. That gets us into reverential notions of God again. Ideally, what I'd like to keep is huge respect for the fact that we were created by something or someone marvelous, who is not wholly unlike ourselves. Therefore, we can identify with that God, identify with God's drama as well as our own and thereby feel larger. Not, "Oh, God, oh, God, don't punish me, please!" Or, "God, dear God, please help me!" The reason I've never found Islam the least bit attractive, is, you know, the prayer ritual. Kneel down, present your buttocks to the sky, and recognize that you are totally weak before the wrath of God. Well, we're totally weak before anything and everything that is vastly larger than ourselves. If this is what religion consists of, our recognition of being totally weak, and God taking care of us, provided we never, ever cross any one of a thousand carefully laid-out lines—then I think existence is knotted up. And, of course the unspoken root of the nightmare in so much of Islam, is precisely their present deep-seated fear. "What if we're wrong?" they must be thinking. "We've been doing it this

way for 1500 years—and now, where are we?" It's like someone who's been married for 50 years saying, "Have I been with the wrong woman all this while?" Conceive of the hate people could have for a church or a marriage if they left it after that many years.

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

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

ML: Gary Gilmore.

NM: His soul was not too weary. On the contrary, he didn't want his soul to die. He was the exact opposite. He wanted his body to die so his soul wouldn't be extinguished. He felt if he didn't seek the death penalty but stayed in jail for his remaining 20 or 30 years, that his soul would expire from the sheer misery of living in jail, the emptiness of it, the ongoing, endless emptiness of living in prison if you'd ^{already} used up ^{as he had,} all its few vital possibilities, ^{right} as he had. But there are other people who say, "Let my soul expire, it doesn't deserve to go on." Which, by the way, is a thought that

can also come to the rottenest human alive, a part that says, "You really are a swine; you don't deserve to live any longer. You're much worse than you think you are." We all have comparable sentiments (in lesser degree) when we arrive at a reckoning with ourselves. But for some, it's terminal. They are drenched in a mortal weariness of ~~themselves~~^{own}, of their soul. So, certain souls expire; they are ready to.

Generally speaking, however, I don't think most souls ^{are willing to} die that easily.

On the other hand, the soul may not have the ^{vigor} capacity to pass through

endless reincarnations. If a cat has nine lives—what does a human soul

^{possess?}

~~have? Three or four lives? It's boundlessly speculative. One human has~~

~~two lives, one has 22? All that is beyond us.~~ Cosmically so. But then, you

are asking: How does God choose? How do God and His aides choose?

ML: Can God execute a soul?

NM: Why not? How not? God can create us, God can end us. Which is

part of the huge fear people have of God. God can terminate us.

Absolutely.

But God hates to give up on an interesting artistic possibility in a human. So let's say He might take very bad people and have them reincarnated. Why? Is it to fill out the picture, to have a certain darkness, shadows for a certain corner? That is one of the clerical responses to

explain why God tolerates evil. Of course I would argue with that. I would

say God ^{can still} sees wonderful potentialities in ~~some~~ awful people. One of the

reasons they were so awful was because they had ^{large} wonderful potentialities

that became frustrated early (or late) ^{so} and turned into their opposite. So,

Concerning this particular soul, ^{therefore} God wants to try again. ^{On the contrary} ~~Oppose~~ such a

^{take} ~~choice to~~ the case of someone who is perfectly bland and pleasant, good and

decent, yet God is not interested. That soul has done about what it's going

to do and ^{the Lord's} it is no longer interesting to ~~divinity's~~ higher purpose. God might

then decide, ^{We can only} let's reincarnate him or her in someone or something much

lower ^{we have to} and see if it responds to the stimulation of a ^{more demanding} tougher life. (Whether

^{is it even still} ~~it's a slum, a pig pen, or a beehive~~.) Or God may ~~decide~~ ^{not worth} repeating.

³⁰ Just as an artist can be ruthless, so can God be ~~ruthless~~ to

humans with mediocre lives. ³⁰ In reincarnation is, I think, ~~situated~~ the nexus

of judgment.

For example, if someone has an adventurous soul, but physically they were weakened by early childhood illnesses, they might be endowed with more strength next time out. God could send them to stronger parents. But that could also produce larger demands. To justify God's new intention, you might have to become a skilled heavyweight. Think of what you'd have to endure to get there. Does this soul, interesting at present, have such

capacity or not? God is experimenting. God is looking to find out. God, like a parent, learns from what the children accomplish and from where they fail. Why not assume that ~~we are all~~ ^(with all else we are also) part of an enormous spiritual laboratory.

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

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

ML: No, I understand, but . . .

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

Economically speaking, it is ~~not~~ ^{may not be} economic to look to direct every one of us. God ~~does not have those kinds of~~ ^{for a divinite} resources. ^{may just not be master of such}

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

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

We can't think of God in terms of age, but we can certainly see ourselves in that manner. There are periods where we may get more from God, when we're young, for example. When we're old, we may be obliged to give more back. Not necessarily to God, but to the way we influence other people, the way we amplify His or Her vision or worsen it, indeed there are some things God can only learn from contemplating our direct experience. So God may be with us a good deal of the time. With certain people, I think God and the Devil are there ^{most often,} ~~much of the time.~~ Certain kinds of highly dynamic people, certain kinds—just to take a flier on ^{this} ~~it~~—certain kinds of entertainers ^{these} may be full of God and the Devil every moment they are on stage because there's such charisma in them, and such lightning changeability. It's so difficult to know if you're dealing then with someone who's good ~~or~~ evil or just exceptional.

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

ML: You still haven't told me how reincarnation interacts with evolution. What is their relation?

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

It may be that after the double blow of the Holocaust and the atom bomb, reincarnation was mucked up badly. There was just too much to do.

One example would be the ugliness of cities that were flattened by the war.

The way they were rebuilt ^{may have been} ~~was necessary and~~ ^{but it certainly was} dreadful. By-the-numbers architecture. It may be that people are finally much less interesting today than they were 100 and 200 years ago when they didn't have flush toilets.

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