

## INTERVIEW II

MICHAEL LENNON: I want to ask a question about purgatory. Do you feel some sympathy for that idea?

NORMAN MAILER: Some—and some uneasiness. I will say that I expect there may be some sizable difficulties present after death, a universal hell of waiting we may all have to go through before we are born again—those of us who will be born again. I will add that there's an automatic assumption in most people who are religious that God is not only all-powerful but instantaneous in His action. There's an Irish saying: "When God made time, He made a lot of it." So God could be instantaneous—but why would He want to be? Nevertheless, this expectation of quick reception and quick designation for one's afterlife is at odds with our own experience—which is everything takes longer than we think it will. That is the accrued wisdom of most men and women after many decades of life. In the economy of human experience, there are always time-consuming episodes you didn't anticipate. To assume that once you pass into another realm of existence things will be

perfect and more instantaneous is no small assumption. It's as ungrounded as to expect that there are no other possible destinations in the hereafter than purgatory, limbo, or hell. Another, after all, might be God's need to judge whether a particular soul should be reborn, or might as well expire. So purgatory might sit there as a species of possibility, an unhappy holding tank. God may look at three-quarters of us and say, "I don't want to make up my mind just yet," and drop us into purgatory. Temporarily, that is.

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

One of the beliefs I hold is that the hereafter is less different than we assume. We may have the same frustrations and difficulties in the after-life, overcrowding, for example, even, conceivably, waste. After the Holocaust, we were forced to recognize there was something absolutely murderous in our species—obviously, it was not just reserved for the Germans, there was something vastly destructive in our nature. We received this knowledge over and over again, in Russia, in China, in Africa, in some of our own actions, indeed, in Vietnam. The point I want to make is that the Holocaust may have exacted a great price from God, even greater than from us. At the core of karma is the notion that it is composed of wise judgment. What if that is not always true? In the godly assessment of each

life, in the reading of the soul, so to speak, that takes place after one dies, can it be that God sometimes says, "I'm too weary to think about this now?" After all, if God is an artist, is it always necessary to make instantaneous judgments? Under certain conditions of overcrowding, literal overcrowding in eternity of the sort caused by the Holocaust or Hiroshima, purgatory becomes a vast way-station.

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

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

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

NM: Absolutely.



ML: Or a general?

NM: Yes.

ML: A public administrator? Or a diplomat?

NM: Yes, yes.

ML: Those are all human occupations.

NM: How can God not be all those things? God is certainly an engineer.

An engineer would see it all in terms of future construction. How do you organize the Hereafter? How do you arrive at the best levels of spiritual sanitation? Yes! Heavenly comfort stations for psychic waste are not necessarily to be taken for granted. When I speak of God as an artist, I don't pretend to mean that God might be a novelist, as if that is all God is up to. Finally, the word "artist" has hegemony over other professions because whatever else, it is creative. God is a creator. A Creator. I don't like the word "mega," it's been used too often, but God is, all right, at the least, a mega-artist. All the faculties of engineering, war, social building, art, music, sport, painting, science, philosophy, medicine, herbology, are His or Hers, and at a level more highly developed than we can begin to conceive. But God is still an artist. A great engineer is an artist. So is a great general like Clausewitz or Robert E. Lee. So are the best in all human categories. We point to that in our own speech. We do speak of Clausewitz as an artist

at war. That is the sense in which I want to use the word. I don't want to diminish this projection of what God might be. Let's think of the size of the Creation. Even if God is not all-powerful, we have only to contemplate the vast extent of flora and fauna, the painterly touches—to offer one example—revealed in the scales of a butterfly's wing.

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

NM: Well, we are parts of God's vision certainly. I believe that, yes, lively but seriously tainted parts of God's vision. That, I would add quickly, is because the Devil is also present. I don't presume to say exactly what part he plays in cosmic affairs, or local earthly matters—but in any event, we are not pure representations of God. We are tainted, warped, even treacherous to the divine projects offered us. We are torn between God and the Devil and our own vanity can be counter to both of them. Across the centuries, human vanity has become a factor, a prodigious factor. The human ego,

which has always been fearful of God's power, and fearful of the Devil's power—that ego can even separate itself into a simulacrum of omnipotent confidence. There's nothing more irritating to most of us than the feeling that we are not completely under our own power, that other forces are pushing us, external forces which are stronger than we are. "Oh, God, here comes that awful compulsion starting up again." Whatever it is. Some impulse we consider unworthy of ourselves or too risky for our adventurous capacities, or opposed too magnetically to our spiritual inclinations.

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

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

ML: Still, if we are roughly more good than evil, wouldn't that signal the ultimate victory of good?

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



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

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

In India, the answer that came back to him before he died was, we may be more bad than good. The immense riots as he came to power—that had to be a spiritual disaster for him. So I certainly don't sneer at Gandhi nor would I wish to systematize him by declaring, "Oh, he brought on so much that was bad because he advocated passivity." After all, this kind of passivity demanded huge courage. And discipline. Heroic passivity. One of the things we might do well to begin to try to understand as humans will

be our future need to reconstruct the essential energy contained in oxymorons. Certain oxymorons are absurdities, so many indeed that we feel free to dismiss all of them by saying, "It's an oxymoron." But there are a few which are vital and valuable. One of them is "heroic passivity." There, one's experience must serve as the arbiter. There can be heroic passivity, or quasi- heroic passivity. The latter can be a disaster. And we've all seen that. Stubborn, frantic passivity—certain pacifists we'd like to throw down the stairs.

ML: What came first in your scheme of things? Belief in courage as the cardinal virtue? Or, does your vision of the divided universe require courage to be the cardinal virtue?

NM: I would rather go back to God's experience as He or She was creating the flora and fauna of existence, all those incredible biological experiments that went on over millions of years. Plus, most crucially, the percipience gathered from the failures. Think of the excitement of God when the dinosaur came into being, the immense excitement that He had something pretty big and pretty formidable. Then it proved too big—badly designed. The record of bad design in evolution could stuff the shelves of many a library. Yet what became obvious was that animals who had courage, or those plants which had a kind of odd integrity, if you will, in terms of their



environment, seemed to do better for the most part than those who didn't. Of course, there are animals—we can see this directly—there are animals who had too much courage. This notion of balance underwriting courage is what God began to search for.

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

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

ML: Evil is his good as in Paradise Lost?

NM: He might see it that way. It's such a blatant speculation, let's have a little fun with it. My guess is that the Devil sees God as incompetent. After all, the Devil is a fallen angel, that I assume. Why? Because certain geniuses have come along who had intimations of what our origins might be. Milton was certainly one. I think Milton is as good a rule of thumb for approaching this matter of God and the Devil as anything I've come across. Homage to Milton. So, I propose that the Devil's belief is that

He or She could end up with a better world, a better form of existence, a more sophisticated, more intelligent, well-run notion of things. Now, what are the Devil's means? Well, our fear is that he could destroy the whole world in order to start over again. There, I'm out on the end of my mental belay—does the Devil have the same creative powers that God does to create animals, plants, humans, a system? Or is the Devil a parasite, essentially, upon God? That's a question I wouldn't presume to answer.

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

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

NM: Well, even at the highest level, there is such a matter as mindless destruction. When you can't win, you destroy the game. The spoiled kid who picks up the marbles comes in all forms. If the Devil feels that He or She cannot gain those powers that are needed to form a new universe, the rage generated may be so intense that the next move is to destroy the whole thing. Talk about "rank speculation," let's suppose the Devil is treacherous and has sold his birthright to some other god in the cosmos, and will do His or Her best to turn over a paralyzed, inane, stupid, mainly-destroyed world

to someone who can build it up. The Devil could be a lieutenant, rather than a major-domo. In that case, the game starts all over again.

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

The questions are wide open. There is no way to propose answers to them yet, but perhaps they'll become somewhat more focused as the new century goes on. As of now, for example, I would assume technology is indeed the Devil's force. Why? I feel it viscerally. That's the best I can offer. I think of all the things I've detested for all these years, starting with plastic. It seems to me plastic is a perfect weapon in the Devil's armory. For it desensitizes human beings. Living in and with plastic, we are subtly sickened. And the Devil looks to destroy God's hope in us. Whether the Devil strives to attain a world that he or she can take over, or whether the Devil, on the contrary, acquires a ruined world, or works toward a world



transferable to some other god—these, I repeat, remain questions far beyond our reach right now.

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

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

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

NM: Saints?

ML: Do you see them as intermediaries, or do they play a larger role, a prophetic role? Do they actually see themselves as instruments of God, 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 many of them had incredible powers. I believe some of the saints were perfectly capable of small miracles—that doesn't bother me a bit. I would almost take that for

granted. There are such things as psychic powers and they can be raised to a very high degree in certain humans.

But the idea that saints are as good as the hagiographers have made them does give me great pause because, finally, the Catholic Church may be the most complex and powerful and amazing and intricate power system in history. But from what we have learned about history, we also know that most powerful people rewrite history to their own specifications. Many a saint must have been built up into much more than that saint deserved—the Church needed him or her at the moment. Still, the idea that some people become so good that they represent the best elements in God is not a concept I would scorn. I believe there were, and are, saints. I would just approach them with a more critical attitude than the devout Catholic.

ML: I guess I agree with you. In each period, the Church has to 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, 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 present in what you just defended. But progressivism has yet to prove itself. Of course, all those things you cited made life easier. I don't want to be a bore about this, but nuclear warfare also came along. And we live in a more diffuse state of general anxiety than people did in 1900. People were locked up then in all sorts of terrors, intimations, and huge fears, but it was all sort of local, 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 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, 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 I think we wander all over the place—we're also louder and more loutish.

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

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—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 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 true fear people have about dying. They feel if they follow all the rules, they won't go to something worse. They take to fundamentalism because it 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 which supports fundamentalism. Police systems are built on it. The phrase, "Keep your nose clean," that is an aspect of fundamentalism. And the true believers' dependence on Revelation is also immense for just that reason. I would go so far as to argue that fundamentalism is one of the Devil's strongest tools: the Devil adores fundamentalism because it keeps people from thinking. So long as people don't think, then they can't begin to carry out God's notions. The irony is that by subscribing (they think) to God's will, they become insensitized to

the sensitivities of divine will. They 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. Remember, I'm a novelist. We tend to think that way. For us, it's a natural way of thought. Nothing is one hundred percent. The point of writing novels is to show what the costs are in human activities. If I may quote myself again, at the end of The Deer Park, Eitel is told by a former wife, "Charlie, you have real dignity now," and he thinks it's a nice compliment. "Because what was dignity, real dignity, but a knowledge of the cost, the frightful cost, of every human



desire?" I've always liked that line because for me, it's the essence of the novel, the frightful cost of human desire.

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

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

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

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

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

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

ML: Before 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 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 used up all its few vital possibilities, as he had. But there are other people who say, "Let my soul expire, it doesn't deserve to go on." Which, by the way, is a thought that can also come to the rottenest human alive, a part that says, "You really are



a swine; you don't deserve to live any longer. You're much worse than you think you are." We all have comparable sentiments (in lesser degree) when we arrive at a reckoning with ourselves. But for some, it's terminal. They are drenched in a mortal weariness of themselves, of their soul. So, certain souls expire; they are ready to.

Generally speaking, however, I don't think most souls die that easily.

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

ML: Can God execute a soul?

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

Absolutely.

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

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

For example, if someone has an adventurous soul, but physically they were weakened by early childhood illnesses, they might be endowed with more strength next time out. God could send them to stronger parents. But that could also produce larger demands. To justify God's new intention, you might have to become a skilled heavyweight. Think of what you'd have to endure to get there. Does this soul, interesting at present, have such capacity or not? God is experimenting. God is looking to find out. God,

like a parent, learns from what the children accomplish and from where they fail. Why not assume that we are all part of an enormous spiritual laboratory.

ML: I'm still having trouble understanding how evolution and reincarnation—which are both part of your scheme, mesh. 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 economic to look to direct every one of us. God does not have those kinds of resources.

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

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



We can't think of God in terms of age, but we can certainly see ourselves in that manner. There are periods where we may get more from God, when we're young, for example. When we're old, we may be obliged to give more back. Not necessarily to God, but to the way we influence other people, the way we amplify His or Her vision or worsen it, 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 much of the time. Certain kinds of highly dynamic people, certain kinds—just to take a flier on it—certain kinds of entertainers—may be full of God and the Devil every moment they are on stage because there's such charisma in them, and such lightning changeability. It's so difficult to know if you're dealing then with someone who's good or evil or just 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 was necessary and dreadful. By-the-numbers architecture. It may be that people are finally much less interesting today than they were 100 and 200 years ago when they didn't have flush toilets.

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