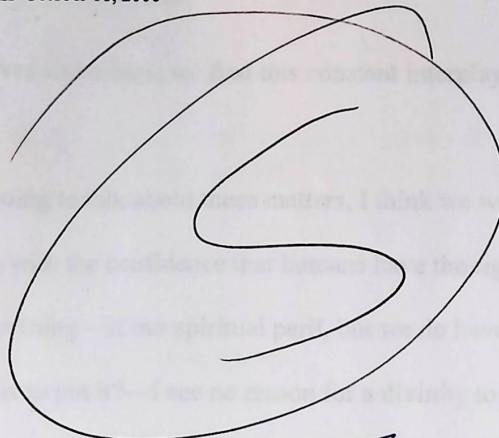




INTERVIEW III IV

Authority of the Senses

MIKE LENNON: You've spoken of the authority of the senses many times, quoting St. Thomas Aquinas, quoting Hemingway. What exactly is this authority based on? What empowers it? If God is your answer, then to complicate the question, can't we say that evil in all cultures has almost always been associated with the flesh and the senses?

NORMAN MAILER: My basic premise proposes that there's a different mixture of God and the Devil in every one of us. Some of that variety creates the shape of our character. You'll hear one person say about another, "He's a good guy, he's stand-up, but he sure can be a son of a

bitch." In ourselves and others, we find this constant interplay of good and bad.

If we are going to talk about these matters, I think we would do well to approach them with the confidence that humans have the right to explore anything and everything—at our spiritual peril, but we do have the right. It seems to me—how to put it?—I see no reason for a divinity to put everything into a Book and expect that to be our only guide. He gave us free will. Or She gave us free will. Once again, let's leave gender out of it. If we were given free will, then the Book is the first obstacle to it.

ML: What's the role of the senses?

NM: I would say the senses were given to us by God. If I'm ready to go in for speculations such as these, I would even go so far as to say that mind may have been the contribution of the Devil. Or, at least, more so than God. How can I justify such a remark? Animals seem to function extraordinarily well on their instinct and their senses. To a large degree they have community—ants, bees, all the way up to primates. There is an extraordinary amount of communication we can witness in animals and they are undeniably superior to us in one manner. They don't go around slaughtering each other in huge numbers. If, by every other mode of moral judgment, we see ourselves as superior, still we know that animals left to

themselves are not going to destroy the universe. But we could. So, it may

be a true question: Did the Devil invent mind? Or is this still God's

domain? Or, more likely, does ~~it belong to both as the~~ ^{the search for dominance there become} field of battle.

There is no question in my mind that the Devil did enter mind. And

not being the first Creator, did His best to invade the senses as well. To

corrupt the senses. ~~Fundamentalists see sex as a corruption of the senses,~~

~~invented by the Devil.~~ But the question is more complex than any of us can

resolve. The key may be ~~never~~ ^{neither} to assume that the senses are ~~wholly~~ God-
~~given or~~ ^{nor} Devil-ridden.

ML: But the line you quoted, which has puzzled me for decades, is "Trust the authority of the senses."

NM: St. Thomas Aquinas said that, and Hemingway, in his way: "If it feels

good, it is good." I've never read Aquinas in depth but I was taken with the

notion that the most formal of the Catholic philosophers had ~~pondered~~ ^{presented} this

rule of thumb. What I think it means—leave Aquinas out of it—is that we

must trust the authority of the senses because that is the closest contact we

have to the Creator. However, it is a most treacherous undertaking. As

anyone who's ever enjoyed a drink knows, the authority of the senses on a

boozy spree is exceptional. You feel so much, see so much—and that's even

more true on marijuana. You trust the authority of the senses until, perhaps,

they become so intense that God and the Devil seem to be there working with you full time. We've all had the experience of an extraordinary trip on drink, and/or pot, but what I know is that the end result ends as often in disaster as happiness. I won't pretend that every time you get drunk beyond measure, nothing good will happen. It occurred to me at a certain point in my life that I had never, up to that moment, gone to bed with a woman for the first time without being drunk. Since some of the most important experiences of my life occurred that way, I can hardly wish to argue that drink serves the Devil alone.

Given the rigors of modern society, it's possible we'd never get anywhere without liquor, or pot.

ML: You have me thinking of Blake's line. I wonder how you'd respond to: "the road of excess leads to the palace of wisdom."

NM: It's implicit in what I just said, but I think I'd be happier if the line had gone: "the road of excess ^{can} ~~might~~ lead at times, ~~are~~ times, to wisdom." I'm not in favor of excess because I've ruined too much of myself in just that way. Blake did have an apocalyptic mind ^{which} ~~that~~ he served manfully. Full-time. It's one of the reasons his remarks inspire ~~the highest~~ flights of fancy. But on the other hand, he is seen by our modern spirit as, ^{signally} ~~crudely speaking,~~ impractical.

ML: The other thing you said that gave me pause was how the Devil invades mind. On more than one occasion you have suggested that scientific thinking undercuts metaphoric, intuitive thinking, and I wonder if that is what you see as the invasion of mind by the Devil. Scientific method, logic, linear thinking, is opposed to the leaps of intuition in metaphor.

NM: Often. It seems to me our minds work on two disparate systems. One is based on the senses. Metaphor, for example, is almost impossible without being somewhat attuned to nature, to its often subtle shifts of mood. That depends so much on one's senses. But then there is another faculty of mind that can be as cold as the polar cap. Indeed, it is a readiness to repel the senses, distrust them, even calumniate them as powers of distortion. This readiness to free oneself from the senses may be exercised most by the Devil.

Almost everything I dislike in the modern world is super-rational: the corporation, the notion we can improve upon nature, to tinker with it egregiously, dramatically, extravagantly. Nuclear bombs ^{as} are one example, ~~All this~~ came out of reason. It's not that scientists filled with an acute sense of their own senses brought their creative intimations to the atom bomb. On the contrary. It was an abstraction away from the senses, a pure flight of

mind that came to the conclusion that it was possible to make the bomb, and then, that it had to be done. Not only to defeat Japan, but for the furtherance of science itself.

ML: This may be related. I'd like to talk about Thomas's Gospel where it's made clear that human beings have the obligation to bring forth what is within.

NM: You had better say what this particular gospel is.

ML: Thomas's Gospel is, of course, not in the Bible, but is a suppressed gospel, discussed most recently by Elaine Pagels. In her book, Thomas's Gospel states that as human beings, we all have the obligation to "bring forth what is within." And if we do, it will save us. If you keep in what is in, repress it, whatever it is—it will destroy you.

NM: I used to believe that entirely. I now think it ^{to be} generally true, but risky. Because what does it mean to bring forth what is within? I work on the notion that there's godliness within us and diabolism as well. So to bring forth what is within you, it is necessary, very often, to send out the worst elements of yourself. Because if they stay within, they can poison you. That is much more complex than saying, "Get it out! Act it out. Be free, man! Liberate yourself." Because very often what comes out is so bad that it injures others, sometimes dreadfully. You could say that every crime

of violence is a way of getting the ugliness in oneself out, acting it out, doing it. You could even advance the argument that there are people who will contain what is ugly within them—and that's their honor. It's a complex matter—often there are people who will sacrifice themselves in order not to injure others. For example, if you act out something dreadful in yourself, if, for example, the need to get falling-in-the-gutter-drunk thereby intensifies the miseries of everyone in your family, it is doing nothing good for others. Or excessive gambling. Or beating children. Or entering sexual relations with them. To the degree that certain ugly emotions are acted out, others are injured terribly by your freedom to do so. I could argue that it is often a Devil's urge you are expressing.

You have to ask yourself at a given moment, "Who is speaking within me?"

ML: How do you answer that?

NM: Well, I can give you one story: It's fascinated me for years. At a certain time in my life I was feeling rocky. My third wife had decided she didn't want to go on with our marriage ^{at a time when hoping} and I had been thinking, ~~Finally,~~ ^{this may be the time I can start to build a life.} She was a very interesting woman but easily as difficult as myself. So when she broke it up, I just didn't know where I was. And I remember one night wandering around

through some
Brooklyn ~~in the~~ semi-slums—not the hard slums but ~~some of the toughest~~
neighborhoods a mile or two out from my house in Brooklyn—not even
knowing what I was looking for, but going out, drinking in a bar, sizing up
the bar, going to another bar—looking—this is ironic but in those days, you
actually would go to a bar and look for a woman. I think you still can, but
it's been so long now since I did it that I can't *no longer* speak with authority.

Anyway, I found no woman. I went into an all-night diner—because I
realized I was hungry, not only drunk but hungry—and ordered a donut and
coffee, finished it. Then a voice spoke to me. I think it's one of the very
few times I felt God was speaking to me. Now, of course, one can be dead
wrong. I go back to Kierkegaard—just when you think you're being saintly,
you're being evil; when you think you're being evil, you might be fulfilling
or abetting God's will at that point. In any event, this voice spoke to me,
and said, "Leave without paying."

It was a minor sum—twenty-five cents for coffee and a donut in those
days. I was aghast. Because I'd been brought up properly. One thing you
didn't do was steal. And never from strangers! How awful! I said, "I can't
do it." And the voice—it was *most* ~~very much~~ amused—said, "Go ahead and do
it." Quietly, firmly, *laughing* ~~amused~~ at me. So I got up, slipped out of the
restaurant, and didn't pay the quarter. And I thought about this endlessly. If

it was God—as I said, this was the closest I ever came to trusting the authority of my senses—my senses told me this was a divine voice, not a diabolical one. It seemed to me that I was so locked into petty injunctions on how to behave that on the one hand, I wanted to be a wild man and I couldn't even steal a cup of coffee. To this day, I think it was God's amusement to say, "You little prig. Just walk out of there. Don't pay for the coffee. They'll survive, and this'll be good for you."

Now, I've thought about this often because it's a perfect example of how difficult it is for us to know at a given moment whether we're near to God or to Satan. Which is why fundamentalists ^{can you} drive me up the wall—^{their sense of} ~~constantly, dependably, predictably. To me, the certainty they have~~ is the ~~single~~ most misleading element in their lives. It demands, intellectually speaking, spiritually speaking, that one must remain ^{fixed} at a level of mediocrity. ~~must~~ ^{And} never reaching beyond the given. It's a great irony. Because many of them who are good Christians, or Orthodox Jews, are compassionate. I don't know much about Islam but I'm sure the same is true there—you can have fine people, wonderful people, fundamentalists full of compassion but they attach that tenderness—which as far as I'm concerned is godly, is, if you will, Christly—I can say in passing if God was ever going to mingle in our affairs, Christ is more than a metaphor. Compassion is probably the finest

emotion we humans can have. When tears come to our eyes for the sorrow of someone else, that may be as close as we get to reaching the best element in ourselves. But, there again, it's difficult to know how pure any moment of compassion is. And when it is manufactured by constant adjurations *being applied to* forced into the daily habits of fundamentalists, *compassion* it becomes the opposite of itself, *becomes forced* *can grow into* turns compassion inside-out, and is an instrument for power.

Speaking crudely, if half the fundamentalists in the world are truly compassionate, the other half use it for an egregious power-trip. ~~And the Devil is imminently present.~~

ML: You know, this always stops me. I try to think how you would translate your metaphysics, your cosmology, into an ethical system. It's not just the fundamentalists. Most religious systems say: OK, we have the theology, now let us show you how that translates into ethics. But what you tell me over and over again is, "We can't be sure." It would be very difficult to construct an ethical system by which to live one's life based on your scheme of beliefs. Have you thought of that?"

NM: *accept* I think ~~your point is excellent~~ I do search for an ethic I can believe in. And that is where I go back to trusting the authority of my senses. They can also be—what's the word I'm looking for?—traded. To the degree that the Devil may affect our senses, ~~they~~ *they can* become a perfect place for him to

get to us. That would be the Devil's aim exactly—to enter our senses, make
 us feel ^{we are} ~~we're~~ having a godly emotion when in fact, we're ^{are being} ~~having~~ an emotion
^{inspired} controlled by the Devil—warped to a degree, distorted from the point.

Nonetheless, my religious idea is that I don't have ^{would offer any bones} ~~any bones to offer.~~
^{as gifts to construct an ethic}

The worst ^{to} ~~that can~~ be said about fundamentalism is that it reduces people to
 the reflexes of a good dog. If a good dog is upset, give it a bone.

ML: It's comfortable.

NM: It's comfortable, but ^{it is} ~~it's immensely~~ limiting. I keep going back to
 Kierkegaard, who, for my money, was probably the ^{most profound} ~~greatest~~ Christian. He
 not only searched into the complexity of our relations to divinity but to
 diabolism as well. He knew that we must take nothing for granted in the
 cosmos. We cannot sup forever on the pabulum is that is termed so
 conveniently God's mystery. "Don't ask, just obey!"

We can, of course, for the sake of this argument pay another visit to
~~the subject of~~ fundamentalism. After all, a good many fundamentalists do
 function with vigor. Their lives have been simplified. They don't worry
 over questions that are debilitating. They function very well—^{their} ~~at~~ a medium
 level. No great writer ever came out of fundamentalism. Nor any great
 scientist. To my knowledge, very few talented actors came out of

fundamentalism—or stayed with it for long. Never a genius of any kind, not since Augustine and Aquinas.

ML: So perhaps fundamentalism is for the less daring, the less bold, the less gifted? But aren't you living on an ethical razor's edge, listening to inner voices to find the right word? That's not something everyone can emulate.

NM: Yes, people want to live in such a way that they will feel secure. But there may be no such security available. Right now, parenthetically, we are living in a time where we have to wonder if we will ever see the end of the 21st century. Or, will we destroy ourselves? In that sense, directly, there is no spiritual security.

So, the fundamentalists, beneath everything else, feel the same fears that existential thinkers suffer—that the whole thing can come to an end. Fundamentalists look to alleviate that fear by way of ^{what I would call their} desperate belief that it's "God's will," and at the end they will be transported to Heaven.

Well, once again, this supposes that God is all good and all powerful, and will ^{carry} take the righteous right up there. Of course, that offers nothing to the idiocies of human history, particularly that the more we develop as humans, the worse we are able to treat one another. Why? Because we now have the power to destroy each other at higher, more unfeeling levels. This can be

epitomized again and again by the concentration camps. Telling poor wretches that they're going to have a shower to get rid of lice—and instead they die with a curse in their hearts. That's more hideous, in a certain sense, than dropping a bomb on 100,000 people—on people you know nothing about. And yet you have fundamentalists carrying on about abortion, speaking of it as thwarting God's will. What does it have to do with God's will if you kill a thousand people in one minute with gas? Or destroy hundreds of thousands in an instant of atomic man-made lightning from the sky? What does that do to God's will?

We might assume that God, like us, is doing ~~what~~ ^{the best that} can be done under the circumstances. God is our Creator. God put us here. We are God's artistic vision, we are God's children if you will, and it's not a good parent who looks always to control the child. The mark of a good parent is they can take joy in the moment when a developing child begins to outstrip the parent ~~in small ways~~. God is immensely powerful but is not all-powerful. God is powerful enough to give us lightning and thunder and extraordinary sunsets, incredible moments where we appreciate God's sense of beauty. But if God is all-powerful, then how can you begin to explain the monstrosities of modern history? There are theological arguments by great theologians that these horrors are to test us. But this reduces our concept of

God to a narcissistic stage director who says, "Let the actors improvise for a script. Do not give them access to the playwright." Then I'll show them what to do."

ML: In one of our earlier conversations, you said humans were created by someone or something not ~~that~~ unlike ourselves. So we are then, in some way, created in the image of God?

NM: Yes. I believe that.

ML: Doesn't that suggest we are more good than evil?

NM: Potentially more good. When a good man and a good woman have a child, there's every reason to believe that child will be a good person. But it's not guaranteed. Good parents can have evil children.

ML: If we're created in God's image and we're potentially good, but then choose evil, perhaps we were evil all along.

NM: Look—not evil all along. ~~Obviously not.~~ If, at creation, the Devil was present and entered us as well, then what we speak of as original sin can be seen as God's obligatory collaboration with the Devil. We were born good and evil.

ML: Fifty-fifty?

NM: Who would presume to say? The point is, whether it's 50-50, 60-40, 70-30, the odds change in each of us because there's an intense war that goes on forever, not only between God and the Devil but—I've said this

before—God and the Devil as they war within us. We make our own bargains with Them. God and the Devil do not have the resources to be in complete control of us all the time. It isn't as if we walk through a normal day and there's God on one shoulder and the Devil on the other—not at all. They come to us when we attract their attention because it affects Their interest as well as ours.

~~Now~~ What I use as the notion behind these notions is that divine energy is analogous to human energy—it is not inexhaustible. God and the Devil are each obliged to manage their ^{own} economies of energy, which is to say that they will give more attention to certain elements of human behavior than to others. Very often they withdraw from certain people. Too much is being given, too little is coming back.

Given this supposition, I feel more ready to make an approach to the question of ethics. It must be obvious in all I've said so far that I am not only an existentialist, but would go so far as to say that we do not know our nature. We only find out about ourselves as we proceed through life. And as we do, we open more questions.

Jean Malaquais once made a splendid remark—at least for me—during the course of a lecture. He was a brilliant lecturer and in the middle of a verbal flight—this was at the New School—some kid said bitterly:

"You never give us answers. You only pose ~~the~~ questions." And Jean stopped in the full flight of his rhetoric and replied, "There are no answers. There are only questions."

The point is that the purpose of life may be to find higher ~~and higher~~ and better questions. Why? Because what I believe—this is wholly speculative but important to me—is that we are here as God's ~~art~~work, here to influence His future as well as ours. We are God's expression, and not all artworks are successful. But we are here because God has a vision of existence that is at odds with other visions of existence in the universe.

There we get into the real question of cosmic existence. There may be a major-domo at the core—maybe not. There may be gods—~~we may be back~~ *the heavens may* *be analogous to* in pagan times ~~and~~ these gods are fighting for dominance over one another.

And, ~~God's vision can be polluted, or distorted, or warped by the Devil. He would just as soon take over God's creation and pursue his vision. It's possible the Devil wishes to destroy both God and our creation together.~~

~~Start afresh. All these questions are indeed so large that as one pursues them into answers, one has to go up into the questions they create.~~

~~Given that,~~ *So,* we come back once more to "where is the ethic?" And again ~~we~~ *I* return to trusting the authority of our senses. What ~~(do I mean by~~ *now)* that ~~now?~~ Isn't it true that as we free ourselves of false conceptions of what

life might be, as we free ourselves of the maxims and injunctions other people have put into us from childhood, as we come to have a better sense of "whatever I am, I am beginning to have my own ideas," you ^{can} also develop some instinct that one is doing the right thing, or one is not. Or, all too often, one is not doing much. As we get older, "Not much at all" can take

over most of our lives. If I am doing a crossword puzzle, there is no high motive necessarily involved. Instead, the activity might be ~~modestly~~ ^{to some most modest} on the

^{degree on the} side of evil—I'm consuming time that ^{could} ~~might~~ be spent in better ways. Or, to

the contrary, I might be preparing my system to get ready for something worthwhile. It's not a large question: I do the crossword puzzle and I don't think about it as good or evil ~~at the time~~. And I don't think of myself as

good or evil so much as probably leaning slightly in the right direction or the wrong one, ^{when it comes down to how I am exercising my time.}

So if you ask where the ethic is at any moment, it can be no more than that one is the resultant of all the forces that are in you as that vector confronts all the forces supporting you, and/or opposing you. It's as if we live in a triangular relationship with God and the Devil, trying to sense the best thing to do at a given moment, be it a good thing or a bad thing. Let me go back to what might have been my lone visitation from the Lord. What God might have been trying to tell me was "Get over this notion of good,

right, proper. Because very often when you're moving in a direction you think improper, you might be helping Me more than when you're trying to be proper. Because when you're trying to be proper, you could be poisoning yourself with frustrated annoyance that makes you a colder person and of less use to me."

So what I'm offering to people as an ethic is to have the honor to live with confusion. Live in the depths of confusion with the knowledge back of that, the certainty back of that, or the belief, the hope, the faith, whatever you wish to call it, that there is a purpose to it all, that it is not absurd, that we are all engaged in a vast cosmic war and God needs us. That doesn't mean we can help God by setting up a set of principles to live by. We can't. Why not? Because the principles vary. The cruelest obstacle to creating one's own ethic is that no principle is incorruptible. Indeed, to cleave to a principle is to corrupt oneself. Of course, to shift from one principle to another can be promiscuous. Life is not simple. Ethics are almost incomprehensible, but they exist. There is a substratum of moderate, quiet, good feeling—generally, if I'm doing things in such a way that the sum of all my actions at the moment seems to be feasible and responsible and decent, that certainly gives me a better feeling than if I am uneasy, dissatisfied with myself and not liking myself.

Now, obviously, there is room for error. We all know about vanity. There are people who, when they like themselves, are dangerous. When they think they are extraordinary and fabulous, they can be awful.

ML: So it isn't so much that you have no ethical system. But it is a system that cannot be abstracted, nor carved on tablets for people to carry around and consult whenever they have to make a decision. Life is always more complicated than any rule that can be laid down.

NM: What I'm asking for—this is an odd analogy, but not entirely—there are certain people who worship sex, good sex. I might be one of them.

What I've noticed about good sex, when it's really good, is the extreme sensitivity with which you proceed. ~~At a given moment, it's a creative dance.~~ There is such a thing as a pure act of love when every moment is distinctive and lovely and fine. That does happen. For most people, it happens so rarely that they remember it—and then remember it and remember it. A sense of perfection does ~~exist in sex.~~ *live in our concept of sex,*

In the same way, sometimes, for short periods in our lives, I think there's an analogous sense of perfection to all sorts of basic emotions—in love, in nurture, in caring for people, in grieving, in mourning—it's very hard to mourn, mourn openly and honestly. Mourning is an element in people's lives that can be duplicitous, even ugly. Take a wife who's been

married to a man for forty years—and in her mourning, what if she detects a secret spot of glee? "That selfish bastard is finally gone." So mourning can be shocking for people because they discover sides of themselves they never knew existed. Or the reverse. Sometimes people die whom you thought you didn't care that much about, and you discover you have lost something or someone valuable to you. So there is the constant element of discovering yourself—not in the ^{time-consuming} ~~awful~~ way people do in psychoanalysis where every little act has to be analyzed and re-analyzed until the air in the room is stale. Rather, just like making love, it's a matter of being sensitive to the moment, reflecting the moment as best you can. And that is not an easy matter. You want a few general ethical principles from me? Remarks I'd even offer to a stranger? Well, then, if possible, I would say to the stranger, "Give up smoking." Because that tends to block a good deal of sensitivity in yourself. It serves the will. I used to smoke two packs a day—why? Because it served my will, particularly when it came to writing. Took me a year to learn how to begin writing again once I did give it up. Perhaps I became a better writer. My point is, anything that will enable you to get closer to yourself, good or bad—in other words, being close to oneself can be much more unpleasant than being at a distance from oneself. That is why

most people do choose, indeed, to be a bit removed from themselves. And so often—here's the dirty little secret—that's why they smoke.

ML: But you know, I remember something else you said about getting close to yourself. It's stuck with me. I don't even remember where you said it—you might have brought it up in conversation, but you declared: "If you dig deep enough into yourself, you're going to come out your asshole."

NM: [laughs]

ML: In other words, yes, there are doors and you must open as many of those doors, and the ensuing doors within doors, but every once in a while, you want to be careful about what you open.

NM: Well, of course you have to be careful about certain doors. Anyone who flings everything ajar at once would be blown away. A mighty change could rage through all the rooms in your psyche. One of the most ^{jealously} self-protective elements in human nature ^{may be to} is ~~protecting~~ oneself from one's own ^{and homicidal} dark corners.

So I don't think it's a real problem that we're going to open, by mistake, all the doors at once—we don't. We can't. What I meant by the closer you get to yourself, the closer you are to coming out of your own asshole has to do with something I'd like to attach to this discussion ^{concerning} ~~about~~ the nature of defecation, shit, and waste. It may be worth getting into. As a

small premise, think of people who are terribly prudish about evacuation. They don't want to think about it, don't talk about it, it's beneath them, they hope it is terribly far away from them. I'd say ethically speaking, that's not a comfortable way to be. Far better that when you're sitting on the throne—parenthetically, it's interesting that we have that metaphor, "the throne," precisely for the toilet—when you're sitting on the throne, you do well to be regal about it and enjoy the sniffs of your own waste. Smell your own shit, and decide for yourself if you're a little more healthy or a little more unhealthy than you thought you were the last time you sat down. That's part of being close to yourself. You take this notion that what comes out of you may be unpleasant but ^{it is certainly real,} ~~it's natural~~ (It can be the nearest we come to a fact. ^{unexpectedly—} ~~occasionally~~) It's like hearing your own voice ~~occasionally~~—so often it's too shrill, too arrogant, too peremptory, too spoiled, ~~or~~ too harsh. To the degree we can hear our own voice, we improve our relation with other people. Because if ^{at times,} we find our own voice unpleasant, ~~then~~ if the other person starts shrieking at us, we don't have to think, "How unstable is the other." Not if we can recognize that our own voice was ugly enough to incite the response.

That's one of the elements in a decent marriage.

ML: This being attuned and listening and paying attention to the self—as you were speaking, I kept thinking, "This is positively Jamesian." James

would sense the tiniest shifts in perception. Now he probably wasn't interested in smelling shit very much—not at all.

NM: That may have been his ^{major} ~~one~~ deficiency. [Laughter]

ML: A while ago, you were hammering on Revelation as something to be rejected by human experience. In your view, is there any merit, or value in the holy books of the great religions, or do you think they should be seen as historical artifacts, quaint, useless curiosities?

NM: No, no.

ML: What is their use then?

NM: Well, if they're seen as general principles rather than as absolute dicta, they can be of great use. The Ten Commandments—most of us do react ^{those ten injunctions.} within the framework of the Ten Commandments. The point is not to build up an inner sense of self-righteousness—"I obey the Ten Commandments and therefore I am nearer to God." No, they are ^{crude} ~~rough~~ guides. "Do not kill." Well, yes, do not kill. Does that mean you have to piss in your pants if you have a gun in your hand and you're face to face with Adolf Hitler in 1941? No, you kill him. At that point, I would not consider "do not kill" an absolute command.

Let's go through the ten commandments: most of them are so simple they apply to 90-95% of the cases. But you have some—"do not commit

adultery." Well, there it gets more complex. Because when people are engaged in miserable marriages, their lives are foul; their children's lives are poisoned. And at a given moment there's an impulse to escape, to commit adultery in order to avoid doing worse things like screaming too much at the kids.
~~children.~~

Where the Ten Commandments fall down is that there are times you have to do something worse than what you're supposed to do. Because if you don't do that something worse, you're going to get into actions even more destructive, more evil, more unhappy, more toxic to others.

ML: So you're not interested in jettisoning the great holy books of the world, you just want to qualify them.

NM: Not qualify. I want us to cease looking upon them ~~so~~ slavishly. Once one becomes a peon ^{to} any part of one's mind, one is then open to the dark side of the moon, which is mass destruction.

ML: Your position is very much like Emerson's. He revered Jesus, he was interested in all the holy books, but he certainly wasn't going to be bound by them. His own quest for his own inner self, very much like yours, precluded that.

NM: I've read Emerson but only in passing, and that for a simple reason.

One, I think he's a great writer, and two, I did feel close enough to him to

think, "If I study him, I could end up ~~an Emerson didact~~, trying to write

wonderful pieces about Emerson." My arrogance, my vanity, if you will, is ~~that I~~
am out on my own explorations
~~that I am my own mental springboard~~. I've had that rare experience,

probably analogous to Emerson's, of being successful enough at an early age

not to worry about making a living the way other people do. In return for

that blessing, the least I could do was spend my time thinking. I have had

such an
~~that~~ advantage, and it's an enormous one and I'm aware of it. I'm happy I'm

aware of it because it keeps me modest rather than vain. There were years

when I was much too vain and I have paid for that. ~~No need to get into it,~~

~~but~~ vanity is corrosive.

There are a few generalities you can count on—vanity is immensely dangerous. But nothing is absolute. Vanity may be terribly important for people who don't have enough of it. Even as it's injurious to people who have too much. But then the notion of moderation that comes to us from the Greeks can also be stultifying. If you apply it to dangerous activities, however, it becomes interesting. What is moderation for a top-notch race car driver? What's moderation to a libertine? Well, you don't have to pursue every last fuck that's ~~before~~ *open to* you. What's the mark of moderation in a womanizer, a groper? ~~Well,~~ *inclined to explain* he doesn't have to feel every woman's ass he's ~~tempted to latch his hand onto~~. He looks to be discriminating. The road

back to balance is discrimination when action is high. ~~That is precisely the meaning of cool.~~

ML: A phrase comes to mind—I'm sure you won't like it—that, crudely speaking applies to a lot of what you've been saying, and that's "situation ethics."

NM: You mean: do the right thing in the circumstances. It's Black. First, what does "do the right thing" mean? Blacks are talking about situations Whites have rarely considered in their full complexity. You're a drug dealer and you're cutting your stuff and there's a guy who, on the one hand is a fool—you can take him completely and give him the next thing to plain talcum powder. On the other hand, you can see he really needs it, needs a drug at that moment. So "do the right thing"—don't cut his stuff to a ridiculous level. Lose a little of the profit.

At every level of human existence, no matter how evil certain activities may seem to others, there is a caution present along with the ugly impulse. (Except, of course, for those rare occasions when the unholy impulse takes over entirely.) But short of such moments, I would say that even very unpleasant people will hold back on certain occasions because we all do have this sense of "do the right thing."

My basic argument is that ethics is not a system of rules. As you said, not something you can etch in stone. Ethics is a sensitivity to the moment and the sense, "This is ^{probably} better to do than that." It could even come down to calculation: you're bilking someone in a deal. But if you're going to bilk him, ^{not} better to do it ~~this way, not that way~~. Because if you do it in too ugly a manner, ^{or increase his} you'll create a desire for revenge in him, ^{to take advantage of others} whereas this way, his feelings will be hurt but not as badly, it won't be as ugly. So what's your ethos at that moment? It's to reduce ugliness in the world system. By a little.

ML: In one of our earlier conversations, you spoke of a time in the distant future when, after "some definitive metamorphosis of existence, human vision would join God's vision—perhaps—and travel across the heavens."

NM: When did I say that?

ML: In one of our earlier conversations.

NM: Was that toward the end of Ancient Evenings or in Of a Fire on the Moon?

ML: Elements of that were there. You were looking around the corner, so to speak, you were anticipating, rare for you, how things might possibly turn out. "A definitive metamorphosis of existence," was part of the phrase, as I recall. Human nature would shift into a completely different level; human

vision would become married with God's and, I assume, would then split off from the demonic. At that point something would happen—we would "travel across the heavens. . ."

NM: Well, that's apocalyptic. I do not see any way we're going to separate drastically or quickly from the Devil as well as from God.

ML: So you would not see. . .

NM: At present, I am more concerned that we do not destroy ourselves.

ML: What would be the necessary conditions for this metamorphosis of existence to happen? What would human beings have to become?

NM: Some of it may be obvious: more and then even more self-awareness. More freedom from fundamentalism. More readiness for humans to accept the heroic demand that they stop leaning on God, stop relying on God, and start realizing that God's needs could be greater than ours, God's woes more profound than our own. God's sense of failure so deep as to mock our sense of failure. God, I believe, is, at present, far from fulfilling His own vision. He is mired in our corporate promotions all over the globe, our superhighways, our plastic, our threats of nuclear warfare, our heartless, arrogant ethnic wars, our terrorism, our spread of pollution all over God's environment. How can God's sorrow not be immeasurably greater than ours?

Before we can approach any thoughts of apocalypse, we have to become human enough, brave enough, to recognize that we cannot rely on God. Rely too much on God, and we are comparable to a tremendously selfish child who drives a parent into exhaustion, deadens the parent through endless demands. "Save me! God, please, can I have that beautiful dress I want for the high school prom? Thank you, God, deliver it to me, God." Pause. "If you don't, God, I'll be angry at you," is the underlying element in the so many of the prayers. Or, the abject beseechment—"God have pity on me, I'm a poor worm."

I think we become a hint more heroic if we recognize that we do have to stand on our own. So, I can feel ~~a certain~~ respect for atheists. I have huge disagreements with them—the first might be their absolute refusal to consider the notion of karma for even a moment. Or any kind of hereafter—their determined intensity that there will be nothing after life. This creates its own sort of trouble. It fortifies the liberal notions that we have to take care of people we know nothing about and enter strange countries and provide them with democracy. ~~etc. etc.~~ *(not. whether they deserve it or)*

I have a tremendous distrust of what people think is the good. At any given moment, 90% of that is fashion. The war in Iraq is a perfect example of fashion—the bright idea that we are there to inject democracy into any

country that needs it. That was a political fashion; it had no real basis in political reality. Of course, it can be done, you can always inject ~~one~~^{SOME} warped form ~~or another~~^{one} of democracy into a country if you have enough troops and ~~ignore the cost~~^{are ready to}.

ML: I want to come back one more time to love and courage. Here I'm going to use Henry James—his idea of the greatest human act, one that required both love and courage is an act of renunciation—at the heart of all his novels is an act of renunciation, and usually it's a quiet act, not even an act you take credit for.

NM: It's suspicious in James. Because James's life is ~~also~~^{just} a study in renunciation. I distrust authors, especially very good authors, when they lay out ~~too~~^a full ~~a~~ program for their characters. ~~They can be~~^{that is} covertly supporting their own work. James had too little passion to get near to people he didn't understand. He worked out an immensely elaborate and beautiful art but it's full of renunciation. And we pay the price. If he had been greater as a writer, Americans would be that much better off. James is not much of a guide to the modern world. A marvelous guide when you're younger to understanding some of the subtly disproportionate things that go on in high society. He's a great guide to a very limited mountain pass that few people will ever have to traverse. But renunciation did him in. If James

had had a few passionate love affairs and had been able to write about them—

ML: He saw them as antithetical. It's the life/art division. James believed that you can have a life OR you can have the art and I'm going to have the art.

NM: Look, I agree, and ^{that does not} it surprises me ^{to a degree} to a degree, particularly now that I'm old. ^{Recently} I've been ~~on record as~~ saying if you want to be a serious novelist, a large element of it is monastic. It's a dull life in the daily sense.

ML: That's very Jamesian.

NM: You don't have a lot of fun. You have to give up the idea of fun.

ML: Renunciation serves art. That was his dictum.

NM: In that sense, I do agree. But there is renunciation as a working sacrifice, a temporary renunciation, and there's visceral renunciation which can amputate a novelist's taproot.

ML: He should have broken off the reservation once in a while? Gone off on a toot?

NM: Yes. Once you've had a wild time or two, you can often support your imagination for a long time. In the harshest sense, you can say the trouble with Henry James is he never fucked another human.

ML: I have one last question which I think you've already answered. Your position on Jesus seems to be very similar to the position of the Muslims: they revere him as a teacher, a prophet, a guide—they do not recognize him as anything special beyond one in a long line—

NM: No. I wouldn't say I have that point of view. It's possible to me that Jesus is the son of God. If God wants to inspire humankind, which is after all His Creation, why couldn't He, why wouldn't He send a part of Himself to humankind? I can accept the miracle—miracles don't bother me. What irks me is the bric-a-brac put up to surround the miracle.

ML: So the incarnation—the Word made ~~f~~lesh is something—

NM: The Word made ~~f~~lesh gives me trouble. The Gospel of John makes me uneasy. I think John, more than Matthew, Mark or Luke, created some of the unhappier aspects of the church. The notion of the Word made ~~f~~lesh can be reversed—there's the danger. The ~~f~~lesh can be turned into the Word, can become injunctions, direct communication, usually from above straight down. What is totalitarianism but the word being implanted in the flesh?

ML: But John said you have to believe revelation, it's all there, there's no other way. Whereas Thomas said you have to look inside yourself. John said "forget what's inside yourself, look to the gospels." So you'd have a natural animosity to John.

NM: I do—and say it again, the word is the flesh?

ML: ~~The word was made flesh. The incarnation.~~

NM: ~~The flesh was transmogrified into the word. Most of us by now are~~
~~transmogrified creatures. We live with the word, not the flesh.~~ *we are*
indeed, transmogrified creatures.

ML: But don't you find the Gospel of John superior in its writing?

NM: The writing is better, yes. Which is why people love John and follow

~~John so much, and why he's~~ *here* ~~of the four, the most important.~~ But he is

tethered to the word that he helped to create—those loud-voiced lying

Bible-thumping exhortationists on TV, *who are also ready*
to sweep up your loose dollars, ~~and~~
fellow Jesus followers, fellow servants
to the Word and the Book, just send
it to my here at blank-blank dot com.

INTERVIEW ~~IV~~ V

Saints and Technologies

MIKE LENNON: I would like to take up again the question of saints. I think you need to say more. In most religions, saints do play a tremendous role. They intercede for lesser humans, they give witness to God's greatness, they are models for humanity by their ability to withstand suffering. Indeed, some of their suffering is self-imposed. Do you see saints in the same way as in the traditional religions?

NORMAN MAILER: You reach me on a weak point. I don't know that I have a good deal to say. It does make sense to me that there are certain people whom God would feel close to. I suppose the subtext to such a

remark is that God may not feel equally near to each one of us. In truth, I would doubt that He does. After all, the Devil is always doing ^{his} ~~is~~ best to obfuscate the divine venture. So, it's not easy to reach us. Very few of us ever get a message directly from God or the Devil. (Of course, hysterics receive several a day.) Most of us are obliged to live with a subtle smudge ^{upon} ~~over~~ our senses. Spiritually speaking, we inhabit a complex and contradictory environment. Theologically speaking, spiritually speaking, we may not be as near to ultimates as perhaps we were centuries ago.

Now there are people who succeed, one way or another, of divesting themselves of most of the Devil. It's hard for me to believe, however, that a saint can exist with nothing of the Satanic still residing in him or her. I can assume that saints are relatively pure, but the notion that they are absolutely so—well, given my temperament, it begs too many questions. It makes everything too easy. Because if a saint is perfect, why the hell do they fail so often? Does the Devil overtake them? Or—let me advance an essentially medieval argument—is the saint so good that the Devil has to use extraordinary and exhausting efforts to create a defeat, and so the saint serves God's purpose by wearing the Devil out.

ML: But all saints are not defeated.

NM: Give me an example of some triumphant saints.

ML: Saint Peter.

NM: Saint Peter! He deserted Christ three times.

ML: But then he redeemed himself and started Christianity.

NM: Yes, and Christianity may still be laboring under the fact that it was Peter who commenced it. You've got a three-time treacherous associate there. . .

ML: There are other saints. . .

NM: I won't say that people can't repent, that they can't restore their spirit back to something finer, but nonetheless renegades do have to remain under suspicion.

ML: That, in a way, brings me to my next question. Your god and your devil are limited, and I assume—

NM: Not limited but finite. Certainly not infinite.

ML: I assume that human perfection is truly impossible for you, as you just said. If there were a human being who was all-good, she or he would be better than God. And if we found an absolutely perfect human being, your theology would be hard-pressed to account for that person.

NM: I don't think I'm in any danger of having my theology, such as it is, overthrown by that premise. Of course, there will never be a perfect human being. It's not in the range of our thinking. After all, I am going so far as to

say there's no such thing as a perfect divinity. The nature of the universe is provisional, existential, not finally determined. That is at the core of everything I present here. God's future is as open as our own.

ML: Let me return to saints. I can admit that Saint Peter was not perfect.

But think of St. Francis of Assisi. . .

NM: Yes, he's perfect in a beautiful way that took care of a great many animals, and thereby brought us a little more into sympathy with creatures who often feel more life than ourselves, but I don't know that he improved human nature particularly, not even by his fine example. I'm asking, rather, about the kind of saints who are trying to change human nature, and almost always end up as martyrs. Indeed, the way they become saints is that they were martyrs first.

ML: One way that we know a saint is a saint, at least in Christianity, is that they were martyred. St. Stephen was martyred, St. Sebastian was martyred.

But you mentioned animals. To shift for a moment: how far down does the chain of being—or, if you will—the war between God and the Devil manifest itself?

NM: I have no idea.

ML: You said that dogs have souls.

NM: Yes.

ML: Then I assume both sides have enlisted them. What about the other animals? Are you ready to say that some are on God's side? Are the eagles and the doves? The vultures and the snakes?

NM: For me to speak on these matters is equal to philosophical free-fall. I would rather rely on the sort of instinctive verdicts that humans come up with after centuries of dealing with certain problems. For instance, my belief in God and Devil comes to a good extent from the fact that the majority of people, through all of recorded time, have believed in both evil spirits and good ones and, finally, in a god and a devil accompanied by angels and demons. If the majority have such beliefs, one does well to keep some respect for such notions. Error is our human signature, but not a constant incapacity to perceive anything beyond ourselves.

ML: Do you relate any of your ideas to modern concepts of disease?

NM: Well, I hardly subscribe to the modern notion that all disease is evil, and is to be eradicated at all cost, so that we can all live for centuries and populate the globe with ten trillion people. Life and death, I will repeat, do have an intimate relation to each other. Just as we cannot conceive of an existence where there is only daylight and never night, so I don't care to think of life void of death and rebirth. Since I ^{believe that} ~~think~~ some of us ^{do} come back again, I will say that I ^{haven't} ~~don't have~~ the remotest clue whom we may become in

our next existence. It's possible, it's perfectly possible, that some or all of us have to descend to the bacteriological level and return from there. My guess, however, is that it is not so elaborate a chain of reincarnation. That would propose a most complex universe in the after-life. I would rather assume there's a purpose to everything, including the biological agents that infect us and often kill us. It may be there are agents of death with which God experiments as fully as God experiments with the development of human and animal life.

ML: You've talked a lot about the moment of death and the state of mind one is in at the moment of death—this follows, I think from what you just said. Peace of mind, I think, is important to many religions—peace of mind at death, none more so than Catholicism. The Church actually has a sacrament called Extreme Unction, now called "Anointing of the Sick." It was created by the Church to give hope to people who were near death.

NM: How would you say that the Church arrived at such confidence in its power?

ML: Well, over millennia, the Church created seven sacraments. And the last one is Extreme Unction. I can't tell you which Father of the Church came up with the theology of it, but there is a sense of the Church reaching

out to the individual at the moment of death and applying all of its powers to giving that person peace of mind as they pass over.

NM: Or, at least, giving them a belief in peace of mind. . .

ML: From the Church's point of view, Extreme Unction works—and I've seen people receive it—and you know, it does give them tremendous peace of mind.

NM: I can believe it's effective. Certainly for devout Catholics, it would be. Let me tell you a small story about a dear friend of mine, Eddie Bonetti, who was dying of cancer. I spoke to him a day before he went. He was a marvelous fellow and you'll see from the conversation what his positive qualities were.

We were talking on the phone and he knew death was close. At a given moment, I said to him, "Eddie, are you scared?" He said, "Yeah, Norman, I am."

I said, "Eddie, it seems to me you have less reason to be afraid than anyone I know. Because you're the loyalest guy I've ever met. You never turned your back on a friend, no matter how much it cost you. I really can't believe that something bad is waiting for you."

He said, "You really believe that, Norman?"

I said, "I think so, I really do."

And the woman he was living with at the time told me he did die later that day with a smile. Which gave me heart because I loved the guy and so am tempted, naturally, to hope that my words had a little to do with his peace.

So, yes, I can believe that Extreme Unction can be wonderful for some. I will say I expect it's a human creation rather than a divine fact. There were no miracles announcing it, no revelation from God. This was a human attempt, if you will, to understand how God's mind works.

So, all right, yes, I can believe Extreme Unction is there for a devout Catholic. It might not work for someone like myself. If someone came in and said, "You are going to die in peace," I'd probably say, "Let me go. If you don't mind, I'll fine-tune my own end—you don't need to do it for me."

Certain theologians would say, "Well, this is vanity. This is precisely why you're not going to have a good end." And my feeling is, "Hey, pal, it's open. None of us know. It doesn't matter how much tradition is behind it. Tradition suggests there may well be something powerful behind it, but can it fit every human case?"

ML: Why is the state of mind at death so very important to you?

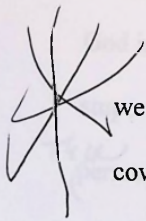
NM: Because I think it's our point of departure, *our angle of flight, if you will.*

ML: So what? Everybody has a bad day. You could happen to have a bad day on the day you die.

NM: No, no—whenever you have a bad day, there's a lot of reason for the ~~downer~~ ^{downer} bad day. I can give you 20 causes for an ~~ugly~~ ^{such} hour. Some are serious, some ~~are~~ ^{are} passing. But, no, I won't let you hide behind the notion that a bad day is no more than a slot on the roulette wheel.

ML: But there are also days when we have false euphoria. We can feel good for no accountable reason and then the next day, say, "Why did I feel so good? I still have all these problems!"

NM: Whenever we have an emotion we can't account for, good or bad, I expect that the root is karmic. That may be the only visitation we receive from previous lives. By the laws of the game, which may well be basic and necessary, we can't know who we were and where we were in previous lives. Nonetheless, intense and unaccountable emotions can come from one's karmic past.



But I'm not answering your question. I think at the moment we die, we are the sum of all the good and bad we've done, all the courage and cowardice we've exercised. And so, for example, if we die with a desire to be reborn, I think it means a great deal to God. If you will, it's ~~almost~~ ^{reaching} like we reach into a litter to select a pup, and there's one who catches our eye

because he wants us. He is the one we choose to take home. Using that crude analogy, I would say that it's important to be ready. After all, that is the one situation we can't simulate, can't preempt. We can pretend to a huge number of emotions in our lives, we may well spend three-quarters of our lives being what we are not. I would go so far as to say that one of the reasons people get married is so that they can stop acting ~~just a bit~~ ^{for a period every day,} ~~They~~ ^{an hour when they} don't have to present a face to the world. People who live alone are always ^{that other} obliged to put on a face when they leave their room.

So, I would say ~~that~~ ^{at least} when one is close to death, ~~that is~~ ^{if} one knows one's going to die, there can be a desire for another life, or a yearning toward peace or—and this is the worst condition—a wish to pass away altogether. The largest urge of the soul becomes, "I don't want to feel pain, so I will accept nothingness."

And, really, suppose you're on high, ~~looking people over~~ ^{over}, wondering which ~~ones~~ ^{humans} you'll refashion. Suppose there's a particular ~~human being~~ ^{man} that God is most interested in, but at the last moment ~~that person~~ ^{to that gent} is pleading for stupor. God says, "Do I really want to go through this again? ~~Or will this~~ ^{Have} ~~person, be finally, a great disappointment again?~~ ^{this become our work large}"

You see, at the risk of being repetitive, I do believe our final judgment in this life is given by the form of our rebirth. The only divine

judgment we receive is our placement in the next life. Often, God's decision may be, "No. No need to be reborn. Off the board." True death. End of existence. If you have no desire to live again, that could be determinative.

ML: I want to explore this more. A nurse told me this recently, a hospice nurse, who cared for the dying, three times a week she went through this, and she had great experience—told me that at the end, often, because people were taking drugs, they'd be on morphine to cut the pain, and their personality, as she put it, "dissolves." That they were alive, they were functioning, but their soul was already gone. And so, for them, the death was before they died—the body was still breathing, the automatic systems were working but—but indeed, the people I have seen die, they revert to powerful impulses, powerful atavistic impulses. The desire to keep oneself clean—they get on the toilet when they're dying. The desire to remember one's mother or grandmother. Or when someone touches you, the desire to reach out, or, to the reverse, afraid you're going to be violated when you're lying on your bed. And I've seen that, the few deaths I've seen.

So people don't ordinarily die in moments of clarity like Eddie Bonetti. A lot of time when they die, they don't know who they are.

NM: I can't answer that. You can die spiritually an hour, a day, a month or five years before your death. I think the more your soul can remain intact

up to the extinction of your body, the finer candidate you are for reincarnation. But that's just my notion.

ML: So risky. . . You mean someone who really wants to be reborn but goes into a coma loses their shot?

NM: Look, the soul can fight the body right down to the very end. The soul can say, "all right, I don't feel anything in my legs any more. Nothing in my fingers. I can't find my thoughts, but I know what I want. That way is more life. I want to be reborn." Or, to the contrary, the soul can feel it isn't worth it. "Let the body have its day. I've abused this body all my life, it's now demanding a cruel payment and—let me tell the truth to myself—I'm bankrupt..."

But I do think that the soul—taking this intelligence from your lady at the hospice—if the soul leaves a week or two before the body, I think, speaking in terms of the transmigration of souls, it could make for a few complexities in the travel schedule. You know, I have this feeling—so many talk about death as a vision: There's this wonderful white light, and relatives come out to meet you. I'm a touch dubious about that. For some people, yes. They were close to their relatives and their relatives do come out.

But there's an awful lot of spirit travel involved. The logistics of the hereafter interest me because God's energies, as I see it, are immense but, to repeat, not infinite. So there are all sorts of procedures to be followed after you die. Economic procedures, if you will, involving the energies available to the Hereafter. It may be much more complex and less adaptable than we assume. The more flaming, fiery, flamboyant sects, the ones that promise everything in the Hereafter, bring out my cynicism (which, after all, is my good shield against wishful thinking). Often, I expect, in the immediate hours or days after our death there can be pauses, long waits. You may hang around in a vast hall—somewhat like the first day in the Army, when nobody knew what to do with you and you were not yet assigned to some sort of temporary training platoon. We can talk about limbo a little later if you wish. Limbo may be an absolutely realistic station for most people when they die. That is, they hang around for quite a while.

ML: Limbo can be for years.

NM: Well, I don't know. I think it could also be a matter of divine bureaucratic—dare I say it?—mismanagement. Because bureaucratic mismanagement on earth—I don't know that we necessarily have to assume all this changes in the Hereafter. I don't think angels are perfect any more

than I believe demons are totally evil. I think the rarest condition in existence is absolute purity of any variety.

If God is a Creator, then God cannot be absolutely pure because creation consists in part of improving upon one's errors, and offering less purchase to one's vices.

ML: What about people—we've all heard about people who die after living lives of greed and misery, rotten people, detestable in every way, but at the last minute, the last few weeks, they call in the priest, they get a seraphic smile on their face, they have money, perhaps, they're surrounded by servants, and they go off into the hereafter feeling very good about themselves. Deluded, perhaps, about their ultimate worth, but nonetheless, smiling, saying their prayers. They haven't gone to a church or done anything decent—

NM: Well, you're creating an improbable person. . .

ML: There are people like that who die happy after living a miserable life.

NM: Who says they died happy? They could be acting right until the end.

ML: That's the moment you said you don't act.

NM: No. No. I said people who are serious about their death don't act.

They may be acting for others, but not before eternity.

I'll give you an explanation why a truly rotten person can die happy, which is they were so rotten in their previous existence, the life before this one, that this life, bad as it was, proved to be a spiritual improvement over the previous one. They die happy because they feel, everything considered, considering how bad were their beginnings, and how absolutely loathsome the initial impulses they were born with, that they have, under the circumstances, gotten better than they were before. We all know people who were total pricks their entire lives who mellow a little bit at the end. That's another human quality.

ML: But you said all the good and evil in one's life is summed up in death. I'm thinking of those who are miserable people for the first 95% of their lives and then they're sweet old people at the end—doesn't seem very just that they should have a happy death. You'd think somehow they should have a miserable death. Where's the fairness in things?

NM: I think you're speaking too hypothetically. This person you're talking about—as a novelist I find him impossible to draw for a book. People who are rotten all their lives rarely end up sweet at the end. If they do—there is such a thing as truly evil and ugly impulses wearing out, burning out. Just as good people can sour, ugly people may sometimes die in a more benign

state. They've used up the ugliness in themselves. They've been rotten, but maybe they feel a bit of contrition at the end. Catholicism is based on that.

ML: Absolutely.

NM: Between the stirrup and the ground. I've always found it excessively sentimental and too easy: be evil all your life and as you're falling from the horse, before your head is knocked off your body—

ML: Say a perfect Act of Contrition!

NM: Yes! I've always found that extreme. And a little convenient. The Catholic Church is not only a study in immense human wisdom, but of applied skill at maneuvering our thoughts around the most non-navigable corners.

ML: It's thought of almost everything. It has an answer for almost everything, every issue.

You spoke a little bit about limbo but I don't recall that you said much about purgatory—as an idea, as a place, as a metaphor. Of course, it's a wonderful metaphor, we all use it. What is your idea of purgatory as a metaphor?

NM: Well, as a metaphor—tell me, purgatory is a temporary station?

ML: It may last for a millennia, but it's temporary.

(past a few superficial notions)
NM: I confess I don't know these concepts. Does limbo have any relation to purgatory?

ML: No. Limbo is the place for those people on whom God can't make a judgment. They died before they were baptized.

NM: Absolutely meaningless. Silly.

ML: I agree. The Church doesn't even talk about limbo any more. They've almost dropped it as a concept. But purgatory. . .

NM: Now purgatory. . .yes.

ML: Purgatory is not endless. There is an end to your suffering. The amount of time you're there and what kind of suffering you have, according to the Catholic Church, depends on what your crimes were.

In place of the
NM: I see purgatory in different terms. ~~The~~ notion that if you suffer long enough you'll purge yourself. I would suggest ~~instead~~ that being reborn takes care of purgatory. For some people, life is purgatory. All but endless suffering. And for a few people, life is heaven—they're happy much of the time. For most people, life can be an intermittent hell. I don't think we need other structures. I think our debts are paid by way of our reincarnations. That makes more sense to me than supporting those immensely wasteful estates called Heaven and Hell where nobody does anything, where nothing's brought back into the divine economy, and people just mark time.

I see God as Faustian, as aiming to go further. God is not satisfied with His or Her Creation, God wants ^{the} ~~that~~ Creation to become better. Therefore, wasteful procedures are anathema to God. And so, I do see heaven, purgatory and hell as wasteful ^{institutions.} ~~institutions.~~ Who can speak interestingly of heaven, after all? Shaw made the best single attempt and decided heaven was boring. And there is always the uneasy little feeling ~~that~~ people have that it could be like Club Med, a gated ~~little~~ tropical island. Whereas on earth, in life, we do experience heaven. We experience it two, three, or four times in a long life, maybe for a minute, no more, but we know what heaven is. There's a kind of luminousness to the joy. Most of us, unfortunately, come closest to heaven through drugs. But, all right—we know what it is.

We certainly know what hell is. Hell can be as simple as having a bad case of gout. Or a screamer of a drug trip. Or a nerve gone crazy in a tooth.

ML: There's conscience. . .

NM: Yes, indeed. There's also dread. When we feel dread, we may not be that far from purgatory. Something important could be taking place in our soul but we don't know what. We are full of fear at taking the next step ^{which} ~~that~~

we now believe is demanded of us. Most men encounter dread in terms of

their personal courage. If they're afraid—if they're afraid of playing football, putting on the pads and going out to play can be purgatory. Boxing can be purgatory. Skiing, if the trail is steep and narrow, and the moguls are formidable, can certainly reduce you. Bungee-jumping can be purgatory—brief but intense. Men and women are beginning to search for such living ventures into purgatory. It used to be that women's purgatory was related to the terrors of childbirth. After all, in the Middle Ages, there was one chance in ten a woman would die in childbirth. That was a true terror. One had to face ultimates to have a child.

ML: How limbo and purgatory came about, if I'm remembering correctly, was that Christianity began with notions of heaven and hell borrowed from previous religions that contained both. Then the structure of the church became more complex and people asked questions. What if you've been bad but not so bad that you should be condemned to eternal hellfire—you've only been *sort* of bad. The Church said, "You're right, we have a place for those people where they have modest suffering." Then people said, "what about people outside the Church? We've been told they're condemned but what if they haven't done anything evil? They died at three years old—a wonderful little child but never baptized. . . ." The Church said, "we have a place for them too." So the Church was trying to create—I'm sure they

would have created another place if they'd had to. But ultimately, the Church began to see the folly of limbo—what a ridiculous idea for people to live in a big empty space forever and feel no positive pain but no positive joy although the Baltimore Catechism decided to offer these innocents "perfect natural happiness." No beatific vision would be available, but no unseemly suffering either. Just limbo.

We talked about saints but I never got to my question about demons. I remember you told me some time ago you had an encounter with a demon. Or a succubus or—whatever you want to call it, right here in a room you rented for a week one winter on Commercial Street in Provincetown. Would it be worthwhile to say anything about that experience?

NM: I won't get into it, Mike, because it takes too long to tell and there's no real point. I can certainly speak of succubi and incubi in the abstract sense. I think they would be useful instruments of the Devil. I only felt such a presence once in my life and it seemed to come out of nowhere, which is why I don't rush to talk about it because I don't understand why it was there. But I really felt as if there were some intangible creature fastened to my chest. I do have a story that may be worth telling about a poetess named Mina Loy. Something like seventy or seventy-five years ago, she was staying in a small hotel SM in the Left Bank in Paris and one night

in her room, she felt this hideous oppression, this monstrous, intangible creature, which seemed nonetheless most alive and had fastened itself to her chest. She lived in horror through the night and felt abominably wretched in the morning. To recover a bit, she went downstairs to take a coffee on the terrace of the little hotel she was staying at, just across the street from the Seine. Alastair Crowley, the famous and notorious magician, was there, a table or two away, and was talking about a man he detested who was also staying at the hotel. And Crowley said, "You know, last night I sent an incubus to invade him, yet when I saw him this morning, he looked perfectly all right. I don't understand it." Mina Loy's comment was, "Let no one say Alastair Crowley is without powers. It is just that they are misdirected."

ML: Let me shift to wealth and poverty. In the last interview we did, you never addressed this. Are wealth and poverty predetermined by what God gives you when you're born? And how much would you say comes from the accidents of the economic jungle?

NM: The poor often believe they are going to be rewarded in the next life. The wealthy also believe—a good many of them at any rate—that they too are going to be rewarded. The Egyptians, for example, believed you had no chance whatsoever in the Hereafter unless you were truly wealthy. You had

to be buried in such a way that all preparations had been made by your family to enable you to travel safely through the underworld long enough to reach their heaven, the Elysian fields. For that you needed varieties of protection. Priests had to pray for you, amulets were sewn onto your burial garments, you were in need of prayers recited by your relatives, and, most of all, you needed a tomb to protect you from evil spirits whenever you needed rest—you would go out and explore the underworld, and then come back to your tomb where your spirit would enter again into your embalmed mummy—and that rested, of course, in your highly decorated and protective casket. After some rest, you would again go out into the underworld for another reconnaissance. Finally, you might make it through. Sometimes you didn't. Rich Egyptians used to have a prayer: "Oh, Amon, do not let me die a second time in the Land of the Dead." The Egyptians believed that the second death was final. The first was provisional, but if you were able to find a way through the underworld into the Elysian fields, you could live forever. So, for them, wealth was crucial. A poor man without the

protection of priests, amulets, and a tomb had no chance at all. Which is

why we still have

~~why you have~~ that long-lived phenomenon of an early civilization, ~~where~~

most people live at a subsistence level, but there is fabulous wealth at the

the rich
top and ~~they~~ certainly know how to protect it.

does carry
I think that belief ~~carries~~ over. People who are abstemious might look with horror on rich people who have gold plates under the serving dishes for dinner. But the rich obviously believe that the afterworld is structured to enable people who are rich to have more of a purchase on eternity. Not all rich people. Some rich people feel guilty. Late in life, they pursue philanthropy—they're terrified of the Hereafter. They know what they did to get that wealth and they are in terror.

Then some of the poor—some who are bitter and furious—feel they were absolutely denied any chance at future existence. They are very angry at God. You also have the poor who believe that it's right and fair. I've lived a clean life, a good life, I've raised my children, done my best, I've never despaired and I'm going to go to a good place.

We have these separate outlooks, and we have an ongoing question for those who believe in a continuance after death. At a guess—my guess—I would think there's constant negotiation between God and the Devil over who travels where. I'm assuming that not only is God not all-powerful but neither is the Devil. The two remain in deep contest with one another. The Devil, therefore, would not wish to be excluded completely from the possibility of rebirth. The Devil might desire to have some of his rich people taken care of. Of course, there are rich people who are close to

saintly, who manage to live with their wealth in such a way that it hasn't corrupted them. I think that's rare—but it does occur, we've all known a few. They are lovely people sometimes. Not all rich people are awful, but a great many rich people are certainly in no shape to pass through the eye of the needle. Nonetheless, you can find a lively energy in some of the rich. Some of them made their money, after all, through their huge energy or by way of their audacity. Not all people who gain power arrive through foul means alone.

So, I expect God to be perfectly willing to discriminate. Certain of the rich, yes, absolutely, let's send them out to be born again. They're interesting.

ML: Are you saying that God will endow some to be born again into great wealth? Or into poverty?

NM: Yes. Why not? It's a species of testing. People who were born in rich and favorable circumstances in one life and grew spoiled and had lives that proved disappointing to His anticipations, might be reborn as poor people. Others who were poor but never turned bitter or felt that they were deprived might be rewarded—a dubious reward is wealth for that is always full of tests. But then some of the poor had a touch of aristocracy innate in them. And there are rich people who have the modesty of poor people. One

function of reincarnation may be to give God further insights into us. I go back to the fundamental premise: God does not understand us completely any more than we understand our children. We can know them well in terms of their habits, some of their virtues and some of their faults, but we certainly don't understand them altogether. So God wants to know more about His Creation, whereas the Devil is attempting to muck up precisely that clarity.

ML: I don't have any disputes on the individual level, but when I think of that phrase of Adam Smith's, "the wealth of nations," there are some peoples, some nations, who have lived in terrible, terrible misery. Take one nation I know a little about, the Irish. For 500, 600 years they lived under British wealth and power and now it seems just that the Irish are richer than the English. They're now the wealthiest nation in the European Union.

NM: I'll give you another example. For a thousand years and more, the Jews lived in the ghetto. In most religions they weren't allowed to hunt or fish or farm, they were allowed to be money-lenders or inn-keepers or own shops in their own communities. So what did they do? They gave everything they had to their schools. I would say that the results got into the gene stream—those ghetto Jews put their emphasis on learning and

intelligence because their own books, particularly the Talmud, happened to be all that was open to them.

ML: But if you look at all the plusses and minuses of all the nations—great wealth in some and great poverty in others—how does that mesh in with the individual decisions that God and the Devil express by way of reincarnation? It seems God may have to give up a whole country or a whole nation or whole race of people for long periods.

NM: I don't want to get carried away with understanding God's motives. I'm looking to find a few general principles. . .

ML: You're looking at individuals. I'm asking you to look at it from a national point of view.

NM: That means first, you have to believe in races. I do, to a certain extent. It's completely incorrect these days to talk about such matters, but I think no, the specific mixture of climate and language over many centuries does produce one kind of person as opposed to another. That may now be part of God's interest in us as individuals. "Will this particular man or woman turn out better or worse than I think he or she will?" God's also interested in races—how will they turn out?

ML: In nations.

NM: Yes. As nations. *But that* ~~That~~ is far more complicated.

ML: God must be thinking a lot about China, with one billion people. . .

NM: God learns. I keep coming back to my fundamental mnemonic—God learns. This is why I'm so opposed to those religions which assume that God is in command of everything.

ML: Last time we spoke, you said that God was developing evolution as He went along.

NM: Yes. God learns.

ML: Then in those early periods of time, when land had just been created, you indicated that God was in the slime of early creation, yes, in there evolving with everything else. Yet you also said with great assurance that God is the creator of the world and the solar system. I have trouble reconciling God in the slime and God as the creator—

NM: Suppose God is the lord of the solar system but at the same time, had to learn how to develop the system from the slime on up.

ML: Yes, but when did God put the souls into creation?

NM: The key to the notion is that it's all been a huge experiment, an ongoing, developing experiment with countless results, good and bad, but most of them were good enough so that evolution continued despite its failures. God learns. And so God invests Himself or Herself in all sorts of creatures en route. Not only animals but flora as well.

Once again,
I don't subscribe to the iron *declarations* authenticity of the Old Testament and the New Testament. Both were written by committee. The Old Testament was put together over a long period by a series of very talented committees, much more talented than the latter-day Bible-builders who composed the New Testament. On the other hand, the people who wrote the New Testament were good enough scholars to be familiar with the best remarks that had been made up to that point in the Old Testament and by many a sage, prophet, and mystic. So, they used that as well. They were also attached to a concept that may or may not be true. Which is that Jesus was the son of God. They were serious men, but they were also a committee. So, as literary works, the Old Testament has some faults, and the New Testament a good many. But to accept them as the absolute map of our spiritual universe is comparable to using the kind of charts Christopher Columbus had to look at before he set out for the West. For instance, even our present idea of the beginning as presented in the first three sentences of Genesis is a false concept.

In fact, one summer I studied Classical Hebrew on my own, and the first sentence of Genesis—have we discussed that?

ML: No.

NM: Well, as you know: "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth." Or so it goes in English. Actually, the first word of the Old Testament—in the original—is most singular. It's only existence is as the first word of the Old Testament, "barashith." The second word is "bora." There are many interpretations of "barashith" but I came up with "out of the pits. . ." or "out of the depths. . ." "Bora" is "being" or "creating" So the first two words might say, "out of the pits came being." The next words are not "the heavens and the earth," but "the firmament above" and "the firmament below," as if to declare that there are two species of existence *out there* from the commencement. And then the next sentence? "The breath of God moved upon the waters. . ."

ML: "The breath of God upon the waters. . ."

NM: It's not "breath of God" at all. The word used here for breath is "ruach." In Classical Hebrew there are three varieties of breath to signify God's presence. There's "ruach," "nefesh," and "neshamah." "Neshamah," if I recall correctly, is the gentle breath. And "nefesh" is a normal wind. "Ruach" is the fierce breath, the angry breath, God's rage. So the line really says, "and the rage of God roared over the waters." So to go back, the first two sentences can well be translated as, "Out of the pits came being, *and* as God

created the firmament above and the firmament below. And God's fierce breath roared over the waters."

ML: Much different.

NM: Yes, I'm suspicious of committees. Even the great one who gave us the King James Bible.

ML: We've spoken a bit about technology. I'd like to go back to that.

Most of humanity sees technology as a way to free us from drudgery, and give us leisure time to read and think and travel, so forth. Why shouldn't it be seen on balance—on balance—I understand all the bad things about it—but why shouldn't technology be seen as largely salutary?

NM: I have four words to describe technology which I've used several times now: more power, less pleasure. I think there's no getting around it: we can't pretend more pleasure comes to us from technology. It tends to crimp our senses and reduce us to people who are able to live in a closed environment. My notion—it's a sentimental notion, doubtless, is that God would have preferred us to be able to do the things we now achieve through technology by means of our spirit alone. In other words, instead of having television, we could reach into our dreamlife and enjoy organized and marvelous dramas that we could create for ourselves or send by telepathy to our friends. The ultimate aim was for every human being to be immensely

creative. Being psychic as well, we would not have needed electronic communications. If I wanted to talk to you, I would be able to put my mind in contact with yours even if you were in a far-off place. We all have small intimations of that possibility. It seems to me such mental powers are grievously reduced with every advance in technology.

As a specific example, I now use hearing aids and I can't hear without them, most of the time, not with most people. But my own small remaining ability to hear gets reduced further by using these hearing aids. In parallel, I think technology tends to curtail our possibilities and accelerate our dependencies.

After all, the great strides that have been made in technology came from previous generations. Maxwell discovered some of the differences between electricity and magnetism. He and Farraday took imaginative, metaphorical leaps. Abraham Lincoln and Winston Churchill didn't have to study previous speeches to come up with the Gettysburg Address or "I have nothing to offer you but blood, sweat, toil, and tears—" They came out of a past that depended on independent human beings rising up to exceptional thoughts at incredible moments. They were not dependent on electronic machines they did not really understand

As a small example, I don't know anyone with a computer who doesn't talk about the glitches.

ML: Look, the first person to use a wheel after the drudgery of dragging things—must have felt great pleasure. I don't see—

NM: Wait a moment, there are crucial turning points in the advent of modern technology. The center of all that is electronics. Whereas the first wheel was made of wood, and sharp stones were used to shape it. These were things people could comprehend, they came out of the earth. Then people began to learn how to smelt ore. Dangerous business, tricky, but they found the means to get fire to melt the ore and so could separate the slag from the molten metal. The Iron Age began.

I say there's a profound difference between early and later technology. Early technology, lasting through to the 19th century, consisted of dealing with very powerful and explosive elements in nature and mastering them, so there was awe and excitement to it. Huge excitement for the railroad when it was developed—people loved to travel on ^{trains. They} ~~them~~. The trains might be cramped and reek of their own foul coal smoke, but they were exciting. Now, traveling on airplanes is not agreeable. Everyone thought it'd be immensely exciting but it isn't. It's reductive. You don't feel like a voyager so much as a piece of trussed-up transported goods. Electronics is the great

divide—the watershed between what I would call good technology and bad. Because no one knows what electronics is. I defy a physicist to reach my mind with an explanation I can comprehend. For that matter, we don't even know what electricity is. A current of electrons, yes, but do we know anything about the makeup of an electron? Does it possess its own consciousness or does it not?

ML: So that's the pivot point, then? That's when technology becomes a miserable activity? But when you were a boy, the radio—you must remember the radio—the crystal set and all that.

NM: You had to be able to solder, yes. But even then, you had to buy your vacuum tubes. People assemble computers today out of factory parts. I did model airplanes when they were made of balsa with glue. Then plastic came along. In my childhood, plastic was not common. Bakelite was the nearest you got to it. Now plastic is omnipresent. And it's inert. It doesn't bring on any sense of the uncanny. It offers an inkling of non-existence. I'm just paranoid enough to believe it's the Devil who loves plastic because it's going to deaden God's sensibilities before it's all over. God won't be able to get to us through shields of plastic. About the time, oh, thirty years ago when women began to wear plastic clothing—the stuff stank, you remember, the awful smell of plastic clothes? I began to think that may be

the point where the ballgame was lost. Women with their finer sensibilities were adopting plastic.

ML: My last question: Great religious ideas have great followings and they last for millennia—some do fade, some die, but the greatest last for millennia. And I'm assuming there's a reason for that. Your faith in the theological and intellectual efficacy of your system is strong. I've observed it for many years and it's deep-rooted inside you. But you have also said your system is not going to be adopted by many other people.

NM: Not in a hurry. No. There's no immediate solace offered for our fears. Only an appeal to our human pride.

ML: Does this bother you?

NM: I suppose that if I had developed these ideas when I was 30 or 40, I would have wanted to become a religious leader. But that is not in my capacity. If there's any validity to any of these thoughts, if they take root in people to some extent, then, yes, these notions may yet be adopted by some. Because I do believe that there are two elements now on the horizon that can yet destroy the world as we know it. One of them is technology and the other is organized religion. The second drives people into stupidity. It can take intelligent children and deprive them of their ability to look at existence. They're obliged to force their thought to fit a mold that may

never have existed. And certainly doesn't exist now. That drives people to extremes. So I do feel that my existential sense of God as a Being who needs us as much as we need Him could yet reach many. But I feel no inner directive to convince people right away. I am just centered enough to recognize how far that is beyond my means.