

GOD INTERVIEW, 2

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interview*

MICHAEL LENNON: It's July 5, 2003, Norman Mailer interview on God and the Devil, part 2.

Norman, let me begin with a summary of your religions beliefs, very brief. God is noble, but imperfect, and not all-powerful. The Devil is equal in cleverness and strength and may win the cosmic war which rages. Human beings play a crucial, perhaps an equal role in this war, but often unknowingly. There is no heaven, no hell. Revelation is, at best, unreliable. Souls are not essences nor are they necessarily eternal. There is no final judgment. Limbo won't work very well in your system but I hazard that purgatory might fit.

Is that a fair summary?

NORMAN MAILER: It isn't a summary. I wouldn't have put it that way. I don't know if we need it if we put it all together but—all right, it's a kick-off, sure. OK, let's get into it.

ML: I want to ask a question—about purgatory, which we didn't get into last time. It seemed to me that you felt some sympathy for the idea of purgatory.

NM: I feel some sympathy—and some uneasiness. I don't know whether it's due to my earlier training, but I find myself embarrassed by speculations on the nature of the hereafter. It seems to me you might have huge bureaucratic difficulties after you die, which is sort of a universal hell of all they have to go through before they're born again—those who are going to be born again. They may also have to go through—

In other words, what I am getting at is that there's an automatic assumption in most people who are religious that God is not only all-powerful but instantaneous. [point of interest: 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?] And this violates all the notions of economy that we have in our own experience—which is everything takes longer than we think it will take—which is the wisdom you have after many decades of living. And there are always some complexities you didn't anticipate. And to assume that once you pass into another realm, things are perfect and instantaneous is a large assumption. It's as large an assumption as to assume that there are no other kinds of difficulties in the hereafter. And one of them may be the need to judge by God whether this particular soul should be reborn or should expire. And that may take up a huge amount of God's resources. So purgatory for me sits there as a species of possibility. In other words, God may look at three-quarters of us and say, "I can't make up my mind this week," and put us into purgatory temporarily.

Now, what the form might be—whether it might be like a Palestinian refugee camp, I have no idea. The feeling I have is purgatory would not be pleasant or agreeable simply because of the conditions.

One of the deepest beliefs I have is that many of our theological speculations do come from our experiences in life. In other words, it's possible the hereafter is less different than we assume. We may have the same hassles, the same annoyances, the same frustrations, the same difficulties there as well. There may be overcrowding in certain areas. Looking back on the Holocaust, part of our horror here on earth was the immensity of the Holocaust. We were forced to recognize there was something absolutely

murderous in our species—obviously, it was not just the Germans, there was something in our nature in terms of what we were capable of, and we were shown this over and over again, in Russia, in China—no need to go into it—in Africa—no need to emphasize that, we all know what we're talking about there.

The point I want to make is that the Holocaust may have exacted even a greater price from God than from humans. Because the very notion of karma is one of deliberation, of wise judgment. In other words, you've led your life, a complex life—all of us have complex lives. And in the assessment of it, the reading of the soul that takes place after one dies, it may be that God says, "I'm too tired to think about this now." After all, God's an artist and one doesn't necessarily want to make instantaneous judgments. Then purgatory becomes a whole new station.

Now, let's try to do a little more with that. With the Holocaust, the number of people being exterminated in a day, the souls arriving in the hereafter, became too huge for God to handle. It may have been that karma has been a mess ever since the Holocaust, the atom bomb, the gulags, but especially the Holocaust since the deaths were so relentless and so numerous.

This notion—the moment you can get to see, the moment you postulate that God is not all-powerful, the idea of God waging a war for his or her vision in relation to other gods all through this huge universe, the stars—then you begin to see the existential nature of the hereafter, OK?

ML: OK. Well, you beautifully touched on what the nature of my next question is. You see God as an artist. I think often your visions of the future are built on your own experience of this life. But 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: God is all those things. God is certainly an engineer—I was about to say it.

Certainly an engineer would see it all in terms of construction. How do you organize the hereafter? How do you take care of things in terms of the best spiritual sanitation? Et cetera, et cetera. When I say God is an artist, I don't mean God is a novelist just like me and that's the main thing God is up to. Finally, the word "artist" has a hegemony over other professions because whatever else it is, it's creative. And God is a creator. So I think of God as an artist. I hate the word "mega," it's been used too often, but God is a mega-artist. All these faculties, disciplines, engineering, war, social building, name any discipline, are all His or Hers and are at a very highly developed level, more highly developed than we can even begin to conceive of. But that's the artist. A great engineer is an artist. A great general is an artist. We do that in our own speech. We speak of Clausewitz—we don't say, "oh, he was just a general." We say, "He was an artist of a general." And in that sense—that's the sense in which we have to use the word "artist."

ML: Well—

NM: Not to mention this huge creation. I don't want to diminish God. Let's think of the size of the creation—even if God's not all-powerful, the incredible flora and fauna of existence, painterly touches that are beyond our imagination in 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 novelists have to conceive of and judge the destinies, the paths, the forked paths that people take through lives, and create the second phase of their lives, the third phase—in a sense, that's very much like God presiding over reincarnation—the second, third, fourth phase. There is that similarity of shaping individual human destinies.

NM: Well, it's more—with individual human destinies—if we are all lively parts of God's vision, which is something else I believe. Mind you, lively but seriously tainted parts of God's vision—again, for whatever reasons. The devil's there from the start and I don't presume to say exactly what part the devil plays in cosmic affairs, local earthly affairs—but in any event, we're not pure representations of God at all, we're tainted representations because we're torn between God and the devil and our own vanity. Human vanity is becoming more and more of a prodigious factor—I don't know whether these are cosmic or earthly events. We'll find a word later before we're done with this that's between the two. We can call it temporarily prodigious spiritual events. But the human ego, which has always been resentful of God's power, and the Devil's power—there's nothing more irritating to most of us than the feeling we're not completely under our own power—that there are forces pushing us stronger than we are. There's that hatred of compulsion: "Oh, God, there's that awful compulsion starting—" whatever it is. Whatever it is one considers as unworthy of oneself, or too dangerous to oneself—or whatever

ML: Promethean.

NM: I don't follow you there.

ML: Prometheus fought with the gods, he argued with the gods, he didn't like to be directed by the gods. Of course the gods punished him.

NM: You'll have to fill me in on that story. My Greek mythology—how to put it? It's not my favorite metaphorical ammunition. [In brief: The gods had fire; Prometheus suggested humans could use it but the gods said, no way—it was too special, too powerful, they'd keep it reserved to themselves. Prometheus stole the fire and brought it to earth. In punishment, the gods made him immortal—to honor his cunning and audacity, his good intentions—but chained him to a rock where a divine vulture forever tore at his liver—so he was in constant pain but couldn't die—a metaphor, I suppose, for the mystic who has glimpsed divinity but not possessed it, the suffering of one who has gotten beyond everyday perception but hasn't fully united with divinity. Prometheus' generous error was to think he could provide divine fire as a free gift to suffering humanity—whereas they had to earn it. So the nice folks just cooked supper, while Prometheus remained chained to the rock of the material world, yearning after final mystic union. Well, a savior complex DOES gets its sufferers into unhappy situations!] Have I made my point?

ML: Yes, you made your point. In Advertisements for Myself, you say that humankind is roughly more good than evil. End quote.

NM: No that's the assumption of democracy.

ML: Well—

NM: I may have said it but—what I said 30 or 40 years ago—

ML: Well, you said human beings are more good than evil. If they're NOT—well. There's no sense, then, in doing anything but enjoying yourself for the rest of your life. Getting all the pleasure one can.

NM: That's how I looked at it then. I would look at it differently now.

ML: That's what I want to know. Because if that's the case, if we are roughly more good than evil, that that would signal the ultimate victory of good.

NM: Yes, it would. But what I would argue is there's absolutely no guarantee. That is the existential question—by existential in this case, I mean the not-yet-determined answer, no one has answered this question yet. When you say existential, it means you do not have the answer. What you have is the presence of an immense question. I think existentialism can only be understood in that sense. When we have lively questions, immense questions, or even small but obsessive questions that keep us on a point of doubt, then we're living existentially.

The fundamental question of them all is are we good or not? Are we more good than not?

ML: Have you changed your position slightly?

NM: I would say yes. In forty years—I would hate to think from the bowels up to the heart, there's nothing but cast concrete there.

ML: It is clear—it becomes more and more clear to me all the time when thinking about these matters why courage must be the cardinal virtue in this cosmic scheme. If the forces of good are brave, strong, and daring, then there's a chance that evil will be defeated. The pacifism of a Gandhi or a Martin Luther King would play into the devil's hands, he would applaud its use.

NM: Everything plays into the devil's hands. We live in an immensely complicated chain of cause and effect. I can make an argument both pro-Gandhi and anti-Gandhi—that's no problem. The same way you can give the argument for some great general: pro-Napoleon and anti-Napoleon. Finally, Gandhi was obviously 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 trying something that had never been tried before. He was searching for the answer to the same question I'm searching for, at a much higher and much more dangerous level, which is: 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—it was a disaster for him. So I certainly don't sneer at Gandhi and I don't systematize him as, "Oh,, he brought on bad because he advocated passivity." Because the kind of passivity he was calling for demanded huge courage.

ML: There was a heroic aspect to it.

NM: Yes. And discipline. It was heroic passivity. One of the things we might do well to begin to try to understand humans is to regenerate the essential energy contains in oxymorons. There are certain oxymorons that are absurdities and we dismiss so many things in life saying it's an oxymoron. But there are oxymorons that are vital and immensely valuable. One of them is "an heroic passivity." That's where wisdom, of course, becomes the arbiter. There can be heroic passivity, or quasi- heroic passivity which can be a disaster. And we've all seen it. There are certain pacifists we respect, and there are certain pacifists we'd like to throw down the stairs.

ML: That's immensely interesting to me. But what I was driving at was what came first in your scheme of things? Belief in courage as the cardinal virtue which led to the vision of the universe where there's a cosmic law which required courage to be the cardinal virtue?

NM: I think you're approaching it schematically. But I think it came out of—as God was creating the flora and fauna of existence, the experiments, the incredible experiments that went on over millions of years, the failures. Think of the excitement when the dinosaur was created, the immense excitement that He had something pretty big and pretty interesting. Then it proved too big—badly designed. Badly designed. The record of bad designs in evolution is absolutely incredible. By the same token, what was obvious was those animals that had courage, or those plants that had a specific 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 have too much courage. This notion of balance—balance is courage—is what God began to search for.

The notion that God made multitudinous errors is crucial to understanding evolution.

ML: Let me shift a little bit over to the dark side, over to the Devil. I really had a lot of difficulty with this in reading over the first interview.

NM: Mind you, so did I. I tell myself I'm not that close to the Devil!

ML: Well, if things are indeed getting worse, it's very clear that you believe that, by the way—which indicates that Satan is winning—why would the Devil wish to destroy existence, destroy the world, rather than run the world as the ultimate tyrant? Wouldn't

he wish to rule humans and make them his evil slaves and minions, rather than destroy them?

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

ML: Evil is his good.

NM: He would see it that way. I'm speculating, obviously, all over the place, but the point—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, he's a fallen angel, which I assume has a great deal to it. Why do I assume that? Because certain geniuses come along who have intimations of what it might be like "out there." Milton was certainly one of them. And I think Milton is as good a rough rule of thumb through this matter of God and the Devil as anything I've come across. Homage to Milton on that.

From the Devil's point of view, 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, there are various ones. He could destroy the whole world and start over again. There, I run out to the end of my string—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 easy 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, well, well—finally, at the highest level, there's such a thing as mindless destruction. Finally, when you can't win, you destroy the game. We can start with the example of the spoiled kid who picks up the marbles. Satan, in a certain sense, rather than let God win—see, it starts as a war between angels—God is one angel, and the Devil is a fallen angel. Then it's still a war where the notion is to create a better universe. At a certain point when the Devil feels that he or she cannot gain those powers that are needed to form a new universe, the rage may be so intense that the next move may be to destroy the whole thing.

You see, when you talk about "rank speculation," I'm going to bring new dimensions to "rank." Supposing the Devil is treacherous and has sold his birthright to some other god out there in the cosmos, and will try to turn over a paralyzed, inane, stupid, mainly-destroyed world to someone who can build it up? The Devil would be a lieutenant, rather than the major-domo.

These notions, you see, of what the Devil might be are not nearly so comfortable to me as assuming that God is the imperfect creator. That makes a lot of sense to me. The Devil could be this, that, or anything—I don't know. But my guess is,—well, before I get into what my guess is, I can't even say to you—this started way back with "Of a Fire on the Moon." Is technology the arm of the Devil? Which I think is probably true by now—I think I believe that. Or is technology a third force? Is technology a force that's going to destroy both God and the Devil? Is technology man's development? Man's assertion against God and the Devil?

These are questions that are wide open. I wouldn't presume to propose answers to them that had any competence.

But—all right—as an immediate assumption, a hypothesis with which I can live until I find a better hypothesis—I repeat, there are no answers, only questions, and we move from one question to a higher question and seek a better hypothesis to answer it. But I would assume technology is indeed the Devil's force. Why? I just feel that viscerally, because of all the things I've detested about it for all the years. Starting with plastic. It seems to me plastic is the perfect component in the Devil's armory. Because it desensitizes human beings, living in plastic, and it sickens them. And the Devil has to effectively destroy God's hope before the Devil can triumph. Whether the Devil hopes for a world that he or she can take over, or whether the Devil, on the contrary, acquires a ruined world, or acquires a transferrable world to some other god—these are all questions that are far beyond my reach

ML: So you're not sure whether the Devil is ambitious, or nihilistic, or nihilistic in the cause of the—

NM: Why must you see them as contradictory? As a novelist I would say some characters that are written in Dostoyevsky are both nihilistic and immensely ambitious. The two go together. Frustrated ambition quickly can go to nihilism. Just as a rotten fruit can turn 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: Saints, prophets, figures that are a little larger than life. That they may be intermediaries, that they may play a larger role, they may play a prophetic role, or actually see themselves as instruments of God or the Devil. There are demons on the other side as

well, and monsters on the other side as well. I wonder if you could say something about the saints and monsters, the lesser figures in this game?

NM: To begin with hagiography is not my strong point. I know very little about the saints and their histories. I would guess, given my general principles, given my general hypotheses, that very few of the saints were necessarily bona-fide saints. By that I mean, they were much more good than bad. I would think many of them had incredible powers. I believe that 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 the nth degree in humans.

But the idea that saints are as good as the hagiographers have made them is something that gives me great pause because, finally, the Catholic Church is one of the most complex and powerful and amazing and intricate power systems in the world, in history, and from what we know about history, we know the powerful rewrite history to their own specifications. And so many a saint was built up into much more than that saint deserved to be. But the idea that there are some people who become so good that they represent the best elements in God is not something that I would scorn. I would believe there were saints. I would just approach them with a much more critical attitude than the orthodox Catholic does. You can't say "orthodox Catholic"—I guess it's devout Catholic.

ML: I guess what I was driving at—that's helpful. I agree with you completely. The Church has so many saints that in each period they have to attract saints of a certain kind to meet certain needs. But one thing that struck me about your scheme is that most of us don't know most of the time whether our actions are ultimately for good or for ill or which side we're 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, destroy, to hurt the side of the Lord?" And they would have to be more aware of their mission. In other words, I'm positing, the saint is not just someone who's a better person in the conventional sense, but someone who is much more aware of their mission, of what they're doing in their life. They're much more telling, if you will, have much more purpose.

NM: Much more devoted to the importance of their mission, you see, and the fundamental belief that what they're doing is absolutely right—when it may not be. There's many a saint who proved to be a devil on true spiritual examination. And many a devil may have been working perversely to undermine the Devil.

ML: Kierkegaard.

NM: Kierkegaard is the best single point of reference in these matters of anyone I know.

ML: Well, have you known—I've heard you say on occasion, "So and so was a saintly person."

NM: When have I said that? Not often.

ML: Oh, I've heard you say it. Not often, but I've heard you say it. And I've also heard you—speaking of the guy you thought was profoundly evil—vonBulow. I remember you...

NM: I don't know if he was profoundly evil. That may be very unfair. I'd rather not get into that—the poor guy. . .

ML: Yes—

NM: He was fascinating to me because he suggested he might be profoundly evil—I don't know.

ML: I'm not making judgments here. But let's take the saintly people—have you run into people where you think—

NM: I've run into any number of people whom I think are more evil than good. I won't name names because I'd be settling scores and after all, I could be wrong.

ML: But the other way—more good than evil.

NM: I don't know that I've ever known anyone well personally that I would call a saint. Offhand, I can't think of anyone. I've known very good people, very good people indeed, but that doesn't mean—

ML: No intimations of sainthood.

NM: Right.

ML: I want to challenge your idea about things getting worse—with a couple of brief statistics. And these seem to be important; I chose these carefully. 1900, the average American lived to be 46 years old. Six percent of Americans graduated from high school. 14 percent of homes had a bath tub. Six percent had a telephone—I'm getting in 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 most people had hardly any books in their homes at all. Today, a thousand books, I believe is the figure, are published every day over the world.

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 in the long run, despite any

of these specific advances—the flush toilet, the telephone, higher education, even—are all short-term and technology is going to murder us.

NM: What I don't like about this is that we're never going to get back to [SIDE ONE ENDS]

The trouble with that is that all the modern assumptions about progressivism are in there. And progressivism has yet to prove itself. Yes, all those things occurred and they made life easier. At the same time, 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 from 1900 to 1950. People were locked up in all sorts of terrors, they had all sorts of intimations and fears that were huge, but it was all sort of local. Whereas now you have general anxiety. Of a very large sort.

And spiritually, the argument has to be, did we really improve anything? I don't want to get into it because you get into very dull, tiresome stuff. Like for instance, maybe people were better off when they had to squat over a latrine and they could smell their own shit. Maybe they were a little closer to themselves than they are now. It's like my argument about contraception which always gets me into tremendous trouble. It's very interesting but it seems that women did not seem to conceive as often in the Middle Ages as they do today. Of course, the argument is, well, all the babies died. [The better argument is fewer women were healthy and well-nourished enough to ovulate regularly, sustain an entire pregnancy, and deliver a live infant.]

All right, then, there was the huge upsurge of human nature, all the energies released in the twentieth century, came out of the fact that the stock that produced those people was the stock that was divine.

You can get into very complex arguments whether modern medicine is a blessing or a viiator of human potentiality, because the strongest do not survive. Now, nobody goes near this argument because it's so Hitlerian, and it may be that not only was Hitler the devil's greatest achievement, but, in fact, one of the things he did was destroy any possibility of thinking along the lines he laid out, you see, people shrink the moment you say courage is important. People shrink because they think, "Start saying that and you end up being a Nazi," and Hitler did more to spoil the possibilities of two or three or four profound ideas of our time—the world was left with nothing but conservatism and progressivism, and the more interesting human philosophies, like exstentialism, were cut off.

To this day, people don't like existentialism because it's not well-grounded. They hate the notion that their feet cannot always be placed in a familiar context. Well, in the familiar contexts, it's stultifying. Progressives are stultified, liberals are stultifying. That age-old, century-old 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—these are—

The Political Correctness is the fierce, unruly, and manic child of progressivism. So, when you present these things, I would say just use a gentle, broad answer, yes, life is certainly more comfortable than it was, and there are more opportunities than there ever were, and they may be used in more mediocre fashion than 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. And whether the human creation, psychically speaking, is stronger than it was a hundred years ago—I

don't think so. I think we're weaker, we're more confused, and I think we wander all over the place—we're 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 our present prize—as, say, opposed to Abraham Lincoln 150—140 years ago? Perhaps we don't have progress. We have less progress than we thought. So those are very rough answers to a rough presentation.

ML: I wanted to challenge. . .

NM: I think it's fair to have it in here.

ML: In our first interview, you said you have an intuition, or in imprinted view, or an inborn belief—I'm not sure which—of both God's existence and of His limited nature. It is also—you say, "I feel that way, I feel that way, it's there, in me, this belief." It's also true 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. Why is your imprinting superior? Why is it the correct one? We have lots of people who go, "My intuitions are as good as Norman Mailer's, and I can't imagine a God who isn't all-powerful."

NM: Their intuition may be more powerful than mine. If I can just go through—sketchily through—when I was a child I believed in an all-powerful God—of course, all children do. Then there was a period when I was a fierce atheist for many, many years. Then there was a period when—and 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, that's the way I would argue. I would say: "The burden of proof is on you. You have much more to explain how we're here if there's nothing behind it."

But I would certainly never argue that fundamentalists don't have intense feelings. They're immensely intense. But I think what it is—if I may presume to speak in such large terms, I think it is their defense against how really terrifying the whole thing is, that we're responsible. You see, the beauty of the all-powerful God is finally, you're not responsible. You just keep your nose clean and you observe ritual, and you'll be taken care of after you die. I think it's a reflection of the true fear people have about dying, because they might go to something worse.

I remember I had a play once, *The Deer Park*, where at the end of it, the hero, who is dying, says, "Where I go, I do not know," and then he groans, "Oh, maybe it will be worse." And that is the terror underlying fundamentalism. Police systems are built on it. The phrase "keep your nose clean" is an aspect of fundamentalism. And the dependence on revelation is immense for that reason. I would go so far as to argue fundamentalism is one of the Devil's strongest tools: the Devil adores fundamentalism because it keeps people from thinking. And so long as people can't think, then they can't carry out God's notions, God's will.

ML: In *Don Juan in Hell*, the Devil didn't want too much thinking.

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: Well, since I'm less familiar with them, I feel less negative. I still feel immensely suspicious, and if I were truly a serious theologian—which I am not—I would devote my years right now to reading the Koran and studying Buddhism and so on and so forth. I don't, because there are other things I want to do with the remaining years I have. But my suspicion is great that I would find the Koran as difficult to live with as revelation.

With Buddhism, it's another matter entirely, because that's not fundamentalism—it's the opposite of fundamentalism. It's a trackless universe which I don't understand. I get very irritated sometimes by people who are 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 and I feel the natural irritation anyone feels when they're told things like that when they have no idea what the other's referring to.

ML: Well, I think you're really a Gnostic.

NM: That has no meaning.

ML: I know. It's very loose. A very loose set of beliefs.

NM: No, let's get into it, at least in passing because I've been called a Manichean, a Gnostic. The Manicheans, we agree—I'm not a Manichean because I don't believe there's a happy ending build into it.

ML: I think I'm a little off there—it's the Zoroastrians who really believe in the happy ending. The Manicheans—well, they do too in some final phase. The Manicheans believe good will win but it won't be a total victory. They see evil will have always stolen some of the light. They see it in terms of light and darkness.

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

ML: They don't believe in a total victory.

NM: Precisely for the same reason I can't believe in heaven and hell as absolute forces.

You see, I believe we can have hellish experiences and heavenly experiences.

ML: Well, what does happen if God does win? Say God does win and the Devil is totally vanquished. . .

NM: God, at that point, has been seriously wounded. And whatever happens, whatever goes on, it's not going to be God, fully resplendent,

ML: That makes you close to Manicheism, because at the end of Manicheism, the third phase, after everything is over and all the battles and sending minions to fight the battles, evil loses, but evil takes a considerable amount of good with it when it goes under.

NM: I would believe that, absolutely. Remember, I'm a novelist. Novelists tend to think that way. For us, it's a very natural way to think. You know, nothing's a hundred percent, and the point of our 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 is real dignity but a nod to the cost, the frightful cost of every human desire" And I've always loved that line because for me, it's the essence of the novel. It talks to us about the frightful cost of human desire.

And you can extend that to the frightful cost of divine desire, where the loss is greater. You know, God might have had a conception of human existence that is much more beautiful than the one God's left with now. These passive, grandiloquent conceptions in revelation that it's all there for us, all we have to do is submit seems to me to be absolutely opposed to the nature of life as we understand it in every pore. Every time we're out there trying to kill a mosquito, for God's sake, we're closer to the reality of existence than thinking in beatific terms.

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 very slightly. Dwight MacDonald used to write about her with adoration.

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

But here's one of her ideas: she believes that God became limited in creating the universe. She saw the act of creating the universe as a an act of renunciation, partially, on God's part, and one of power-sharing with humans.

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

ML: because God existed along in His endless powers, and so on. Then suddenly He created something—He's giving something away. She believed that humans, like you, had a role to play because of this power-sharing, as did the Devil who profited immensely by God's creative act.

NM: She also believes in the devil.

ML: Oh, yes, and she believes the Devil gained when God created people.

NM: I think that's true but I think it's a sterile image. There's God in the empyrean and He decides to come down and mix with us—it's a little bit like the rich boy who decides to spend a little money on the street and see what happens. And so I find that a tiresome notion. I take it for granted that everything has its cost.

ML: Well, she's saying 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 that God lost. That gets us into reverential notions of God again which I'm totally opposed to. Ideally, what I'd like to see is this huge respect for the fact that we were created by something marvelous, which is not that

unlike ourselves, so we can identify with that God, identify with God's drama as well as our own and thereby feel somewhat larger. Not, "Oh, God, oh, God"—you know, in Islam, the reason I've never, personally, found it the least bit attractive, is, you know, kneel down, shove your ass up toward the sky, and prostrate yourself, recognize that you're totally weak before the wrath of God. Well, we're totally weak before everything. If that's what religion consists of, our being totally weak, and God taking care of us, provided we never, ever, ever cross any one of a thousand carefully laid-out lines—then I think existence becomes stultified. And, of course the unspoken nightmare at the root in so much of fundamentalism and Islam, is precisely this notion: what if we're wrong? We've been doing it this way for 2000—not 2000, 1500 years—and now, look, the West is surpassing us. That's why that great rage is there. It's like someone who's been married for 50 years saying, "was I married to the wrong woman?" The vast rage that would be there. Or the hate people would have for a church if they leave it after many, many years.

ML: I'd like to finish up with a few questions on reincarnation.

NM: Let me pay my respects to you which I'll cut out of the transcript—otherwise it's self-serving to both of us. But these questions have been excellent.

ML: What are the reasons—as far as your able to surmise them—that a soul is chosen for reincarnation? Does God or his karmic bureaucrats. . .

NM: Karmic bureaucrat—I don't like that. I've been using that facetiously. We're going to end up with a very stuffy notion. . .

ML: All right, God and His angels—whoever does His bidding.

NM: I don't like angels either. That's why I used karmic bureaucrat in the first place.

But I don't want to get stuck with either one. God's instruments, God's aides. . .

ML: All right, God or His aides—do they extinguish some hideous souls, or must the souls acquiesce, give up and commit eternal suicide?

NM: Suicide?

ML: Yes,—not physical suicide but some souls just give up—that's one way to go out of existence.

NM: All right, let's start with that. I meant that certain people 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's 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, 30 years, then his soul would expire from the sheer misery of living in jail, the emptiness of it, the ongoing, endless, emptiness of living in jail if you'd used up all its possibilities, as he had. So there are certain people who just say, "Let my soul expire, it doesn't deserve to go on." Which, by the way, I also think, that as humans, in the rottenest human alive is a part of us, given my notions of the divisions within us, there is a part that says, "You really are swine; you really don't deserve to live any longer. You're much worse than you think you are." We all have that coming to a reckoning with ourselves. A "How dare you think you deserve to have anything more?" And beyond that, there's a mortal weariness of the soul. And so, certain souls expire. As they die, the whole person dies.

Generally speaking, I think, most souls don't die unless—I do have this notion the soul's not around for endless reincarnations. A cat has nine lives—what does a human soul have? Three or four lives? It's all so speculative. One human has 2 lives, one has 22 in

terms of the soul. All that's totally beyond our compass. But what goes, you're saying.

How does God choose? How do God and His aides choose?

ML: Can God execute a soul.

NM: Absolutely. 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 I think what's involved there, and this is the vital notion of it, is going back to the notion of God as the great artist, the incommensurate artist—God hates to give up on an interesting artistic possibility in a human. So let's say God decided with certain people—He might take very bad people and have them reincarnated. Why not? To fill out the picture and have certain darkness and shadows in certain corners, and because there's wonderful potentialities in these awful people. One of the reasons they were so awful was because they had wonderful potentialities that got frustrated early and turned into their opposite. So God must try again with that particular soul. There might be someone else who might be perfectly bland and pleasant, good and decent, and God's not interested. That soul has done about what it's going to do and it's not terribly interesting. So God might decide, let's give it something much lower and see if it responds to the stimulation of a much tougher life. Or God may say, no, this one is not worth repeating. Just as an artist should be ruthless, God can be ruthless. Just the way an artist is best when he's somewhat ruthless on his or her own work. Which is, "This is not up to what I can do. A fuera." And so, this business of reincarnation is, I think, exactly the nexus of judgment. You see, I believe when we die, we're judged. How are we judged? We're judged by the particular vision, the immediate local vision, if you will, that God has for our next incarnation. And it could be for better or for worse.

By better, it doesn't mean it's going to be easier. It could be more challenging. For example, if someone has an adventurous soul, but physically they were weak through their life from early childhood illnesses, or factors larger than God's intention or theirs, or through a genetic disposition that was not powerful, because they were born for other reasons than to be strong, then God can decide if they were stronger, it would be more interesting. So God could send them out as stronger. But that could be terrible trouble. You could be sent out—to fulfill God's intention, you might have to become a heavyweight champ and think of what you'd endure to do that. Does this soul have the capacity or not? God's experimenting.

We're all part of an enormous spiritual laboratory.

ML: Great answer.

I'm still having a little bit of trouble understanding how evolution

NM: A little bit? You're better off than I am.

ML—how evolution and reincarnation—which are both part of your scheme, mesh. How do they mesh in your scheme of things?

Let me elaborate: do they—

NM: Well, we're dealing with species there. . .

ML: Let me give you a little bit more. . .

These are some of the things revolving in my head: evolution and reincarnation, did they begin simultaneously? Evolution with its attempts to make species stronger, better, more durable—it 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 there purposes intertwined?

NM: As I've been saying all along—you haven't gotten the first thing I'm saying: 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's un-economic to direct every one of us. God doesn't 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 learns from the child, the child learns from the parent. There are reversals all the time.

We can't think of God in terms of age, but we can think of ourselves, not unless there are periods where it may be that we get more from God when we're young, and when we're old, we've got to give more back. Not necessarily straight to God, but in the way we influence other people, the way we relate to other people, the way we either improve his or her vision or worsen it.

So God is not the football coach, He's not the band director. God's the impresario, if you will, but the impresario is a little bit above the fray. God learns from our experiences. God may intervene; the Devil may intervene. God may be with us all the time. With certain people, I think God and the Devil are there every way in every way. 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 all the time because there's such charisma

and such changeability. It's so difficult to know if you're dealing with someone who's good or evil or impossible.

Then there are other people who have little nudge from God, or a little nudge from the Devil, once a month, or what-have-you. I'm not trying—I don't want to systematize this.

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

NM: What would it be? What we get to there—we're talking about the macro-economic and the micro-economic. Did I use those words properly? Macro and micro?

ML: Which is which?

NM: Macro is the huge.

ML: Is that evolution?

NM: Yes. Macro is evolution. And reincarnation is micro. My point is, that to the degree that careful attention is given to reincarnation, finally, it's no more of a perfect, perpetual-energy, seamless mechanical process than anything else in the cosmos. There are times when God's better at it than at other times.

It may be that after the Holocaust, the double blow of the Holocaust and the atom bomb, reincarnation was mucked up very badly for a long period. There was just too much to do all at once. A perfect example would be the ugliness of cities totally flattened by the war and the way they were rebuilt with the dreadful architecture. It may be that people are finally much less interesting today as they were 100 and 200 years ago.

Do we have anyone around who's as wonderful and marvelous and god-awful as Botler
[????? WHO? Cannot get!!] Do we have anyone around who's the equal of Botler?

[???

ML: That's very helpful—the macro and micro.

NM: And how they come together is obviously—what you could say, you could almost get into a numbers game. Of 10,000 rebirths, 6 thousand work out well, as opposed to 4000 not-good choices. Well, then, one's on the way to a more successful evolution.

ML: That's the end of my questions.

NM: They were terrific. I can tell because I felt less fatigue than I usually do with these things—which is a good sign I'm not having to do all the work. This ought to be fun.

ML: I wanted to challenge things more.

NM: This may not be the last time we do it.

ML: More questions come to mind as we go along.

NM: Let me whip this into shape—I'd better stop this. [tape ends]