

GOD INTERVIEW, 2

Secret
edited

MICHAEL LENNON: 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 that idea.

NORMAN MAILER: Some sympathy—and some uneasiness. Like a good many others of my generation, I find myself embarrassed by speculations on the nature of the hereafter, but I'm here to take the plunge. So, I will say that I expect there may be huge bureaucratic difficulties at present after death, a sort of universal hell we will all have to go through before we're born again—those of us who are going to be born again. (May I dare to include myself provisionally among that number?) I will add that there's an automatic assumption in most people who are religious that God is not only all-powerful but instantaneous in His action. There's an Irish saying: "When God made time, He made a lot of it." So God could be instantaneous—but why would He want to be?

Nevertheless, this expectation of quick reception and quick designation for one's afterlife is at odds with our own experience—which is everything takes longer than we think it will take. That is our accrued wisdom after many decades of living. It is our take on the economy of human experience: there are always some episodes or complexities you didn't anticipate. To assume once you pass into another realm or species of existence that things are perfect and instantaneous is a large assumption. It's as ungrounded as to expect that there are no other difficulties in the hereafter but purgatory, limbo, or hell. Another, after all, might be God's need to judge whether a particular soul should be reborn, or might as well expire. That may take up a little too much of God's resources. So

purgatory sits there for me as a species of possibility. In other words, God may look at three-quarters of us and say, "I don't want to make up my mind just yet," and put us into purgatory. Temporarily, that is.

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

One of the beliefs I hold is that many of our theological speculations derive from our own experiences in life. It is possible the hereafter is less different than we assume. We may have the same frustrations and difficulties in the after-life, overcrowding, for example, even waste, conceivably. After the Holocaust, we were forced to recognize there was something absolutely murderous in our species—obviously, it was not just reserved for the Germans, there was something vastly destructive in our nature. We were shown this over and over again, in Russia, in China, in Africa, in some of our own actions, indeed, in Vietnam. The point I want to make is that the Holocaust may have exacted even a greater price from God than from us. Because at the core of the notion of karma is deliberation, wise judgment. All of us have complex lives. And in the assessment of each life, in the reading of the soul, so to speak, that takes place after one dies, can it sometimes be that God says, "I'm too tired to think about this now." ? After all, God is an artist and doesn't necessarily want to make instantaneous judgments. Under certain conditions of overcrowding, literal overcrowding of the sort caused by the Holocaust or Hiroshima, purgatory becomes a vast way-station.

Let me try to do a little more with that. Given the number of people exterminated in a day during the Holocaust, the souls arriving in tumult, became too huge in number for God to measure justly. It may have been that karma has been in a species of uproar ever

since the Holocaust, the atom bomb, the gulags, but especially since the Holocaust since the deaths were so relentless, ongoing, and numerous.

This notion—that is to say, the moment you postulate that God is not all-powerful, but is in the act of striving or warring to promulgate His or Her vision as opposed to the vision of other gods across the stars, can afford a glimpse into the existential nature of the Beyond—a more agreeable word perhaps than the Hereafter.

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

NM: Absolutely.

ML: Or a general?

NM: Yes.

ML: A public administrator? Or a diplomat?

NM: Yes, yes.

ML: Those are all human occupations.

NM: 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 future construction. How do you organize the hereafter? How do you take care of things in terms of the best spiritual sanitation? Heavenly latrines for psychic waste are not necessarily to be taken for granted. Et cetera, et cetera. When I speak of God as an artist, I don't pretend to mean that God is a novelist just like me, as if that is all God is up to. Finally, the word "artist" has hegemony over other professions because whatever else, it is creative. God is a creator. A Creator. So I think of God as an artist. I don't like the word "mega," it's been

used too often, but God is, all right, a kind of mega-artist. All these faculties and disciplines of engineering, war, social building, art, music, sport, painting, science, philosophy, medicine, herbology, are His or Hers at a level more highly developed than we can begin to conceive of. But God is an artist. A great engineer is an artist. So is a great general. So are the best in all human categories. We point to that in our own speech. We speak of Clausewitz—we say, "He was an artist at war." That is the sense in which I want to use the word. I don't want to diminish this projection of what God might be. Let's think of the size of the Creation. Even if God is not all-powerful, we have only to contemplate the incredible flora and fauna of existence, the painterly touches that are beyond our skills revealed in the scales of a butterfly's wing.

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

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

of God's power, and fearful of the Devil's power—that ego is so often next to omnipotent in us. There's nothing more irritating to most of us than the feeling that we are not completely under our own power, that forces are pushing us which are stronger than we are. There our hatred of outside outside influence: "Oh, God, there's that awful compulsion starting up again." Whatever it is. Some impulse we consider unworthy of ourselves or too risky for our spiritual or adventurous capacities

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

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

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

NM: Yes, but what I would argue is the absence of any guarantee. That is the existential question—by existential in this case, I mean the not-yet-determined answer, no one can answer this question yet. When you say existential, it means you do not have the answer. What you have is the presence of an immense or intense question. I think existentialism can only be understood in that manner. When we have lively questions, or even small but obsessive questions that keep us on a point of doubt, we are living existentially. The fundamental question in this case, is are we good or not? Are we more good than not?

ML: It becomes more and more clear to me all the time why courage must be the cardinal virtue in your cosmic scheme. If the forces of good are brave, strong, and daring, then

there's a chance that evil will be defeated. Would the pacifism of a Gandhi or a Martin Luther King play into the Devil's hands, then? Would he would applaud its use?

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

In India, the answer that came back to him before he died was, we may be more bad than good. The immense riots as he came to power—it was a spiritual disaster for him. So I certainly don't sneer at ^{Ghandi}Gandhi now would I wish to systematize him: Oh, he brought on so much that was bad because he advocated passivity.^a The kind of passivity he was calling for, after all, demanded huge courage.

ML: An heroic aspect?

NM: Yes. And discipline. Heroic passivity. One of the things we might do well to begin to try to understand as humans will be our future need to regenerate the essential energy contained in oxymorons. Certain oxymorons are absurdities, so many indeed that we dismiss them all by saying, "It's an oxymoron." But there are a few that are vital and immensely valuable. One of them is "heroic passivity." That's where one's wisdom becomes the arbiter. There can be heroic passivity, or quasi- heroic passivity. The latter might be a disaster. And we've all seen it. Stubborn, frantic passivity—certain pacifists we'd like to throw down the stairs.

ML What came first in your scheme of things? Belief in courage as the cardinal virtue? Does your vision of the universe ask for a cosmic law that requires courage to be the cardinal virtue?

NM: I think you're approaching it too schematically. I expect it developed out of God's experience as He or She was creating the flora and fauna of existence, the experiments, the incredible biological experiments that went on over millions of years. Plus, crucially, the percipience gathered from the failures. Think of the excitement of God when the dinosaur came into being, the immense excitement that He had something pretty big and pretty formidable. Then it proved too big—badly designed. Badly designed. The record of bad design in evolution stuffs a huge portfolio. Yet what became obvious was that animals who had courage, or those plants which had a kind of odd integrity, if you will, in terms of their environment, seemed to do better for the most part than those who didn't. Of course, there are animals—we can see this directly—there are animals who had too much courage. This notion of balance underwriting courage is what God began to search for.

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

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

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

ML: Well, if things are indeed getting worse, if Satan, as you postulate, could be winning—why would the Devil wish to destroy the world, rather than run the world as an ultimate tyrant? Wouldn't he wish to rule humans, convert them ^{be} to his evil slaves and minions, rather than destroy them?

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

ML: Evil is his good?

NM: He would see it that way. It's such a blatant speculation, let's have a little fun with it. My guess is that the Devil sees God as incompetent. After all, the Devil is a fallen angel, that I assume. Why? Because certain geniuses have come along who had intimations of what our origins might be like. Milton was certainly one. I think Milton is as good a rough rule of thumb for approaching this matter of God and the Devil as anything I've come across. Homage to Milton. So, I propose that the Devil's belief is that He or She could end up with a better world, a better form of existence, a more sophisticated, more intelligent, well-run notion of things. Now, what are the Devil's means? Well, our fear is that he could destroy the whole world in order to start over again. There, I'm out on the end of my belay—does the Devil have the same creative powers that God does to create animals, plants, humans, a system? Or is the Devil a parasite, essentially, upon God? That's a question I wouldn't presume to answer. That's why I have more trouble dealing with the notion of the Devil than with God. It's 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. When you can't win, you destroy the game. The spoiled kid who picks up the marbles comes in all sizes. If he feels that He or She cannot gain those powers that are needed to form a new universe, the rage generated may be so intense that the next move is to destroy the whole thing.

Talk about "rank speculation," let's suppose the Devil is treacherous and has sold his birthright to some other god in the cosmos, and will do His or Her best to turn over a paralyzed, inane, stupid, mainly-destroyed world to someone who can build it up? The Devil would be a lieutenant, rather than a major-domo. In that case, the game starts all over again.

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

The questions are wide open. There is no way to propose answers to them yet, but perhaps they'll become more pressing as the new century goes on.

But, all right, as an immediate assumption, as an hypothesis with which I can live until I find a better one—let me repeat, there are no answers, only questions, but we can move from one question to a higher one, and thereby seek a better hypothesis to test with our experience. As of now, for example, I would assume technology is indeed the Devil's force. Why? I feel it viscerally. That's the best I can offer. I think of all the things I've detested for all these years. Starting with plastic. It seems to me plastic is a perfect weapon in the Devil's armory. For it desensitizes human beings. Living in and with plastic, we are subtly sickened. And the Devil looks to destroy God's hope for us. Whether the Devil strives to attain a world that he or she can take over, or whether the

Devil, on the contrary, acquires a ruined world, or works toward a world transferrable to some other god—these, I repeat, remain questions far beyond the reach of all of us.

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

NM: Why must you see that as contradictory? As a novelist I would say some characters in Dostoyevsky are both nihilistic and immensely ambitious. The two go together.

Frustrated ambition can turn quickly to nihilism. A rotten fruit can grow poisonous.

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

NM: Saints?

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

NM: Hagiography is hardly my strong point. I know very little about the saints and their histories. I would guess, given my general principles, my general hypotheses, that very few of the saints were necessarily bona-fide. By that I mean, vastly more good than bad. I would think many of them had incredible powers. I believe some of the saints were perfectly capable of small miracles—that doesn't bother me a bit. I would almost take that for granted. There are such things as psychic powers and they can be raised to a very high degree in certain humans.

But the idea that saints are as good as the hagiographers have made them does give me great pause because, finally, the Catholic Church has to be one of the most complex and powerful and amazing and intricate power systems in history. But from what we have

learned about history, we also know the most powerful people rewrite history to their own specifications. And so many a saint may have been built up into much more than that saint deserved since the Church needed him or her at that moment. Still, the idea that some people become so good that they represent the best elements in God is not a concept I would scorn. I believe there were, and are, saints. I would just approach them with a more critical attitude than the devout Catholic does.

ML: I guess I agree with you. In each period, the Church has to attract saints of a certain kind. But one thing that struck me about your scheme is your declaration that most of us don't know most of the time whether our actions are ultimately for good or for ill or, indeed, which side we're helping, which hindering. But saints struck me as those who might have greater premonitions, greater knowledge of what was to come and what certain human actions could do to advance the cause of good. And, a similar faction on the side of the Devil—those who asked, "What can I do to bring down, hurt, or destroy some strength of the Lord?" In that sense, the evil would also be more aware of their mission. In other words, I'm positing that the saint is not just someone who's a better person in the conventional sense, but someone most aware of his or her mission.

NM: Yes, imbued with 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 further 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: I want to challenge your idea about things getting worse—with a couple of brief statistics. 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—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, technology is yet going to murder us.

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

The argument: Did we really improve anything spiritually? I don't want to get into it because you take on some very unpalatable stuff. For instance, were people better off when they had to squat over a latrine and so they could smell their own product? Maybe they were a little closer to themselves then than they are now. It's analogous to my argument about contraception which always gets me into tremendous trouble. It's interesting that women did not seem to conceive as often or as easily in the Middle Ages as they do today. And, in that time, many of the babies died in their first year. But the

ones who survived may have been harder than the mass of us now. If we proceed further, we have to get into all the complex arguments over whether modern medicine is a blessing or a vitiator of human potentiality. Because today, it is not only the strongest who survive. Nobody will go near this argument because it's so Hitlerian. It may be that Hitler was not only the Devil's greatest achievement, but, in fact, one of the things he did was to destroy any possibility of thinking along the lines he laid out. People shrink the moment you say courage is important. They think, "Start saying that and you end up a Nazi." Hitler did more than anyone to spoil the possibility of exploring our time—the world was left with no more than conservatism and progressivism. The more interesting human philosophies, like existentialism, were cut off.

To this day, people don't like existentialism because it's not comfortably grounded. They hate the notion that their philosophical feet cannot always be placed in a familiar context. Well, live in the familiar contexts, and it can be 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 staples of political correctness and political correctness is the fierce, unruly, and manic child of progressivism. So, when you present these things, I would prefer to come back with a gentle, broad answer, to say, yes, life is certainly more comfortable than it used to be, and there are more opportunities for most than there ever were, although, of course, they may be used in more mediocre fashion than similar opportunities were used a hundred years ago. But lives may also be more drenched in anxiety of a sort we can't locate, an anxiety that lives in us in such a way that we don't even have nightmares any longer—what we have are various stretches of poor sleep and

uneasiness. 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 140 years ago? Perhaps. Or perhaps we have less progress than we supposed. Those are my rough answers to a rough presentation.

ML: In our first interview, you said you believe in God's existence and in His limited nature. 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. We have lots of people who could say, "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—when I was a child I believed in an all-powerful God. Of course. Most children do. Then there was a period when I was a fierce atheist for many years. By now, philosophically speaking, atheism is more incomprehensible to me than the notion that there's a Creator. And to this day, if I were arguing with an atheist, I would suggest: "The burden of proof is on you. You have much more to explain 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. Too 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. The horror for all too many would come down to this: If it all ends badly, we

humans are also responsible. You see, the beauty of the all-powerful God is finally, you're not responsible. Just keep your nose clean, observe ritual, and you'll be taken care of after you die. I think fundamentalism is a reflection of the true fear people have about dying. They feel if they follow all the rules, they won't go to something worse. They take to fundamentalism because it curtails the dimension of their responsibility.

I remember in my play, The Deer Park, at the end, its hero, who is dying, says, "Where I go, I do not know. It may be far worse." And that is the terror supporting fundamentalism. Police systems are built on it. The phrase "keep your nose clean"—that is an aspect of fundamentalism. And the true believers' dependence on revelation is also immense for just that reason. I would go so far as to argue that fundamentalism is one of the Devil's strongest tools: the Devil adores fundamentalism because it keeps people from thinking. So long as people can't think, then they can't carry out God's notions. The irony is that they are then blind to God's will. They are frozen out. They cannot collaborate with God's even if they wish to.

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

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

With Buddhism, it's another matter entirely. That's the opposite of fundamentalism. It's a trackless universe which I don't pretend to understand. I get irritated sometimes by

Buddhists saying, "well, you're very much a Buddhist whether you know it or not." And I don't know what they're talking about.

ML: I think you're really a Gnostic.

NM: That has no meaning for me either.

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

NM: Let's get into it, at least in passing. I've been called a Manichean, a Gnostic. The Manicheans, we agree—I'm not a Manichean because I don't believe there's necessarily a happy ending built into the end-game.

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

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

ML: Nor do they.

NM: Precisely for the same reason I can't believe in heaven and hell as absolute forces. We can have hellish experiences and heavenly experiences, but I don't know that we have the right to postulate such conditions as absolute entities.

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

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

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

NM: I can believe that. Absolutely. Remember, I'm a novelist. We tend to think that way. For us, it's a natural way of thought. Nothing is one hundred percent. The point of writing novels is to show what the costs are in human activities. If I may quote myself again, at the end of The Deer Park, Eitel is told by a former wife, "Charlie, you have real dignity now," and he thinks it's a nice compliment. "Because what was real dignity but a knowledge of the cost, the frightful cost of every human desire?" I've always loved that line because for me, it's the essence of the novel, the frightful cost of human desire. So why not extend that to the frightful cost of divine desire, where the loss is greater? God might have had an earlier conception of human existence more beautiful, much more beautiful than the one He's left with now.

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

NM: I know her work slightly. Dwight Mac~~Donald~~ used to write about her with adoration.

ML: Well, she's not afraid to think in bold terms—but I don't know if you'll agree. Here's one of her ideas: she believes that God became limited in the course of creating the universe. She saw the act of creating the universe as a an act of renunciation, one of power-sharing with humans.

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

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

NM: She also believes in the existence of 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 also 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 some 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 keep is huge respect for the fact that we were created by something or someone marvelous, which or who is not that unlike ourselves. Therefore, we can identify with that God, identify with God's drama as well as our own and thereby feel larger. Not, "Oh, God, oh, God, don't punish me, please!" Or, "God, dear God, please help me!" The reason I've never found Islam the least bit attractive, is, you know, the prayer ritual. Kneel down, shove your buttocks up to the sky, and 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 recognition of 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 Islam, is precisely their present deep-seated fear. What if we're wrong? they have to think We've been doing it this way for 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,

"Have I been with the wrong woman all this while?" Conceive of the hate people could have for a church if they left it after many, many years.

ML: What are the reasons—as far as you are 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.

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 it. God's instruments, let us say, God's aides. . .

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

NM: Suicide?

ML: Yes give up, go out of existence.

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

ML: Gary Gilmore.

NM: His soul was not too weary. On the contrary, he didn't want his soul to die. He'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 or 30 years, that his soul would expire from the sheer misery of living in jail, the emptiness of it, the ongoing, endless, emptiness of living in prison if you'd used up all its few vital possibilities, as he had. So there are certain people who say, "Let my soul expire, it doesn't deserve to go on." Which, by the way, I also think, that even in the rottenest human alive, that is a part of us, a part that says, "You really are a swine; you don't

deserve to live any longer. You're much worse than you think you are." We all have that coming in more or less degree when we arrive at a reckoning with ourselves. For some, it's terminal. They are drenched in a mortal weariness of the soul. So, certain souls expire.

But generally speaking, I think, most souls don't die that easily, although I do have this notion that 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 boundlessly speculative. One human has 2 lives, one has 22? All that's totally beyond our compass. But then, you are asking: 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 the vital notion is to go back to the notion of God as the great artist. God hates to give up on an interesting artistic possibility in a human. So let's say might take very bad people and have them reincarnated. Why? Is it to fill out the picture, to have a certain darkness, shadows for a certain corner? That is one of the conventional explanations for why God tolerates evil. Of course I would argue with that. I would say God sees wonderful potentialities in these awful people. One of the reasons they were so awful was because they had wonderful potentialities that got frustrated early (or late) and turned into their opposite. So God wants to try again with that particular soul. There might be someone else who is perfectly bland and pleasant, good and decent, yet God's not interested. That soul has done about what it's going to do and it's not terribly interesting. God might then decide, let's reincarnate him or her in someone or something

much lower and see if it responds to the stimulation of a much tougher life. (Whether it's a slum, a pig-pen, or a beehive.) Or God may say, no, this one is not worth repeating. Just as an artist can be ruthless, so can God be ruthless to His or Her mediocre work. In reincarnation is, I think, situated the exact nexus of judgment. We are judged by the choices God makes for our next incarnation. It could be for better or for worse.

By better, I don'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 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 became stronger physically next time out, it would be more interesting for God and for the person. So God could send them out stronger. But that could produce terrible trouble. To ⁵justify God's new intention, you might have to become a heavyweight champ. Think of what you'd endure to get there. Does this interesting soul have such a capacity or not? God's experimenting. God is looking to find out. God, like a parent, learns from what the children accomplish and what they fail to do. We're all part of an enormous spiritual laboratory.

ML: Great answer. But 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, 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 their purposes intertwined?

NM: 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 can be enriched by the child, the child acquires strength and wit from the parent

We can't think of God in terms of age, but we can certainly see ourselves in that manner. There are periods where we may get more from God, when we're young, for example, and when we're old, we've got to give more back. Not necessarily to God, but to the way we influence other people, the way we relate to others, the way we either amplify His or Her vision or worsen it.

God is not the football coach, He's not the band director. God's the impresario, if you will, but the impresario is a bit above the fray. Some things God can only learn 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 hour 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 every moment they are on stage because there's such charisma in them, and such lightning changeability. It's so difficult to know if you're dealing then with someone who's good or evil or just impossible. Then there are other people who only get a little nudge from God, or from the Devil, once a month. , I don't want to try to systematize this.

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

NM: What would it be? We're talking about the macro-economic and the micro-economic. Reincarnation is Micro. My point is, that to the degree that careful attention is given to one particular reincarnation, finally, it's not perfect. There are times when God'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 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 dreadful by-the-numbers architecture. It may be that people are finally much less interesting today than they were 100 and 200 years ago when they didn't have flush toilets.

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

ML: Back to macro and micro.

NM: You could almost get into a numbers game. Of 10,000 rebirths, let's say 6000 work out well, as opposed to 4000 not-good choices. Well, then, one's on the way to a more successful evolution. I don't believe we're doomed. Just in real danger.

ML: That's the end of my questions for today/