

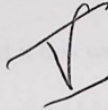
NORMAN MAILER

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INTERVIEW

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JML: We have not spoken of ritual as part of religion. Recently my wife and I went to the ordination of an Episcopal priest. It was an extraordinary event. Thirty or forty priests and bishops and deacons stood over the kneeling aspirant, touching a shoulder or back or, if they could not reach the person, they touched the shoulder of someone who could. All the while, a chorus in the background was chanting “Vene, Spiritu, Sancte!” (Come, Holy Ghost). While another singer, the lead singer, was singing a`capella verses about the glories of being a priest, of the holy responsibilities and obligations, the special status that they had among believers, ending with the ancient pronouncement from the ordaining bishop, “Thou art a priest forever.” It was a very moving, a very powerful experience. It made me think of one of our earlier conversations in which you noted that

fundamentalists believe that if they keep their nose clean and observe ritual, they had a ticket to heaven. Does ritual have any significant merit for you or do you reject it completely?

NM: I've thought about it. Put it this way: I have high suspicions about ritual. It seems to me that it's a mixed blessing. As you know, one of my favorite remarks is that repetition kills the soul. Well, obviously that is a remark that ought to be explored before we go further. Many kinds of repetition are crucial to the human venture. Obviously, one of the ways in which we learn is through repetition. There certainly is such an act as creative repetition—every time you do it, you are growing a little better, a little deeper. You are getting on to something more. I grant all that. Nonetheless, I'm immensely suspicious of ritual. If you get down to it, where does my theology start? What occasions it? What stimulates it? What gives me the confidence to go on with it? I am not a theologian. I know little, technically, on the subject. But if you work as a novelist all your life, you are dealing in a funny way—and I don't want this to be misunderstood!—but you are dealing with God's problems, with morality and judgment. It doesn't mean that you have God's power in any way, nor God's goodness, assuming that God is All good—which I don't believe is

absolutely true. What I wish to say is that if you are any good at all as a novelist, and you've spent your life thinking about characters and human nature, you do end up with some sense of what the universe might be like. And by extension—at least a little bit—what God might be like. You begin to posit the need for a Devil. Even the best novels usually need some kind of villain. He can be a most rarefied or unconscious sort of villain—an E.M. Forster unfeeling fellow, for example—but nonetheless the moment you begin to contemplate such a being, you are, of course, living with some notion of Evil. From there, a novelist can arrive at the next idea, the Devil. I will add that writing novels does tend to push you away from repetition. A good novel does not keep repeating itself. That is *exactly* the hallmark of a bad novel. And so most good writers are wary of mediocre rote. Indeed, I find that most people I don't like in life tend to be masters and monsters of mediocre repetition. The politicians we despise the most do tend to keep repeating the same platitude. So, I do have a premise that repetition is dangerous when used as a power tool by mediocre people. Adjurations that are endlessly repetitive can wreck families, tyrannical parents—or even unimaginative ones who know nothing better than to repeat. That probably has some relation to my suspicions of ritual. Because ritual tends to set human nature into a form. I think it's a basic question whether human

nature should ever be cast into a pre-arranged shape. Obviously, I'm thinking of fundamentalists. I distrust them viscerally. I feel that their notion of God is inspired by the Devil. They cleave and cling to repetition and the voice they hear does not come from Jesus Christ. I can add that as a child I heard them all the time. On Saturdays, when I wanted to play ball, I'd be sent to the Synagogue. There, of course, it was all praise and repetition, very much so...

JML: For thousands of years.

NM: No matter. I was a child. I was bored stiff. Once in awhile I'd be slightly affected, but most of it washed over me. I was ensconced in the same shell at the end of the service as at the beginning. Year after year. I had no relation to that set of rituals. There was another ritual, altogether, back in the early seventies, that I did find kind of interesting. It was Transcendental Meditation—TM—which was much in fashion thirty-five years ago. I remember I had to bring a flower to the instructor on the day I was inducted into TM. He was just a gawky young man, but absolutely inflamed with the concept of Transcendental Meditation. In turn, I found it slightly odd and certainly boring. You were told to keep your head as empty

as possible for twenty minutes. Send away all the passing thoughts that came through, even if they were interesting. I said to myself, "Why am I doing this? I've spent my life as a writer waiting for interesting ideas." And to do that, to get ready to work, the first thing is to empty your head. I'd been doing Transcendental Meditation without giving it a title for years. I saw it as no more than passing through a half hour of boredom before you could get going. Nonetheless, the instructor said a few words in Hindi, or whatever, and they gave me a sound to repeat which I was to use to brush away any errant thought. I forget what mine was. Something like OM, Allen Ginsberg's old OMMM. I think they sprinkled a little water into the air and there was some perfume...It was a very small ritual, but I did feel a trace of effect. Something modest did take place inside me. I did not feel shrived so much as altered some miniscule bit. Obviously, in a deep and powerful ritual more takes place.

Let me move forward, however, to make my next point. Which is, given my fundamental notion that God and the Devil are at war all the time, I would go so far as to posit that ritual may well have been conceived first by the Devil and God, recognizing its efficacy and determined not to lose any soul He or She did not wish to lose (if they could help it!) entered ritual as well. I think therefore, ritual did become an intense and fascinating

mixture of the combined presence of God and the Devil. There is a sturdy power to the repetitions; the music, the chanting, the ceremony, the intense consciousness of everyone present that They—one Elemental, at least, or Two are indeed present. One of my favorite notions is that when major events occur, the Lord and Satan are both there. I once wrote that a general, on the eve of a great battle, may think as he gets out of bed that it is very important to him whether or not he puts his left boot on first or the right.

JML: A ritual.

NM: I'd say not so much a ritual, as a sense that the Powers are there. They are around one. This goes back after all, to Homer. Anyone who looks into The Iliad will find nothing strange about this. So, I can answer your question by saying that I don't scoff at ritual, but I don't trust it. I might be happier if we could live without it. All the same, I have to recognize the extent of my ignorance, my circumscribed upbringing, my early rejection of ritual and my taste. I have to agree, however, that if you wish to speculate, as I do, on the nature of God and the Devil then ritual is not a poor place to start. Because there they are cooperating. One of the notions about this holy-unholy contest is that there are any number of occasions when God and

the Devil have to cooperate Willy-nilly. Not only because each divinity is trying to outwit the other but because like rival legislators, they also have to keep close contact, like it or not, in order to put together temporary but necessary working agreements.

JML: Continuing just a little bit more on ritual—I'm sure professional heavyweight boxers decide which glove is going to be laced on first and how many minutes they want to be alone before the fight and which jock strap they wear and the same with soldiers. I know professional baseball players have certain things that they have to do. The center fielder has to step on second base when he runs by after a home run or, you know, the forces will be against him. Athletes are particularly superstitious, I would say, and they go through various rituals and preparations before and during the game. Soldiers do the same thing. When I was in the Navy, I knew sailors who were tremendously ritualistic about how they tied a knot. It was a very bad omen if you did it the wrong way. Everything had to be done in the right way on the ship. Otherwise, you could be calling down evil things upon you. These aren't religious rituals, but they are often done by athletes, soldiers and sailors with the knowledge that there's something around.

NM: Yes. I was very susceptible to that when I was younger. I do know what you are talking about. And that period in San Francisco back—what was the year?

JML: 1964

NM: Yes, the early sixties. There was a week or two when I would walk parapets in San Francisco. All the time. I used to dread getting up in the morning because I knew before the day was over, I'd be walking the parapets. These parapets varied in width between eight inches and a foot and a half wide so there was no great risk unless you lost your head or got dizzy. I would suspect that God and the Devil, plus their various angels, affiliates, cohorts, coworkers, what have you, the entire spirit-world if you will, I would say, yes, they do pay more attention to people who are engaged in unusual events. If we started out by talking about ritual, we are now involved with rote. Whenever people engage in rote, that is, act out their superstitions, go in for repetitive or customary moves at a time when a great deal is at stake for them, (or so, at least they see it,) well, why wouldn't that attract the attention of the Gods? One of my prime notions is that whenever

major events are occurring, coincidences multiply. Athletes, for example, who are going to play in games that they see as very important can feel that they have a great influence on many other people and that the spirit world is going to pay attention. There is a feeling that one is not alone, but surrounded, at the best, by spirits. I would argue that can be a legitimate or semi-legitimate notion rather than madness.

JML: When I was writing my doctoral thesis on you back in the early seventies I had a chapter on your theology, your cosmology. I had two or three English professors on the committee and one philosophy professor. He argued with me about that chapter. Wrote me long letters.

NM: Let me get this straight. This is while you were formulating the thesis and he was asking you to shift it?

ML: Yes, he was reading a draft. He said that your system, as far as he could understand it, was terribly incomplete.

(Mailer Laughs)

He said he could not find in it how the universe came into being or ends.

How the cosmic war would end at the end of time or even if there would be an end of time.

NM: He sounds like a major league ass.

ML: Well, no, he was gentle with me but he thought that anybody who was a philosopher, who had a philosophical system, ought to have—let me finish—

NM: Let me just stress one point: I never heard of that before. Why do you have to have a beginning and an end to your philosophy? What about Logical Positivists? They live without a beginning or an end.

ML: Well, he was an Aristotelian. That explains a lot probably. But he also felt that the chief thing was that you had no clear definition—and what he believed and what a lot of philosophers believe—on the central question of philosophy: Being. What is being? What is the ultimate nature of Man? What is the ultimate nature of God? What is being? When he confronted me, I kept saying, existentialism, existentialism. As much as I knew about it

(and I knew a little but not a great deal). One of my English professors on the committee said, "Look, Mailer is a literary man. He's not a systematic philosopher. He has ideas, he has feelings that may or may not be profound, but he isn't out to create a philosophical system." And that's what finally got the philosopher to back down. He goes, "You're right. This is a literature Ph.D., not a philosophy Ph.D." But I've thought about it for many years, this debate that we had. It kind of slowed things down, although it didn't hurt me in the end. Now, you did write about Marx, Freud, Kierkegaard, Sartre, Schopenhauer—it wasn't that you weren't familiar with some philosophy, you were clearly interested—but finally, I guess, any philosopher who won't propose ultimates is a very unusual philosopher. As I read it, there is no ultimate nature of God, no ultimate answer to any of these questions in your system. In so reading over everything that we have done so far I keep coming to you saying, "We don't know; we can't be certain." And in most philosophical systems there's usually one rock somewhere.

NM: The rock? What if the rock is in transit? What if eternity is in chassis? I'm using that old famous phrase of William Saroyan's "The foundation is in chassis." In other words, eternity may be moving, and so may not be necessarily eternal. The simplest riposte I could give is that no

philosopher has ever come up with an answer to these questions that is satisfactory. No human, not ever, and I won't be the first either. But what I will say is this. I do have certain basic beliefs. You make me ask what we've been talking about through these five interviews. I thought I'd said it. God is not all powerful and not all good. God is like a Greek god, if you will. Like Zeus. If we need some model. I don't feel I need one. I see God as a warrior engaged in trying to shape some very large part of existence. How large, is absolutely out of our cognizance. I have no notion whether God is a deity for the solar system, or for a few of the galaxies, or for half the galaxies. I have no notion whether God is in command of black holes in space, or is terrified of them. My fundamental notion is that the cosmos as a whole is at war within itself, and here we are all created by a divinity who is an artist, not an emperor, not a law-giver, but an artist. This is my most basic notion of God. I see God as doing the best that He or She or They (it could be a marriage!) can do to extend God's notion of existence further out into the cosmos. I believe there are other notions in existence out there—counter-notions, other concepts of how the cosmos should be. But we humans are God's venture, God's artwork. We humans also are God's soldiers, God's working, even militant living premise. We may even be God's ability to change the given in the cosmos. So to insist on wanting to

know where we are going, asking, "What is the end?" can be philosophically misleading. When I say that I'm an existentialist, I mean it in the firmest sense of that word by its root, its sound. By its nature, existence is not predetermined. It is open. God has a vision of existence and what it can become, and we not only work to fulfill that notion but we also deny it. Lest we forget, there is that implacable war between God and the Devil and that keeps God from expressing His or Her clear notion of how things ought to be. God can not always lead us. Not only did He give us free will but we are not necessarily loyal. The Devil is also in us. So God must live in states of compromise and frustration. That makes more sense to me than envisioning God as always knowing exactly what He or She is doing and telling us how to do it, as if He is always the Supreme Theatre Director and we are minor actors in a huge opera. I've said this over and over. The end is open. Existence is open. This notion that there is a predetermined place that we all will reach, a union, a single point to existence which we will get to only by obeying God's instructions totally, is, if you stop to think of it—I repeat—a vision of God as an opera director who is perfectly happy because the score is entirely in hand. I say existence is more complex, more difficult and more conceivably ennobling for us. For we are not just serfs. Nor are we children drawn in off the street to partake in the children's chorus,

although before we even go on, we are told not to open our mouths, not to sing. So I argue that to pretend to be able to say where we are going, is a most pretentious outrageous philosophical stance. All we can know is where we are at present to the degree we can even know that. Everything in our existence fortifies this concept for me. Within reason, I know where I am at this moment. Within reason! Do I know where I will be in a year? Do I know if I will be alive? No. Do I have any concept of where society will be in a hundred years? No. We live in the present. That's all we are given. And we do have instincts. I would go so far as to say that I agree with Goethe on this: That these powerful instincts are God-given. We are embodying God's plans, but even God's design is subject to change because of the nature of existence. Not all the storms of the cosmos may have been anticipated by God. God is an Artist who is not in full command of the ship of the universe. Most certainly he is not a wholly successful engineer. God never did solve the problem of how to keep tectonic plates from roiling the globe and outraging the ocean.

JML: The moment of death carries great weight in your theological thinking, but I don't see any consideration of what happens to the 20 percent of all people who die—I believe that's the number—who die of

strokes, heart attacks, aneurisms, sudden death. I have a friend who the doctor said was dead before he hit the ground—you know, there is no time for such people to prepare themselves, no time to reflect, project, anything. Are they just unlucky, is this just a flaw in the way God did things? I refer to your concept of the importance of our state of mind when we go into eternity. These people have no chance.

NM: To begin with, the answer is nobody dies without a moment. You know, the famous Catholic notion that Graham Greene was obsessed with—the moment of remorse, the affirmation of faith—that can take place, or so he believed, or wondered, in the instant between the stirrup and the ground. Time, after all, to anyone who has had experience with even minor drugs like marijuana knows that time is extendable; time telescopes, time compresses. A tenth of a second can feel like five minutes in a dream. The notion that you propose, that you die without warning—I disagree. Even if you have no more than a nanosecond before your death, that is not where all of it takes place. The moment of death is anticipated as we live our lives. It is exactly where morality enters everyone's consciousness. The question, "Am I a good man, or a bad man?" is with us from a very early age. It's with us certainly as children. "Am I a good boy or a bad one?" As you get

older, and begin to think more about death, so you brood more about judgment. Of course not everyone believes in judgment. Very often you will hear rather fine people say "Oh, there is nothing after this. All I want is a little peace." It is a sad remark, particularly sad to me because, given my notion that many of us are reborn, many of us, at least, perhaps most of us, I see it as sad if one does not want to be reincarnated. That suggests a deep sense of defeat. As I've said earlier, we humans can have a purpose that can even align itself with God's purpose. So, such despair, in a very deep sense turning, can be against God as well.

JML: I guess I'm not making myself sufficiently clear. We had a long discussion in which you emphasized how critical the final moments of one's life was. It is the time you prepare yourself for the journey into death. You used the example of the people in the gas chambers who were cheated out of such preparation by being told they were going to get a shower at last. Instead, without warning, they were gassed. You know, if you have a brain aneurism, you don't have a tenth of a second. You have nothing. Your brain stops. No thought. You put all this emphasis on the end of it and I'm wondering....

NM: Let's say that 99 percent of the people who are alive have a reasonable amount of time to think before they die. So, you are talking about the one percent. And if I can't contain them in my argument, then I can't.

Everything that I attempt here, if I can honor it with the word "philosophical" would insist that we don't have one-hundred percent for anything. I'm opposed to the notion that any philosophical system can be complete. It's one of the reasons that I detest fundamentalism. I don't like one hundred percent theories. So, let's say that what I have to say is valid for 9/10ths of people, or 99 percent of people, or 80 percent of people, but I do believe that, yes, our preparation for death is most important. And for those of us who have the opportunity to think about it and mind you, we do think about it more and more as we come nearer, yes if you have just a few minutes at the end, it isn't as if you are suddenly facing death for the first time. You've been living with its conundrums all your life. But now you are truly refining it. You are handing in your final submission, your own comprehension of the mystery, large or small.

JML: And if God is limited in His powers, then it occurs to me that God didn't work this out. He created a human being who dies in a variety of ways. One of these ways didn't allow for this.

NM: How can I refute such logic? I have to agree. But, look, I don't believe death is the same for all of us—the great equalizer. I don't think that at all. I see reincarnation as a species of reward. That's why I find it depressing when people say, "Oh, I want some peace." And mean it. They want to be off the board. Whereas others do want to come back. Life was interesting for them. Life was challenging enough. With all the bad and the ugly that one experienced, there was enough good to form the desire to want another chance at doing more with a life. And of course I do go back to my basic notion: God is an artist. No good artist is ever satisfied with what he or she has created. The artist usually wants another chance to do it better. But as a practical matter, we can't afford to redo many of our works. In terms of humans, however, men and women are more interesting than the greatest art works. The dumbest human is a work of art beyond our measure—if only we can perceive him or her in full. So there is every reason to want to redo it. If I believe that God is our Father, God is our parent, I can add that parents do not control their children altogether. They are never in whole knowledge of their offspring. Parents can do their best with their children, but they still remain in part a mystery. I would even say that God is fascinated with the mystery we present to Him. God wants to know more

about many of us. Of course, it is not all full of white light and New Age sweets. Reincarnation can go wrong. One can do worse than one did the first time. After all, we are also here to serve. God is engaged in an heroic adventure. Which is to take His or Her notion of existence and carry it across the stars. For that, God needs humans to become more and more extraordinary. More wonderful. For that, we've got to develop. And this development comes out of rebirth. Out of being put in situations curiously parallel to those you failed in one life. I'll give a very crude example. If one was a coward, physically speaking, in certain ways, if one was, for example, terrified of heights, well then possibly in the next existence you are placed in a family of mountain climbers. As a child you may go through horrors because of this. But now you've got guides. Human guides who can carry you to a place you couldn't get to on your own in your previous life. If we go back to the initial question "why is one's death so important?"—it may be that one has a better sense at the end of what one did or didn't do in one's life and what one would like to be in one's next life. Maybe that provides coloration for the soul, and does it at the last moment. Maybe that even guides all those poor overworked monitors in all those immense bureaucratic halls of Karmic Reassignment.

JML: What happens to the souls of individuals if the person becomes a successful mountain climber and is no longer afraid of heights? If you have a long run of successful reincarnations and keep improving, what happens then? If you get as good as you are going to get?

NM: Forgive me, but I think that's a lame proposition. To begin with, the best mountain climbers remain afraid of heights. But they have learned how to live on such heights. As humans, we are still so far from being anywhere near any remote kind of perfection. Most of us are so underdeveloped, so frustrated, so minor in relation to what we could have been, every one of us, even those of us who are successful, that there's no need to speak of a superfluity of perfection. Besides, as I've just said, not every reincarnation is a success. God is trying to learn more about us. That is my basic point. God learns even as we do. Think of God as a protagonist rather than a mega-autocrat. A divine protagonist in the cosmos. And so, some of his artworks do well. But some don't. Besides, one's desire to be reincarnated is not necessarily well grounded. We don't know, we don't know. Some incarnations improve one's spiritual situation. Some don't. Our souls can also become less because we tried again and failed more severely. The hope

is that reincarnation as a general overall, near-universal system, works more often than it fails.

JML: As far as we know, our ancestors seem to go back three or four million years. Is it possible that there are souls from the earliest human beings who have been reincarnated?

NM: I'm going to get your professor very annoyed now, because I don't have a clue. *(NM laughs)* If you want me to guess, I can guess. One expedition to the side of this notion is that Karma itself may be embattled. Think of one of the great horrors of war, when too many people die at once, like Hiroshima. Or a Tsunami. When one hundred thousand souls are incinerated in one atomic blast, or a Tsunami hits, that may wreak great spiritual carnage. Karma may not be equipped to deal with so many deaths at once. That may well be one of the Devil's most profound urges. To mess up Karma. Destroy the main centers of reincarnation. As I've argued, reincarnation is God's Venue, God's means of repairing earlier misconceptions. I'm sure God has interest in all of us, but in varying degrees. God may well be like an overworked parent. So, God might feel,

after someone particular has died that that man or woman did not receive enough attention from Him. So God would look to improve that person's chances in the next incarnation. So, the divine judgment we may get is not heaven nor hell, but whether we are given a better or poorer chance the next time out. If we were one hell of a son-of-a-bitch in one life, then we may be born again under hideous circumstances in the next. That, it seems to me, is a more appropriate way to be punished for our sins than to suffer eternity in Hell.

JML: Given everything we've said, I don't see any reason why reincarnations can't go on for a couple of million years. Why not? No problem. Where is the rush?

NM: The real question may be: How much time does God have? If existence comes down to a race to convince the cosmos of God's special purpose, there may not be endless time. Other visions of existence, alien to us, may be seeking to over-take us. In which case, God could be in a great hurry. God might have less patience now than He had three hundred thousand years ago. That, of course, once again, is beyond me. I'm amazed by that professor. I keep coming back to him. The notion that philosophy

should have an answer for everything is anathema to me. It is the rock on which Fundamentalism will finally founder if the fundamentalists, that is, don't destroy us first.

ML: Well, there is usually some teleological sense among philosophers.

How is it going to turn out in the end?

NM: All right. I'll offer a provisional end. God has a vision of existence and God feels that his vision is more creative, more useful to the future of existence than other visions out in the cosmos.

JML: What is that vision?

NM: That life becomes more and more creative, diverse, splendid and incredible.

JML: OK. You have stated it at any rate.

NM: I can give you another vision of existence. It is not mine. It is that we are to sit in heavenly fold and listen to hymns that are beautiful because God

has put us in Heaven. Tell me, what is more final about that? This Heaven which is the same every day, where we do nothing because we have been good in the past?

JML: There is the vision in many religions that you merge with the universal mind. You merge with the mind of God, you become part and parcel of God. And you do not just exist in some amusement park or Club Med, but in pure intellectual bliss having been completely purged of all weaknesses and corruptions. Many religions posit that.

NM: It assumes that we're all here to get to a certain pre-determined place. If we keep our spirits clean enough, we will reach heavenly bliss. But I'm saying that heavenly bliss is not guaranteed. Everything we know about the nature of existence is that it is cruel, paradoxical, glorious, disappointing, tremendous, and often more modest than we expected. What we can hope for is to be part of a great creative process that is attempting to go forward into a better existence without knowing what the end is, or whether it will even be favorable. The only end that we know is that we are going to die. What we don't know is our end after death. Will there be one, will there not be? That's one question we do not know the answer to. We live without a

final certainty. Given that every one of our understandings comes down to a lack of knowledge about the end, why assume that God knows the end? That, too, is a very large assumption. Just because God created us, doesn't mean that God has every answer.

ML: American historians have debated the concept of what they call American Exceptionalism: the idea that the United States has a special role in history, perhaps even a divine role. Divine destiny. It goes back to the Puritans, back to Governor Bradford, to the City on the Hill. Does this notion mean anything to you? Does America have a special place in the divine project?

NM: I've written about American Exceptionalism, lately. I'm opposed to the disaster of what we're doing in Iraq, and I do blame American Exceptionalism. My feeling is that all humans belong to exceptionalism. Not just Americans. All of the globe is part of God's exceptionalism. To translate, it isn't that any particular country represents God's basic notion of how to do it, it is, rather, the human creature. I would even say that I see all of evolution as God's attempt to experiment with higher and higher forms in His animals. Doing so, God made errors along the way. The dinosaurs were

probably a large error. I would be hard-put to defend the horse-fly, or the octopus. Or the hippo, the alligator, the ant-eater. Bold experiments, but did they really succeed?

JML: All the same, why couldn't some humans be more successful in certain countries at certain times?

NM: All right, certain people in certain countries could be very important to God. But there could be one person in Thailand who is more important to God at this moment than all of America put together. Who knows? That's not the point. It's the implicit ugliness of vainglory to assume that America is the closest embodiment of God's desire? How can God put up, for god sakes, with suburbs and malls and superhighways and plastic? Not to mention the folly of assuming that democracy is a magic serum to be injected into the veins of ugly tyrannical brutalized lands.

JML: Well, maybe we've blown it. You know, in the beginning, the idea of American Exceptionalism came from the notion that they had it in Europe, and lost it. Blew it. There were endless wars and too much corruption. And we were a new start.

NM: I won't argue that. The Lord may have had certain hopes. Even one hundred and fifty years ago. But I don't think God has had much hope since the Second World War. We've blown it badly since then. And we've cheapened the very surface of life. We've ruined the freshness of the air, the cleanliness of the rivers. I don't want to rant. But at this point I have to say that America is not a country whose own spiritual goodness as a nation stands up to any kind of examination.

JML: I know when Kennedy was assassinated somebody said, and you quoted it, that God had withdrawn his blessing from America.

NM: I believe it was John Updike.

JML: That remark moved you. You thought he might be on to something there.

NM: Yes.

JML: Several times in conversations I've had with you, and in your writings, you've mentioned the possibility that God might have intended human beings to develop their telepathic powers.

NM: Yes.

JML: And in your novel Ancient Evenings some of the characters actually employ telepathic powers. I must add that modern novelists can, in a sense, read minds. Because they're always exploring what people are thinking. One of the great advances came, I suppose, when the novel moved into the human mind.

NM: When? In which century?

JML: Well, it started around a hundred years ago.

NM: No more? Dickens enters people's minds.

JML: Not like Joyce. Or Virginia Woolf.

NM: All right.

JML: Do your speculations about telepathy have anything to do with using this novelistic tool? I mean you certainly explore the consciousness of virtually all of your heroes. You rarely see characters from just the outside.

NM: Yes, but I don't think that I would lay claim to any more telepathy than is average. I'd say rather that novelists try to study society in various ways. Some novelists, at any rate. We try to understand how the social machine works. We also try to understand how characters who are different from ourselves seem to be put together. There is this notion that there's a little bit of ourselves in someone else. We can if we've done enough of the work over the years, we can yes, project out a notion of other lives that is complex and real. Sometimes the character comes alive even if he or she is most different from one's self. The best novelists can do that. They can go very far away from themselves. Parenthetically, I have always respected novelists who try for that as opposed to novelists who write about things that they know very well. They can be superb, but they don't venture out. I will say that telepathy is a very small part of all this. There might be writers who have telepathic powers, but I wouldn't lay such claim for myself.

JML: I do get a sense that you believe that years ago, perhaps ten thousand years ago, people might have been developing their powers of telepathy but since then it's atrophied.

NM: Absolutely. That's certain for me. I do believe that the divinity wanted us to be telepathic. God may not have been counting on electronics to do the job for us. Electronics may be the Devil's purview. God just assumed we would become more and more telepathic and in the course of that we'd develop more and there would be less need for technology which—my assumption—stifles God's Creation. Smog is no good for God's good air. Static is not good for our ears or His. I don't want to go through the old litany of all that's wrong with modern civilization. Since technology is here, I'd say we have to look upon our present history as God's attempt to deal with the Devil. In other words if the Devil succeeds in establishing technological shoots and outbursts and venues and avenues all through society, God has to deal with technology as well. But He comes in second. The devil is the pioneer in technology. So, I would assert.

JML: Right. Still, I wonder. One of the new phenomena that is sweeping not just the US but the world—in fact, the United States I understand, is behind many parts of the world, certainly Europe and Asia—is cell phones. Only half the people in the States use cell phones, but in Asia and in Europe it's sixty or seventy percent. Is it the opportunity to call up people all the time, any where in the world, when you want to confirm some thing or get some information or call your mother. Or call your lover. It's creating a whole new set of communications in the world that never existed before. How would you say that God and the Devil deal with this? Does it benefit either of them?

NM: Well, it could obviously benefit both of them. But given that I am an old curmudgeon, my feeling is that it's more of a mess than a help. Because I'm not all sure that instant communication with everyone alive is the *beau ideal*. Not at all. Often, the hunt for information is what enriches the use of it. Once the difficulty becomes part of the intellectual process, we tend to do more with it if we are truly serious. Everybody is talking these days about information glut. We're all buried under tremendous and usually superfluous amounts of information. That could be stultifying to imagination. But I can't speak with authority. If I were younger and were

using a cell phone all the time, I would say this thing is heinous, or, I love it. I would then be prepared to argue either way. Now, I'm just pleased that I can get a goddamn call through on a cell phone without losing the signal.

JML: I remember you were there at the birth of television. You pondered it, you had many theories about it and you've written about it. It seems to me that in many ways the cell phone is almost equal in its power.

NM: Well, let me just say I was never a great enthusiast about television...But I thought maybe there would be some good, new forms, and a rise in intelligence in the population. Only thing, I left the commercials out of it! I didn't anticipate the terrible impost that commercials would levy against our minds. The interruption of concentration. The blasting of concentration. But the cell phone has come too late for me to have strong feelings. I do know there is one bit of dialogue in almost every cell phone conversation. "I'm not hearing you very well." "OK, I'll shift to my land line."

JML: You've sometimes suggested that pure intellect may be closer to the Devil than the Lord. Which made me think, what about language? It is

perhaps the most complex and subtle creation of intellect. Where does language fit in to this discussion?

NM: Language does not come just from intellect. Language is the marriage of intellect and the senses. That's a huge difference. Technology, for example, tends to be divorced from the senses. Plastic is divorced from the senses. Most electronic machines are not agreeable to employ. You know, think of the old-fashioned iron vise in a man's workshop. It makes cranking sounds as you tighten it up, and you get a sense of whether the wood is being held properly. Not being crushed and not too loose. You have very little of that sensuous cognition with technological machines. At best, you're reading dials, and your eyes can have a little play with the subtlety of the dials. But you can't ask technology to enrich your senses. On the other hand, language comes out of the senses. Half of language is onomatopoeia. We love different languages for their qualities, their separate characteristics as sounds. I love German for its guttural richness. French for the emphasis it offers the base of my nose and throat. I love English for the postures possible in English, the manners one can employ in speaking it, Spanish for the fire in your heart. The intensity of emotion, the irony. Ditto for Italian in its way. For its sense of bravura. All these reactions come from our

senses. There is one rule of thumb about language. If you're in a new country and you want to learn the tongue you get a girlfriend of that nationality who doesn't speak your language and you'll learn much more quickly. So no, I reject the question.

JML: Well it did occur to me that I've never heard you speak philosophically about language.

NM: I had all sorts of theories years ago. But I never got down to grips with it. I do have these notions still. I think particular consonants in language have, for example, specific qualities. I think "R" almost always has to do with anger, rage, ire, fury, redness, roar. "L" has to do with love—lassitude, leisure, likelihood; "L" is tender... "S" is sibilant. "S" suggests hissing, displeasure, sinuosity, snakes. I tried to make up a rule for all the consonants, but it gets hard after a while. R, L and S are the easiest. "B" is almost always impact. "B", "K" you know. Break. Sounds that implode upon your ear tend to have relations to B, K. F....

JML: Well what is the relationship between God and the Devil to language?

NM: That's absolutely beyond me. Look, look! Animals come close to speaking. I had a dog fifty years ago, a standard poodle. Immensely bright. I always felt that his greatest pain, his true soul-suffering—because dogs in my opinion do have souls—and in fact parenthetically there is one very large but unascertainable notion, it may be that in Karma we go back into the animal chain again. In any event, this dog was extraordinary. He made sounds, truly tortured un-dog-like sounds in his throat. He was trying to speak English to me. Sounds you couldn't begin to spell out. I could make them for the tape recorder but you could never transcribe them. That dog wanted to speak. Dog to man just as equal as man to man. So, I could propose that all through the stages of evolution, God, too, was developing—God was discovering language. There may have been a point where the insects were chirping and humming, making all these needle-like sounds and God said, "There's got to be something better than this." God may well have been discovering higher possibilities to his universe. God, in that sense, rose from the slime along with us. This notion is more heartening to me than any belief that the divinity plays games with us, lays down the law for us, delivers us a complete manual on how to live. And that's the end of it. Just keep your nose clean. Cling to the Ten Commandments, Buster, and keep those nostrils immaculate. Hell, why not look rather upon the Ten

Commandments as a moral essence that humans extracted from human experience good and ill before the earliest script-writers sat down to write up the myth of Moses coming down from the mount with the tablets.

JML: Change of subject. You have little regard for Dante.

NM: Well, I've only read him in English translation. I'm sure in Italian he's much better. But in English I can't say I was impressed.

JML: You called him Johnny One Note.

NM: Yes. He's got nine circles of hell. That's a fascinating concept. Nine worsening circles of degradation, of defoliation of the leaves of one's soul. Yet, reading Dante in English, I can't tell one circle from another. They all stink. Everybody keeps suffering in very much the same way.

JML: No, no no

NM: That's what I got from my reading. I'm sorry.

JML: You didn't see the diversity of suffering?

NM: Not compared with what could have been done. I felt he was settling a lot of personal scores. Every author, sooner or later, will show his bad, ugly, mean, small side. But Dante abused the privilege. So many citizens of Florence were skewered. Too much of that. Compare him to Homer...Dante in my mind is... What's the word I'm looking for?

JML: Petty?

NM: At the least. Small. Much smaller. Now, in Italian I might have to change my mind to a certain extent. But not in English.

JML: That's what T.S. Eliot said. You have to be able to read the Italian to do it... And then it's fantastic. It's a fantastic language.

NM: Well, Dante probably had an insight into sounds. It isn't just because Eliot said it. T.S. Eliot can be a bore just like any of us. No, it's more that I recognize that it's very hard for me to believe (on the basis of reading Dante in English and deciding that he's overrated) that I know more than all the

people who read him in Italian and love him. On the other hand, I'm most suspicious of Literature Courses. From the word go, the student is told that this or that is most important.

JML: Exactly. But you admire Milton.

NM: Milton was not settling a lot of private scores. I have the feeling Milton was grappling with the same questions I'm wrestling with. Yes, I have a lot of respect for Milton. But not for Dante. Maybe you can show me sometime where the suffering intensifies. I couldn't see where. By the way, a thought in passing: Who came up with the nine innings of Baseball? Was it somebody who had read Dante? In a really exciting baseball game each inning becomes more and more like a deeper circle of hell. If everything is at stake and it's the last game of the World Series and the game is close all the way, by the ninth inning, everybody is in the ninth circle.

JML: I don't know where the nine innings came from. All right, here's my last question. Have recent geopolitical events reaffirmed or undercut your theological beliefs? I mean, has the reelection of George Bush confirmed your belief system?

NM: I can answer that. Perhaps too simply. For four years I've felt that George Bush is one of the Devil's creatures. And I don't mean this in any large paranoid sense. You see, I believe that God and the Devil are in all of us. And it's very easy to find varying portions in oneself of one side or the other. But I suspect that George W. Bush is drenched with the Devil. Every time he feels that Jesus is speaking to him, I would bet it is the Devil doing a first-rate impersonation of the Son. One of the Devil's greatest talents is to talk like Jesus. And visit us in our dreams. And tell us how to do it, "Jesus loves you, Jesus is with you. Jesus is telling you to do this." Our war in Iraq has been so hideous and stupid and needless that it could only have been begun for the lowest reason. Which was that America needed a war to begin to unify our own country. But if a country can't be unified, without military subterfuges, then I say let it go down hill until it finds its honest unity. Don't give it a hypodermic. This is like using steroids. The war in Iraq has been steroidal for America. So in that sense, I think the Devil is winning right now in America, yes. And it's no small concern. I think people are beginning to feel this all over the world. Obviously, all too many feel that way in France, in large parts of England, in Germany, and to a great extent in Italy and Spain. Certainly in the Middle East. You can't even

begin to get into that. In Israel, being Jewish myself, I have to wonder how the hell they feel at this point. I remember many years ago at Norman Podhoretz's house, at a time when we were still friends, Rabin was there. He was a general at the time. And I remember saying to him—this was 45 years ago—“You know, if you get into a deep military relationship with America, it's going to screw you.” And he looked at me, as if I was such an innocent, and he said in effect, “What kind of choices do you think we have?” And, yes, I think we both were probably right. Depending on America for its military strength has done something to Israel that is irreparable. On the other hand, they had no alternative. The Arab nations gave them none. So I don't sit in judgment on Israel, but I do inveigh against America for going into war with Iraq.

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