

THEOLOGY
INTERVIEWS

NORMAN
MAILER

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Metaphysical Discussion I

MICHAEL LENNON: Scientists now believe that the expansion of the universe is accelerating. Does this circumstance fit in with your ideas? Is the ever-expanding and accelerating nature of the cosmos reflected in your concept of a god who can grow and develop?

NORMAN MAILER: Let me say, it's not a topic I am drawn to.

I start from another direction. Having been a novelist all my working life, I may know a little about human beings. I should. They have been my study. You might say my theological notions come out of such questions as who are we, what are we, how do we develop, why, indeed, are we in existence? And is there the presence of a Creator in what we do?

So the larger cosmic speculations are of less interest to me. In truth, I would hate to rely on the ever-changing state of advanced physics for my ideas.

ML: It isn't just the expansion of the universe; it's the fact that the expansion is speeding up.

NM: Yes, but that's not in my compass.

ML: In places, you've said that God and the Devil are lesser divinities in liege to larger powers who might be the ultimate creators. Who or what do you feel is the ultimate power in the universe? Who created the universe?

NM: I feel the same way about the ultimate Creator as I feel about the expanding universe: too large for my speculations. But I don't see any inherent logical contradiction in saying that I believe our God created the world we live in, and is in constant conflict with the Devil. That stimulates my thought.

ML: In "St. George and the Godfather," you say, "The world's more coherent if God exists, and twice coherent if He exists like us." I'm afraid this logic smacks of wish-fulfillment. God need not exist merely to satisfy your desire for order. Perhaps the world is incoherent, perhaps the cosmos is disordered. . .

NM: Look, I would answer: Where does my desire for order come from? Not only do we have a fundamental desire for order, we have an obvious tendency as well toward disorder—a true conflict between order and disorder. So I say, let's search for the source.

ML: OK. But in most religious systems, there is a relationship between cosmology and ethics, between the nature of the deity and humanity. The Puritans called it "God's Providence"--

NM: Wait a moment.

ML: No, I want to get to the relationship between the nature of the deity and codes for human living. In Judaism and Christianity, for example, God's nature is suggested in the rules for living provided to humans by God. What is the relationship in your system between the nature and shape of the ruling forces in our sphere and the ways in which humans should conduct themselves?

NM: Oh, Christ, Mike, I don't really like these questions. I don't think in these formulae.

I want to get to something more basic to my thought, which is that much of the world's present-day cosmology is based on works of Revelation, the Old and New Testament, the Koran, yet, for me, Revelation itself is the question mark. Revelation, as such, is not God's words but ours back then, words debated back then, if you will, in committee, and assembled by working theologians with separate agendas. After all, why would God bother to speak in that fashion? There's no need. God could have imparted such thoughts directly to us. Revelation has always struck me as a near-ineradicable power trip by now for those humans with highly mixed and usually unsavory motives to enable them to lead the crowd. They and their followers quote from Scripture constantly, use it as their guide-rail and run into intolerable contradictions which cripple their own power to reason. I will go so far as to say that to be a Fundamentalist is to exist as a human being whose reasoning powers are beaten into paralysis before every question to which they do not already have an answer.

I confess, therefore, I have very little interest in organized religion. When I study its practices, they make no sense to me. I've always felt that Revelation is a heavy impost upon our human condition. I see God, rather, as a Creator, as the greatest artist. I see human beings as His most developed artworks. I also see animals as His artworks. When I think of evolution, what stands out most is the fabulous study of the possibilities—the likelihoods for success or failure—that went on in God as an artist. So, I think of all the errors made as well as the successes. In marine life, for example, some fish have hideous eyes—they protrude from the head in tubes 10 inches long. Think of all those animals of the past with their peculiar ugliness, their misshapen bodies, worm life, frog life, vermin life, that myriad of insects—so many unsuccessful experiments. These are ways the Artist was trying, this great artist, this divine artist, was trying to express something incredible—which is to say beyond one's artistic reach—and it was not, for certain, an easy process. Indeed, it went on forever! We'll get to

the Devil in a bit but I would guess that evolution was interfered with by the Devil. I think there were false trips that God engaged in because the Devil deluded Him—or Her. Forgive me if I keep speaking of God as "Him," that's a habit that's come down to me from Revelation. Obviously, to speak of God as "Him" or "Her" is off-putting, but to speak of "Him/Her" or "It" is worse.

In any event, it makes sense to me that this war between God and the Devil has been present in evolution. Whether God had a free hand for quite a while or the Devil was meddling in it from the start, what we see in evolution either way are endless mistakes, species that were badly conceived. Sometimes a young artist has to make large errors before he or she can go further.

I can hear the obvious rejoinder: "There's Norman Mailer, an artist of medium rank looking to give himself honor and nobility and importance by speaking of God as an artist." I'm perfectly aware that that accusation can be laid. I have to recognize that.

All I say here can be declared no more than a projection of my own needs.

ML: Well, you have spoken of God as a novelist. . .

NM: No, I haven't. What I've said upon occasion is that God is a better novelist than the novelists—that's not the same thing. God does not have to write novels.

I would like to think that I believe in God as the Artist, the Creator, because it makes the most sense to me. Whether I have a private agenda, or whether I am being an objective philosopher (to the extent that one can contend with that particular oxymoron—objective philosopher!)—so be it. Whether guilty or innocent, this is the argument I advance: God is an artist. And like an artist, God has successes, God has failures.

ML: Evil, you've said more than once, is growing in power—especially in the last hundred years.

NM: Yes.

ML: Do you think there was ever a time in the past, a golden age, when good was in the ascendancy?

NM: How would I know?

ML: Well, if you say things are getting worse. . .

NM: Let's say that in my lifetime, certain things have gotten much better and other things have gotten much worse, so much so that latter-day events would stagger the imagination of the 19th century. If, for example, the flush toilet is an improvement in existence, and you can advance arguments against it which I won't get into—but if it is an improvement, if the automobile is an improvement—again, huge arguments—if technological progress is an improvement, then look at the price that was paid. It's not too hard to argue that the gulags, the concentration camps, the atom bomb came out of technological improvement. For the average person in the average developed country, for the average or even poor person, life, if measured in terms of comfort, is somewhat better than in the middle of the 19th century, but by the measure of our

human development as ethical, spiritual, responsible and creative human beings, it may have gotten worse.

I can't speak for other languages, but I do know the English language has been debased in the last half-century. Young, bright children no longer speak well; the literary artists of 50 and 100 years ago are, on balance, superior to the literary artists of today. The philosophers have virtually disappeared—at least, any philosophers who make a difference.

ML: I take it, in your view of history, the Enlightenment and the rise of science were not steps forward.

NM: Mixed steps forward. Forward and retrograde. It all depends on what God intended. I could give you a speculation—a rank speculation: Perhaps God intended that human beings would get to the point where they could communicate telepathically. To the degree that one wished to reach certain people in small or large numbers, one could transmit thoughts at them. One could create operas in one's mind if one were musically talented, and beam

them out to all who were willing to listen. All the means and modes we have of modern communication may be substitutes, ugly technological substitutes, for what was potentially there.

For, mind you, ask the average person, myself certainly included, "How do we see the image on television, how does it work?" it's an absolute mystery when you get down to it. The best engineers in the world can't tell you how it happens, why waves of sound striking the auditory nerve produce specific pieces of hearing. No one, for instance, can tell you what light is—they're still arguing over whether it's a wave or a particle or both. I could go on with that. My fundamental argument is whether the Enlightenment was for good or for ill. To assume automatically the Enlightenment was good means you automatically have to say, yes, the Enlightenment created marvelous things and marvelous freedom for many, many people. It also created the worst abuses of communism and fascism—so much worse than the Divine Right

of Kings. It also helped to foster the subtle, insidious abuses of technology.

I've said before in other places, technology represents less pleasure and more power. It may be that we are supposed to arrive at our deepest achievements through pleasure and pain, rather than through static, interruption, mood disruption, and traffic jams.

ML: What you said about communism and fascism—I can see communism as a fruit of the Enlightenment, but isn't fascism a reaction against it? The fact that it cites the blood, the blood-consciousness, all that?

NM: One of the cheats of Nazi-ism was their implicit claim that they were going back to the blood when in fact they were abusing human instinct. The extermination camps were an absolute violation of any notion of blood. The Nazis were cheating people of their deaths. They informed the camp inmates they were going to have a shower. Into the chamber they all marched, took off their clothes, happy to have a shower what with all those lice on them,

hoping the shower would be hot. In they went, and were gassed. Their last reaction in life had to be, "you cheated me!" They die in a panic. That's not going back to the blood, to instinct, to preparing oneself to enter the next world. They were obliterated by their own excess of reason. They were ready to assume that even their vile guards were capable of sanitary concerns for them, the imprisoned. How wrong they were!

Reason, ultimately, looks to strip us of the notion there is a Creator. The moment you have a society built on reason alone, (which was the aim of the Enlightenment) then individual power begins to substitute for the concept of a Creator. What has characterized just about every social revolution is that sooner or later several leaders take it over, and quickly turn cannibalistic. Only one leader is left, an absolute dictator. Once you accept the notion that there is no god, the ultimate station for the Left, the Right, or the Center is totalitarianism.

ML: Are you saying that the Enlightenment was a time of victory for the Devil?

NM: It's considerably more complicated than that. We have to ask: What is the relation of God, the Devil, and the human to one another? I think it is a warring relationship among three forces who are separate yet intertwined.

Let me assume there's a Devil always present in human affairs, very much present. Why? Because the Devil is another god who wishes to preempt the god that exists. The Devil has other notions of what existence could be. I'd go so far as to assume that technology is the Devil's invention. Like God, the Devil wants to have power in the universe. God wants that power to satisfy His vision of what the universe could be.

ML: Do you ignore the presence of Christ?

NM: Christ may well be God's son, a physical and spiritual entity that God decided was necessary for humanity. Jesus may well have been real. If I wish to argue against revealed dogma, that

doesn't mean my passion is for it all to go. Jesus does make a kind of sense that most of the rest doesn't. Jesus as a principle of love, compassion, forgiveness and mercy is something we can all comprehend. We feel it in ourselves. We feel it as the best part of ourselves, the gentlest, richest, most generous part. But Revelation in company with organized religion repels me because of the philosophical inconsistency of their God as the Almighty, God the All-Powerful. I think that's where the philosophical trouble begins. It's in the idea that God is All-Good and All-Powerful. The twentieth century demonstrated the contradiction to that, and most dramatically. How can we not face up to the fact that if God is All-Powerful, He cannot be All-Good? Or She cannot be All-Good. If God is All-Good, then God is not All-Powerful.

To answer this contradiction, theologians have been tying themselves into philosophical knots for the last ten centuries.

ML: Much of your thinking seems to be premised on the event of the Holocaust. I wonder if there had never been Hitler, would your notion of a limited, embattled god have been conceived? Is Hitler the final thing that pushed you into that belief?

NM: Being Jewish, the fair answer to that is probably yes. But there still would have been the gulags. And the failure of Bolshevism. The noblest social idea to come along, the most intense form of socialism, proved to be a monstrosity. That alone would be enough. Then came the atom bomb, the fact that 100,000 people could be wiped out at a stroke. And this in the early stages of nuclear development. So if you eliminate all three of those, Hitler, gulags, atom bombs, then maybe I couldn't have come to these ideas. But historically speaking, you can't perform such an excision. Those three horrors dominate the 20th century. Not to mention the trench warfare of the First World War.

ML: The whole problem of evil—Voltaire heard about the earthquakes in Lisbon in 1755 and said the destruction proved

there was no God. Throughout our history humans have questioned God whenever there was an earthquake, a disaster—of course, many of these were natural disasters. That was bad enough. But, of course, why would God allow a natural disaster? You can't blame any of that on humans. That was Voltaire's point. At least we can blame the Holocaust on human evil or the Devil. In part, at least. We can't blame an earthquake in Lisbon in which 100,000 people were killed—we can't blame that on human beings.

NM: No.

ML: So that forced many philosophical thinkers of the Enlightenment into their—they said, "That's it. God can't possibly exist. This is ridiculous." But if you take a step back, you can say: Maybe we're looking at too small a scale. Yes, six million people were exterminated with untold suffering. The suffering is so great it's impossible for us to conceive of it. It's horrifying to an extreme degree to anyone who's ever looked at the photographs or read the

accounts. But maybe, in the larger scheme of things, God was allowing this to happen to send a message to humanity on how far it had slipped, and he was even willing to sacrifice his Chosen People, or a great number of them, in order to send a message to humanity that it was time to embrace Christianity, embrace love, do whatever had to be done.

NM: Let me interrupt here—

ML: Let me finish—

NM: Wouldn't God be quite a dolt to keep doing that if it didn't work?

ML Strong medicine, I'm saying. More and more—the earthquake in Lisbon doesn't do it—OK, we'll have trench warfare. And then we'll have gulags, the Holocaust, then the threat of the atomic bomb. And indeed, the atomic bomb was dropped but after all, we have not had a nuclear holocaust—we backed away. Maybe we've learned and we've backed away from the brink of a nuclear disaster and spared the world.

NM: I think we have. It's possible that even the Devil was appalled by the bombs. Used to satiety, nuclear warfare could destroy all of his technology/

ML: So maybe it worked.

NM: Let's go back to the Voltaire's earthquake in Lisbon. Let me give you my notion of God as the artist—that is, a God limited in power. For example, why are there volcanoes? I would answer: Because God is not a perfect engineer. That makes as much sense to me as God punishing us and punishing us without compensatory result. It's very hard to argue that these acts of nature engender more than a temporary frisson of religiosity in most people.

ML: Well, then, returning to your triangle of God, the Devil and the human being. You've talked about God but you haven't talked much about the Devil.

NM: Not as yet. The notion I have of the Devil depends to a good degree on Milton. I think he fashioned a wonderful approximation to what the likelihood might be. In one way or another, there was a

profound argument between God and very high angels—or between God and gods, and the result was finally that one god won—the God we speak of as our Creator, God won, but it was a Pyrrhic victory. Because Lucifer, if you will, did very well indeed. Thereafter, the war was on. And this war has gone on ever since, gone on in us.

Whatever the form this takes, my understanding is that God and the Devil are intertwined in all our actions. Even as I'm speaking, I could have the best of motives and the worst of motives working at the same time. As I've said many times over the years, when we work with great energy, it's because our best motive and our worst motive, or to put it another way, God and the Devil, are equally engaged in the outcome, and so they're collaborating with us for a period. There can be collaboration between opposites, as well as war. This collaboration can consist of certain agreements—"The rules of war will be. . ." And of course, the rules can be broken. The Devil can betray God. Once in a while,

God also breaks the rules—with a miracle. But my argument is that when we act with great energy, it is because God and the Devil both have an interest in the outcome. Whereas when we work with little energy it's because they're not only at odds, but are dampening or countermanding each other's impact upon us.

ML: What if God happens to be dominating us? Wouldn't that be better? Couldn't we argue that it would be better to have God motivating us more than the Devil? Many heroes in history have been so motivated by the good that they have gone on to achieve great things. Like Constantine—"in this sign, conquer—in hoc signo, vinces!" and goes on to—

NM: You can't argue that way. Claim, if you wish, that Constantine was a fabulous person who helped Christianity to triumph—indeed, he did. You could also say he may have helped to destroy something more fertile than Christianity which was the richness of pagan belief. Our latter-day troubles might have started on the instant that Constantine decided to become a Christian.

I'm not going to accept a discussion that allows you to moor your philosophical vessel at any point alleged to be a rock in the historic stream.

ML: Let me put it this way: if schizophrenia is on the rise—I don't know that it is—but if it is on the rise in human affairs—

NM: I'd be surprised if it weren't.

ML: All right, would that be an indication that the collaboration between God and the Devil was not working well?

NM: Let's not emphasize a "collaboration" between God and the Devil. I've spoken of it as "the accepted rules of the game." Take an average contest in professional football. Two teams who fight each other on the field with skill and bestiality, each side laboring to win. Nonetheless, there is a whole set of laws that prevail.

After they tackle a guy, they don't kick him in the head. I'm saying that in order to keep it flowing, God and the Devil have certain understandings with one another. What they are, I couldn't begin to try to say. We don't come very close to the nature of

mysteries but sometimes we can obtain a sense of their relations. The only clue I have is that when there's great energy available—then I expect They are in a temporary collaboration. I would assert that we do have God and the Devil within us in varying degrees. Perhaps one can be—just guessing—as elevated as 70% good, 30% evil. Or, the reverse, 70% evil and 30% good. Maybe once in a great while there's a saint—90/10.

But generally speaking, we are mired in good and evil. Mired because we spend most of our time in trade-offs, in the exhaustion of efforts because one part of us wants to do something and the other part is opposed.

Very often our good fights an offensive battle against our evil—that does go on. We know that. The Christian churches are built on that: fight the evil in your soul.

ML: St. Michael the Archangel.

NM: Yes. But my argument is that it has become a three-way situation. It isn't that we're passive onlookers while God and the

devil wage their war within us and we, in our turn, have nothing to offer. We are the third force and don't always know which side we're on in any given moment, or are, sometimes, independent of both.

If you'll accept my notion that technology may be the most advanced, extreme, brilliant and dazzling artistic creation of the Devil—for technology, of course, does incredible things—then you get a real sense of why some people would be more leagued with the Devil than devoted to God. Half the human universe must be by now on the side of technology. Maybe more than half.

ML: Let me push your idea a little further. You are saying that when you have the most energy, when you're moving forward, it's because your good and your bad motives are in synch—wouldn't that argue, then, that when everyone felt like that more and more, and we had this great sense of energy, that we're moving forward, accomplishing positive results: happiness results—

NM: War also results. It's not simple. What I want to get rid of, if nothing else, is the fundamental notion that Revelation will simplify our existence. I say the human being has to take several steps forward into living with the notion that there are no answers, there are only questions, profound questions, and that that is ennobling. It is ennobling to face existence with the recognition that you're not going to have answers, merely hypotheses that you can test for validity by the ongoing inner experiences of your life.

ML: The Manicheans see God and the Devil as brothers who fight until the end of time but at the end, good will defeat evil. Is that where you depart from the Manicheans?

NM: Absolutely. We don't know the end—we could end with the failure of the good. Because if the good is guaranteed to win at the end, then all we're in is a fixed wrestling match. "Where are we, which city? Atlantic City? Or is it Pittsburgh? Oh, Pittsburgh. Good. That's my turn to win tonight." If goodness is assured an

ultimate victory over evil, then we are in a comedy, an ugly comedy considering how we suffer in the course of the contest.

ML: Go back to football—no football team ever assumes it is written they will win a big game. A victory brings the joy that it was not predetermined in advance—it was achieved. I'm saying existence consists of a continuing set of achievements and defeats, achievements and defeats,

ML: Forever and ever?

NM: No. But certainly up to the point where humankind enters into some definitive metamorphosis of existence, arriving perhaps at the notion that God is not the most powerful deity in the universe—but can succeed, nonetheless, in promulgating His vision into other worlds. It may be that our vision can join eventually with God's vision. Perhaps our mission is to travel out across the stars—not necessarily in space ships, but by our spirits ready to seek to make a better universe. But, of course, we can

certainly fail. Who knows what other forces are out there in the galaxies? Dare I mention black holes in space?

ML: OK, but you started by saying all this was too large for us.

NM: It is, but I've strayed from the points I planned to talk about.

ML: Let me take up then the "four last things" of Christian eschatology—death, judgment, heaven, hell. You have commented, at least obliquely, on all but one, heaven. Why have you given heaven such short shrift?

NM: Because I don't believe in it.

ML: Without a vision of heaven, your belief system is unlikely to draw many adherents.

NM: I'm not trying to found a religion. I think if these ideas of mine have any value, a great deal of time will go by before there are adherents. First of all, our child-like notion of heaven has to be relinquished.

ML: But not hell?

NM: I don't believe in absolute hell any more than I believe in heaven, certainly not in hell as a place of eternal punishment. It strikes me as prodigiously wasteful. I remember a lovely religious lady named Anne Freemantle, a fine writer, once said, "I think God looks for a very tidy universe." I thought about that for a long time

ML: You set The Deer Park: a Play, in hell. Hell is something you refer to all the time. It's a constant reference. Heaven is absent. But you talk about judgment and death, of course.

NM: It was perfectly legitimate, I felt, to put my characters in hell because hell's a point of reference for everyone. Everyone believes in hell, and much more readily than they do in heaven. Heaven is harder to conceive. What we all know is that the most perfect moments in our lives don't last for long. Extraordinary moments are perishable. Whereas we can be in hell for months, then years, we can live in towering depressions. Hell, therefore, is much more available to human beings as a set of imaginative propositions. It

was easy for me to situate the play of The Deer Park in hell. It gave a springboard to the drama.

Yet, I still don't believe in hell as eternal punishment. I've always felt Dante is the most overrated great writer of all, because he is—we must face this dire fact—Dante is Johnny One-Note. Hell has dimensions. Some parts of it are critically worse than others. We can approach that when we talk about reincarnation.

But my notion remains that the only heaven and hell we ever receive—the only judgment that comes to us—is by way of reincarnation. To wit, we're given a better possibility in our next life as a reward, or we are born to a worse one.

In other words, I'm not interested in absolute moral judgments, eternal heaven, eternal hell. To the contrary. Just think of what it means to be a good man or bad. What, after all, is the measure of difference? The good guy may be 65% good and 35% bad—that's a very good guy. The average decent fellow might be 54 good, 46% bad—and the average mean spirit is the reverse. So

for that—say, I'm 60% bad and 40% good—for that, must I suffer eternal punishment?

OK, you as a Catholic may come back to me and say there are such places as purgatory and limbo, but they are temporary conditions before one goes to final judgment.

The argument I would advance is that heaven and hell make no sense if the majority of humans have such a mixture of good and evil within us. There's no reason to receive a reward if you're 57/43—why sit around forever in an elevated version of Club Med? That's almost impossible to contemplate. You remember the fun George Bernard Shaw had with his expectation of heaven as a prodigiously boring place where Don Juan nonetheless wished to reside because at least you could think there. That was the best Shaw could come up with as a concept for heaven—at least you can think well and carefully in heaven. But my notion is that your partial reward or partial punishment, which I do believe exists—is meted out in your reincarnation. How else account for the ongoing

feeling of conscience that we all seem to have? Conscience is there for good cause; conscience is vital—if, for nothing else, it's there because it gives us a clue to what is likely to be our next future. Will we be reborn in a situation that offers more opportunities? Or, for punishment, will there be fewer good chances? Will our next life be easier or more painful?

Now, this notion is simple, but people who are fixed entirely on notions of eternal hell and eternal heaven can't come near to it. They cannot comprehend what I'm talking about. Yet, for those who are wondering if there is a viable scheme to the afterlife, these assumptions can become meaningful. Why do I strive to become a better person? Can it be because I wish to have a somewhat better life the next time out? If I am going to be reborn, I want to be able to do more with my next incarnation than this last one.

I have a joke to tell at this point: I die and go up before the Monitoring Angel. He says, "Oh, Mr. Mailer, we're so glad to see you. We've been waiting. Let me tell you I consider it an

agreeable assignment to serve as your Monitor. Now, tell us—we ask everyone this—what would be your idea of a proper reincarnation for yourself? Because you've been certified for that. Which is very nice—not everyone passes on to reincarnation. So, tell me, what would you like to be in your next life?"

Karl I say, "Well, you know, everything considered, I think I'd like to be a black athlete. I won't argue with where you position me at birth—it can be under poor, ugly circumstances, I'm willing to take that on—but I would like to be a black athlete."

ML The Monitor's face clouds. "Oh, Mr. Mailer," he says, "everyone these days wants to be a black athlete. Right there we're over-subscribed dreadfully. So, let me see where you have been put. . ." He looks it up. He says, "I'm afraid we've got you down for cockroach. But—there is good news—you'll be the fastest cockroach on the block."

All right—we're going to be reincarnated. Whether we know what our reincarnation will be, I doubt. I expect it will be full of surprises, some most unhappy.

ML: Whenever you've spoken of reincarnation, you've done so in an ironic manner. You talk about directives in the Bureau of Karmic Reassignment. But I don't recall your ever talking about the likelihood of the reassignments. In your mind, how does reincarnation work? Who controls the process?

NM: God.

ML: Let me talk in these inascertainable concepts. Does it tie in to God's need for humans to be soldiers in His future cosmic war? Is it an operation run altogether by God? Are all souls recycled? Are new ones created?

NM: Let's see if we can work through these one by one. First, I would assume that God has ultimate hegemony. I am sure there are any number of monitoring angels. It's a bureaucracy, if you will. We don't have to be that precise about it. Where did our

human bureaucracy come from? I feel most of our social forms derive from celestial forms. In other words, bureaucracies could be human representations of the notion of how it might work—and not work—in the heavens. We can't stand bureaucracy because of the boredom, repetition and slowness. But it may be that there are elements in heaven that do work more efficiently. Angels at the switchboard rather than humans. Heavenly bureaucracies may effect their work better than our earthly ones. Still, I see that part of it as comparable to bureaucracy.

ML: You said not all souls are recycled.

NM: I believe the soul is a gift from God. Of course, you can abuse any living gift to the point where it does not survive. Any number of people may end up by saying, "All I want is a little peace. Let me sleep forever." They may be given just that.

ML: So, such a termination is not necessarily a function of evil. . .

NM: No, not of evil—but it is giving up. If the complications of life and the exhaustion of contending with all the little gods and

devils in yourself burn you out, there can come a point where the soul loses its desire to exist. You see, reincarnation is a gamble. You could do worse the next time. Fear of an even more painful existence may convince you to throw in your hand. That is a spiritual suicide, the opposite of literal physical suicide. I think people do commit physical suicide because they feel they're in danger if they don't—that their soul will expire before their body. Gary Gilmore was a perfect example. Why did he so desire to be executed? Because he expected his soul would expire in prison and he was a great believer in the value of his own ongoing soul.

ML: You are saying that when a soul does expire, it doesn't go to heaven, or to hell—it just ceases to exist.

NM: Yes. It's gone. It's in a true cemetery.

ML: Are new souls being created?

NM: I don't talk much to people who believe in reincarnation because I don't like their jargon. But, yes, people who believe in reincarnation do talk about new souls or "young souls"—and, yes,

I would expect God creates new souls. That doesn't mean the new presence is an angel who comes to visit us on earth—to the contrary. God may say, "I've been studying the Devil and his terrible propensities. Let us see if we can conceive of a soul who will be able to war with the Devil a little more effectively, a new soul who will have many of the qualities of the Devil but can transmute them, transform them, elevate our sense of spirit even in the dirtiest, ugliest, foulest places. We can call on Dostoyevsky at this point. God may have decided that an iota of goodness in an evil soul can be immensely important.

ML: You hardly speak of the casualties in this war between God and the Devil.

NM: While the soul is a separate being from the body, I would suppose that the soul also has its period of existence. A particular soul might expire after a single earthly existence, another could be reincarnated a number of times, but doubtless, there's a limit to it, yes, souls do expire, I must suppose.

ML: Wear and tear, so to speak?

NM: Wear and tear, so to speak. Indeed. Just as God may finally expire, or the Devil. There are forces out there completely beyond us who wouldn't mind seeing the total collapse of one, the other, or both. We may be speaking of a force that consists of the drive to nothingness. Nothingness may be a huge power out in the great cosmic universe. It may desire the extinction of the universe. To repeat: We have yet to explain black holes in space.

ML: You've always said you're on the side of being.

NM: Yes, but it's like saying, "I'm a Yale man," or "Loyal to Harvard." The built-in pitfall of these conversations is that we are always on the verge of sounding all too hollow. The reason I nevertheless presume to take this route is that I am weary of the philosophical paradoxes and evasions that good Christians tie themselves up in, those mutually exclusive conundrums, where they simply don't have an answer they can follow down to the core. The set of beliefs I offer here makes sense at least to me. Be it

said: Having a view of the universe that makes sense to yourself is, I think, Jung's finest prescription for mental health. One of his profound conclusions was that nobody could be cured of their neurosis until they found their own vision of God. That is a fabulous idea. I believed it before I could articulate it so I was naturally excited when I came across that thought in his work.

ML:: Many people who believe in reincarnation would say they have retained some sense of their previous life. You've always said that you don't remember.

NM: My feeling is there's a very good reason why not—I believe there's a valve in us that shuts off recollections of any previous existence. Think what your life would be if you knew about your three or four previous lives. My memory is already failing for the one life I'm aware of. How could I handle the confusion of other lives that were also mine? I do think, however, that there are deep instincts in us about previous incarnations. Sometimes we have reactions to events that are inexplicable. Something inside says,

"Don't take another step in this direction." Or "I will pursue this course even if it makes no sense to me whatsoever." Some people are maniacs on motorcycles—what do they get from it? Something profound. Partly from this life—they're curing hostilities, aggressions and rages they can only solve on a motorcycle that is going fast on a wet road. But maybe it derives from a previous life when they were terrified of any commitment to danger and endeavor.

ML: So many people who believe in reincarnation have self-aggrandizing memories of the past. "Oh, I was in Cleopatra's court."

NM: I can't stand that.

ML: It kind of put me off reincarnation.

NM: Yes, that particular vanity is atrocious. Devil-driven, probably. It's unpleasant in the same way people who are devout Christians believe they're going to heaven because they're steadfast in their belief. Either way, it is self-aggrandizement.

ML: At the end of Ancient Evenings, which I've been re-reading over the last few days, Meni the Second, the young Meni, says, "Purity and goodness are less to Osiris than strength." Which is a restatement of what Cherry says in An American Dream: "God is weaker because I didn't turn out well." Add to that Rojack's belief that "God was not love but courage; love came as a reward." You return to this idea many times in your books. Especially in Harlot's Ghost. I can see the force of this idea, but couldn't it be argued that love can create strength just as courage generates love?

NM: Yes, it can be argued. It is still a question, however. Does love have as powerful and vital an effect as courage? There are any number of men and women who are full of love but are nonetheless timid and cowardly and hate themselves for being cowardly—it poisons the amount of love in them, even if, essentially, they are loving creatures.

ML: In Christian belief, love can move mountains. But for you, love seems to be more of a passive quality, not active like

courage—love comes as a "reward"—so it isn't seen as an active principle. It's the emolument you get for being courageous.

NM: Let me tell you how I got to that point.

It struck me that everyone I knew, including myself, was always looking for love. "Ah, if I could find love, I could solve my problems." Some years ago, however, I found myself saying to my children, "Don't go searching for love. Love is not a solution but a reward." So long as you go searching for love directly, you will fail. Because love is a grace and you don't pursue grace.

Now, mind you, I'm not a macho maniac on courage. Many, many times I've said that an old lady who crosses a busy street in terror, feeling she hardly has a 50/50 chance of making it safely across, is exhibiting courage that might be more intense than a professional soldier attacking a machine gun nest if through all his young manhood he's been ready to die in such an action. Odds are such a

soldier is braver than the average old lady, but we can't put an inflexible hierarchy on the scale of courage.

Still, my own experience tells me that to the degree one is brave, one finds more love than when one is cowardly.

ML: But I'm not talking about romantic love, rather about what Christianity calls "charity."

NM: Charity comes when you're brave. How many cowards are full of charity? Cowardice is a poison.

ML: It's a question of precedence. You always put courage as the more active, the more powerful—

NM: I often find when I'm feeling weak that I'm also very nice, and when I'm weak I feel the weakness in others and am sympathetic to it. But it's not nourishing. It's just back-and-forth. Whereas when I'm feeling strong and also feel compassion or charity—on those rare occasions—there's real goodness in it. It's of real use to the other person.

ML: Well, to get down to basic ethics: when someone does something that's an act of real generosity done at a cost to themselves, it's because they love the other person. I don't mean in a romantic way—it could be devoid of sex.

NM: I'm not putting that down but I'm not ready to elevate it. Because as a novelist, I know better. Forgive me for putting it this way, but most often when you have an act of great generosity, there's a tangled skein behind it of good and bad motive. Don't forget that I believe in this tripartite base to human nature: God and the Devil to either side of us, ourselves in the center. Contemplate the number of compromises, relations, treaties, surprises and rebellions—people are perfectly capable of rebelling against both God and the Devil, shutting them both out of one's existence as far as possible. That's one attitude: Damn their eyes, I'm doing what I want to do! There is the human ego—the notion that neither God nor the Devil know what they now want of me as well as I know. So I do call it a tripartite relationship, and by that I

certainly don't mean that the humans are subservient in it. What terrifies me at times is that humans may become dominant over the others. I just don't trust us to go traveling across the universe on our own.

ML: You mean there may have been some individuals in history who were so powerful at a certain moment in time, they equalled God and the Devil? Constantine, say, or Charlemagne—

NM: Constantine, again!

ML: Churchill, Napoleon—

NM: Napoleon, yeah. I think certain humans can free themselves to the point where both God and the Devil are both working for them for a brief period. But, again, please take us back to speculations I feel closer to.

ML: You've eliminated heaven and hell from the Four Last Things.

NM: As absolutes. But hell can be very real—take some proud society lady who is unpleasant to her servants. She is all caught

up in money and her jewels—we all know people like that—she's willing to sell herself to the Devil but the Devil also rejects her too because at bottom she's a silly ass and the Devil doesn't need her. So there she is, ready for judgment, and God's judgment is: "You'll be a scrubwoman in your next existence. And if you complain once, you'll clean latrines—provided you still have any soul left."

Most conservatives believe that the poor man has as good a chance or better of getting to heaven as the rich man because the temptations among the rich are so awful that they easily can go to hell. And that's what enables conservatives to function. They can put up with inequity in this life because they feel there's a better existence waiting for those poor who are patient and good in horrible circumstances.

Well, I believe there's an element of truth in that, just as there's an element of truth in the implicit liberal faith that every soul, every human, is terribly important and must be protected in this life. These are not only warring notions, but may be warring

notions within God. Because where is the artist who does not have such profound disputes within? The Creation may have come out of these warring notions in the Creator.

It isn't that God is only fighting the Devil. He's also debating within Himself or Herself what the next proper course might be. I wish to suggest that it is in experiencing the play of this complexity that future theology could find its nourishment rather than the churchly insistence that God's words are actually in the Book. No, I do not see the laws of existence as etched in stone with no deviation permitted. No absolute heaven or absolute hell. Such concepts are devilish ways to confuse ourselves profoundly. Because they don't add up. In terms of our experience, they make no sense. Our experience is that everything in life is more or less shaded. On certain days, certain things are better. Certain of our acts give us more pleasure than on others.

Sometimes evil acts—what we see as evil acts if we believe in Revelation—give us pleasure that we find ungodly, devilish.

Yet acts that we think are evil may have been inspired by God who decides, "This poor soul is going to expire unless there's a breakout. This poor soul has to do something unpleasant before this soul can feel any life again." In this sense, God's compassion can also be present in an evil act.

Never forget Engels' immortal three words: "Quantity changes quality." Petty evil is one thing. Massive evil is another. I'd never use an argument like this to arrive at a justification of Hitler or Stalin. They embodied massive evil.

ML: Considering your belief in various states of grace and the idea of dying in a state of grace, it seems to me that if there's any pathway to formal religion open in your mind, it's to Catholicism.

NM: I probably do feel more connection with elements of Catholicism than to any of the other formal religions. But that's as far as it goes. I was talking once with a Catholic theologian who said, "well, so much of what you say seems almost Catholic." I said, "Yes, but I could never be a Catholic."

He asked, "Why? Would it be the transubstantiation in the Mass?"

I said, "No. I could believe that. Why can't God be present in a wafer? That would not bother me. Why can't wine become the blood of Christ? I wouldn't believe it in a hurry but that wouldn't keep me from becoming a Catholic."

So we went through various hurdles and obstacles and finally he asked again, "Why, then, can't you be a Catholic?"

"Because," I said, "I don't believe in the omnipotence of God."

And he said, "In that case, I can understand why you're not a Catholic."

ML: All right. Let's return one more time to reincarnation. I can feel that you have more to say on that.

NM: Yes. One matter we've not gotten into is my supposition that the atom bomb, the concentration camps and the gulags were mighty efforts by the Devil to foul up reincarnation, to choke off

all subtlety of the judgment within reincarnation. I hope I've suggested the delicate dispositons of God, the care with which the question is asked: "What shall I do with this soul?" That is at the core of reincarnation—delicate, responsible, artful, deliberate judgment. If the process is overloaded, it can break down. God, I repeat, is not all-powerful.

ML: So mass slaughter fouls up the divine bureaucracy?

NM: Contemplate the mess in eternity when so many human creatures were being slaughtered en masse.

ML: Not if you can go back to an omnipotent god. Most people believe God can handle anything and everything

NM: No, God's energies are also limited. Everything I say is based on that. We may live in a universe that is expanding but there is not always endless energy available. No. No.

ML: Ae you saying that the Devil does have a purchase on the process of reincarnation?

NM: Through marring it, mainly. Or overloading it.

ML: It was Herman Melville who said—in a line I could never forget—when he was, if I recall, writing Moby Dick—he said, "Lord, when shall we stop growing?" In your theological belief, there's a paradox, to me at least, in that on the one hand, growth is something you're always seeking and it is the summum bonum—

NM: Not all growth is good.

ML: But good growth is good, positive growth, growth of some kind is better than stasis.

NM: Good growth is good; bad growth is bad. The growth of suburban shopping malls has been prodigious in America—does that mean it's good? Does it mean that because the old family store gave way to the corporate chain, that it was inferior humanly? Not necessarily.

ML: Let me ask you about evolution. You accept evolution. You know, the traditional Catholic belief in evolution—the Catholics were quick to embrace evolution even as many Protestants—at least fundamentalist Protestants—were not. The Catholics were

among the earliest to embrace the notion of evolution and they didn't have any trouble with it. They said: People coming from monkeys—no trouble at all, that's how the body was created. And at a certain point God put the soul in. Is that--?

NM: I happen to believe that dogs have souls.

ML: Well. . .

NM: Mind you, in reincarnation you may not come back as a human. You could come back as a dog, and, just as a parenthesis, that makes a great deal of sense to me because so many dogs, I find, are closer to the human than humans.

ML: Stretch evolution back—people from monkeys or dogs is no trouble at all. That's just three million years. But going back—50, 60, 100 million years—when the creatures were coming out of the slime, do you see that at a certain point God puts—

NM: I don't think it's answerable.

ML: Well, what doesn't have a soul?

NM: It makes more sense for me to believe that God was in the slime from the beginning and God was less in those days. God has grown with us. God has grown with evolution.

ML: Well, God created the world—

NM: God may have been developing along with evolution. Why must a god be independent of time?

ML: Well, if God created the world—at that point, He wasn't slime.

NM: Wait: we create our children. That doesn't mean one is able to create children on the day one is born. I'm not talking about an omnipotent, all-powerful God, but one who grows with us.

ML: I'm assuming that in the course of human history, God at some point began the process of creating souls.

NM: These souls also developed. The soul of an amoeba would be primitive, but still a soul that gave the amoeba some intimation of direction, some sense that it must do its best under its own limited circumstances. God, obviously, was superior to the

amoeba from the beginning, but God was also developing as the Creation went from the amoeba to the paramecium to the multi-celled creature.

ML: Here's where I have a problem with reincarnation—when did God create such a process?

NM: That's beyond me. Perhaps at the point when God had given souls to a great many higher animals and people, He or She decided, "This is wasteful. I, as an artist, can do better. Certain of my creations could have been a lot better but they had to live in the worst circumstances." So, God said, "Let's give them another chance to exercise a little free will."

ML: And deprive them of all memories of the past?

NM: Who knows? Was it worked out in discussion with the angels? Or in argument with the Devil? Did the Devil say, "No, they must remember every last thing they've ever done," and God said "No. That's messy. I want a tidy universe."

It comes down to something basic. God's notion is: Let's make the Creation better. The Devil's is: let's wreck the Creation. I have, says the Devil, something else in mind that will supplant and replace the Creation.

ML: What would the Devil want? Total destruction? Nihilism?

NM: For the sake of argument, let's say the Devil would want to fashion a universe on His or Her terms.

ML Have we any idea what those terms would be?

NM: Well, given my taste for rank speculation: it could be an immensely technological universe where the need for existence—individual existence—and soul would be much less. That would be more to the Devil's taste: Individual units that function in relation to other more or less individual units. More spiritually mechanized. That seems to be the prevailing tendency in the 20th and early 21st century—more and more interchangeable units, ready to serve a corporate machine. At the other end of it, you have the maniacal intensity of the most extreme Muslims whose

only feeling is there's something so wrong with this approach that it all has to be destroyed, and don't ask questions. The Koran has all the answers. Once again we are at a point in history between the rock and the hard place.

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. I will say that I expect there may be some sizable difficulties present after death, a universal hell of waiting we may all have to go through before we are born again—those of us who will be born again. I will add that there's an automatic assumption in most people who are religious that God is not only all-powerful but instantaneous in His action. There's an Irish saying: "When God made time, He made a lot of it." So God could be instantaneous—but why would He want to be? Nevertheless, this expectation of quick reception and quick designation for one's afterlife is at odds with our own experience, which is everything takes longer than

Metaphysical interview II

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. I will say that I expect there may be some sizable difficulties present after death, a universal hell of waiting we may all have to go through before we are born again—those of us who will be born again. I will add that there's an automatic assumption in most people who are religious that God is not only all-powerful but instantaneous in His action. There's an Irish saying: "When God made time, He made a lot of it." So God could be instantaneous—but why would He want to be? Nevertheless, this expectation of quick reception and quick designation for one's afterlife is at odds with our own experience—which is everything takes longer than

we think it will. That is the accrued wisdom of most men and women after many decades of life. In the economy of human experience, there are always time-consuming episodes you didn't anticipate. To assume that once you pass into another realm of existence that things will be perfect and instantaneous is no small assumption. It's as ungrounded as to expect that there are no other difficulties in the hereafter than purgatory, limbo, or hell. Another, after all, might be God's need to judge whether a particular soul should be reborn, or might as well expire. That may take up a good deal of God's resources. So purgatory sits there as a species of possibility, an unhappy holding tank. God may look at three-quarters of us and say, "I don't want to make up my mind just yet," and drop us into purgatory. Temporarily, that is.

Now, what the form of this purgatory might be—whether it bears resemblance to a Palestinian refugee camp, I have no idea. One of the beliefs I hold is that the hereafter is less different than we assume. We may have the same frustrations and difficulties in

the after-life, overcrowding, for example, even, conceivably, waste. After the Holocaust, we were forced to recognize there was something absolutely murderous in our species—obviously, it was not just reserved for the Germans, there was something vastly destructive in our nature. We received this knowledge over and over again, in Russia, in China, in Africa, in some of our own actions, indeed, in Vietnam. The point I want to make is that the Holocaust may have exacted a great price from God, even greater than from us. At the core of karma, deliberation is assumed as is wise judgment. All of us have complex lives. And in the assessment of each life, in the reading of the soul, so to speak, which takes place after one dies, can it sometimes be that God says, "I'm too weary to think about this now?" After all, God is an artist. Is it always necessary 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 expatiate a little on that. Given the number of people exterminated in a day during the Holocaust, the number of souls arriving in tumult, is it possible they became too great in number for God to measure with calm and justice? It may be that karma has been in a species of uproar ever since the Holocaust, the atom bomb, and the gulags.

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

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

NM: Absolutely.

ML: Or a general?

NM: Yes.

ML: A public administrator? Or a diplomat?

NM: Yes, yes.

ML: Those are all human occupations.

NM: How can God not be all those things? God is certainly an engineer. An engineer would see it all in terms of future construction. How do you organize the Hereafter? How do you arrive at the best levels of spiritual sanitation? Yes! Heavenly comfort stations for psychic waste are not necessarily to be taken for granted. When I speak of God as an artist, I don't pretend to mean that God might be a novelist 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, at the least, a mega-artist. All the faculties of engineering, war, social building, art, music, sport, painting, science, philosophy, medicine,

herbology, are His or Hers, and at a level more highly developed than we can begin to conceive. But God is still an artist. A great engineer is an artist. So is a great general. 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. That, I would add quickly, is because the Devil is also present. I don't presume to say exactly what part he plays in cosmic affairs, or local earthly matters—but in any event, we are not pure representations of God. We are tainted, warped, even treacherous to the divine projects offered us. We are torn between God and the Devil and our own vanity can be counter to both of them. Across the centuries, human vanity has become a factor, a prodigious factor. The human ego, which has always been fearful of God's power, and fearful of the Devil's power—that ego can even separate itself into a simulacrum of omnipotent confidence. There's nothing more irritating to most of us than the feeling that we are not completely under our own power, that other forces are pushing us, external forces which are stronger than we are. "Oh,

God, here comes that awful compulsion starting up again."

Whatever it is. Some impulse we consider unworthy of ourselves or too risky for our adventurous capacities, or opposed too magnetically to our spiritual inclinations.

ML: 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. That still remains to be proven.

ML: Still, if we are roughly more good than evil, would that signal the ultimate victory of good?

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

The fundamental question in this case: are human beings 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 applaud its use?

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

In India, the answer that came back to him before he died was, we may be more bad than good. The immense riots as he came to power—that had to be a spiritual disaster for him. So I certainly don't sneer at Gandhi nor would I wish to systematize him by declaring, "Oh, he brought on so much that was bad because he advocated passivity." After all, this kind of passivity demanded huge courage. And discipline. Heroic passivity. One of the things we might do well to begin to try to understand as humans will be our future need to regenerate the essential energy contained in oxymorons. Certain oxymorons are absurdities, so many indeed that we feel free to dismiss them all by saying, "It's an oxymoron." But there are a few which are vital and valuable. One of them is "heroic passivity." There, one's experience must serve as the arbiter. There can be heroic passivity, or quasi- heroic passivity. The latter can be a disaster. And we've all seen that. Stubborn, frantic passivity—certain pacifists we'd like to throw down the stairs.

ML What came first in your scheme of things? Belief in courage as the cardinal virtue? 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 this too schematically. I would rather go back to God's experience as He or She was creating the flora and fauna of existence, all those incredible biological experiments that went on over millions of years. Plus, most crucially, the percipience gathered from the failures. Think of the excitement of God when the dinosaur came into being, the immense excitement that He had something pretty big and pretty formidable. Then it proved too big—badly designed. Badly designed. The record of bad design in evolution could stuff the vaults of many a great library. Yet what became obvious was that animals who had courage, or those plants which had a kind of odd integrity, if you will, in terms of their environment, seemed to do better for the most part than those who didn't. Of course, there are animals—we can see this directly—there are animals who had too

much courage. This notion of balance underwriting courage is what God began to search for.

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 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. Milton was certainly one. I think Milton is as good a rule of thumb for approaching this matter of God and the Devil as anything I've come across. Homage to Milton. So, I propose that the Devil's belief is that He or She could end up with a better world, a better form of existence, a more sophisticated, more intelligent, well-run notion of things. Now, what are the Devil's means? Well, our fear is that he could destroy the whole world in order to start over again. There, I'm out on the end of my mental belay—does the Devil have the same creative powers that God does to create animals, plants, humans, a system? Or is the Devil a parasite, essentially, upon God? That's a question I wouldn't presume to answer.

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

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

NM: Well, well—finally, at the highest level, there's such a matter as mindless destruction. When you can't win, you destroy the game. The spoiled kid who picks up the marbles comes in all forms. If the Devil feels that He or She cannot gain those powers that are needed to form a new universe, the rage generated may be so intense that the next move is to destroy the whole thing.

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

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

The questions are wide open. There is no way to propose answers to them yet, but perhaps they'll become somewhat more focussed 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 and in us. Whether the Devil strives to attain a world that he or she can take over, or whether the Devil, on the contrary, acquires a ruined world, or works toward a world transferrable to some other god—these, I repeat, remain questions far beyond our reach right now.

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

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

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

NM: Saints?

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

But the idea that saints are as good as the hagiographers have made them does give me great pause because, finally, the Catholic Church may be the most complex and powerful and amazing and

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

ML: I guess I agree with you. In each period, the Church has to 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 might prove to be a devil on closer 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 overwhelm us, even destroy us.

NM: All the modern assumptions about progressivism are present in what you just defended. But progressivism has yet to prove itself. Of course, all those things you cited made life easier. I don't want to be a bore about this, but nuclear warfare also came along. And we live in a more diffuse state of general anxiety than

people did in 1900. People were locked up then in all sorts of terrors, intimations, and huge fears, but it was all sort of local. More particular. 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 we would have to take on some very unpalatable stuff. For instance, were people better off when they had to squat over a hole in the ground and so could smell their own product? Maybe they were a little closer to themselves than they are now. It's analogous to my argument about contraception 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 hardier than the mass of us now. If we proceed further, we have to get into all the complex arguments over whether modern medicine is a blessing or a vitiator of human potentiality. Because today, it