

Metaphysical Discussion V

Ritual, and related matters

ML: We have not spoken of ritual as part of religion. Recently my wife

and I went to the ordination of a 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 "Veni, Sancte Spiritu, Veni, Sancte Spiritu."

(Come, Holy Ghost). While another singer, the lead singer, was singing

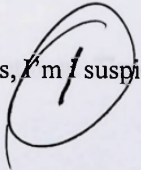
a capella verses about the glories of being a priest, of the holy

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: Neither. I've thought about it a great deal. Put it this way: I have high suspicions about ritual. It seems to me that at best, it's a mixed blessing. You know one of my favorite remarks is that repetition kills the soul. Well, obviously that remark has to be explored before we go further. Any number of kinds of repetition are, I will admit, crucial to the human venture. It is, after all, one of the ways by which we learn. And there is such a thing as creative repetition. Nonetheless, I'm suspicious of ritual.



Where, after all, does my theology start? What occasions it? What stimulates it? I would answer that it is because I have worked as a novelist all my life. I don't want this to be misunderstood, but in a certain sense you are dealing with a few of God's problems. Judgment, particularly. If you're any good at your work, you've spent your life thinking about human nature. Since few good novels can do without a villain, you are, of course, soon living with the notion of Evil.

Now where in all this is the relation to ritual? Ritual is repetition and in writing a novel, you look to do the opposite. A good novel does not keep repeating itself. That is exactly the hallmark of a bad novel. So, most good novelists are wary of repetition. Moreover, most people I don't like tend to be masters or monsters of mediocre repetition. The politicians we

despise are one example. So one develops an understanding that repetition can be dangerous when used as a tool by mediocre people. Adjurations that are endlessly repetitive. Unimaginative parents often know nothing better than to repeat what they say over and over. I confess that worries me about the nature of ritual. I think it looks to set human nature into a form. TV evangelists seem diabolically inspired to me when they cleave and cling to repetition. Earlier, as a child, synagogue services left me bored. Most of it washed over me. I might just as well have been a shell on the surf's edge. But for a little wear and tear, I was the same shell at the end of the service as at the beginning, and this was true year after year.

I did experience one ritual that was interesting to me. It was my induction into Transcendental Meditation. That was a fashion thirty five

years ago. I remember that for my initiation ceremony, I was told to bring a flower to the initiator. He happened to be a gawky kid who was absolutely wild about Transcendental Meditation which I had found no more than odd and boring. You were just supposed to empty your head for twenty minutes—not allow thoughts to come through. I said to myself, “I’ve been doing this for years as a writer. Every time one goes to work in the morning, the first thing to do is empty your head. So I’d been practicing Transcendental Meditation willy-nilly.

Now, in the initiatory ritual, they said a few words in an Asian language, and then gave me a mnemonic to repeat. I forget mine. It was something like Allan Ginsberg's OM. Alan Ginsberg's old ~~OM~~ ^{OMMM.} I kept repeating whatever the sound was in my head for twenty minutes.

Whenever an errant thought came into your head, you were supposed to use the mnemonic to wash the thought away. It was a very small ritual, but I did feel an effect. Something did take place. Obviously, then, in a deep and powerful ritual, a great deal happens. Let me move forward to make my next point. Given my fundamental notion that God and the Devil are at war all the time, I would go so far as to suggest that ritual may well have been first created by the Devil and God, recognizing its efficacy and determined not to lose any soul unnecessarily, entered ritual as well. I think ritual becomes an enmeshment of the presence of God and the Devil. It does have the demons and the saints marching in. There is a power to the repetitions; the music, the chanting, the ceremony, the concentration of the principals. So it may indeed be an important moment. One of my favorite notions is

that the Lord and Satan are there when major events occur. A general, on the eve of a great battle, gets out of bed and finds it very important to him whether or not he stretches out his left foot first or his right.

ML: A ritual?

NM: No, but that is a sense that powers are present. Anyone who reads

Homer will find nothing strange about this. So ~~that I think~~ ^Y ~~that~~ would be my

answer. I don't scoff at ritual, and I don't trust it. I would be happier if we

lived without it, but I have to recognize that my upbringing, my tastes, my

life has had little to do with rituals. Nonetheless, I can find it fascinating.

Because there They are—cooperating! Keep in mind that there may be any

number of occasions when God and the Devil have to cooperate—exactly

because they each are trying to outwit the other. For that, they have, at

times, to engage in formal contact.

ML: What about rituals concerning athletes? I'm sure professional 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. I know professional baseball players have certain things they have to do. The center fielder has to step on second base when he runs in or you know, the forces will be against him. So athletes are particularly superstitious and they go through various rituals and preparations before and during the game. I know 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 bad omen if you tied a knot the wrong way, or did something on the ship that was not done exactly in the right way. You felt like you were calling

down evil things upon you. These are not religious rituals but they are often done with the knowledge that there is something in the air.

NM: Yes. I used to be very susceptible to that when I was younger. I do know what you are talking about. Back in San Francisco in 1963, I used to walk parapets which had sheer drops to the street below. I used to be full of dread every morning because I knew that before the day was done, I'd be walking the parapets. They varied in width between eight inches to so much as a foot and a half in width so there was no great risk unless you lost your head. But I would suspect that the spirit world if you will, does ^{pay} close attention to people engaged in unusual events. We started by talking about ritual. Now, we are involved with rote. Whenever people engage in rote, in other words, express a superstitious fear by going ~~on, go~~ in for repetitive

moves when a ~~great~~^{good} deal is at stake, that can draw the attention of the ~~Gods~~.

So athletes who are going to be playing in games that will have a large emotional effect on many people, are going to attract ~~the~~^{such} attention of the ~~Gods~~. One does have the feeling that one is not alone, but is among accompanying spirits. At the least!

ML: I never told you this story, but when I was writing my Doctoral thesis on you, ~~I never told you this story~~, I had a chapter on your cosmology. I had to face two or three English professors plus a Philosophy professor on the Ph.D. committee, ~~and~~ he argued with me about it. Wrote me long letters.

NM: Let me get this straight. While you were formulating the thesis, this happened?

ML: Yes, he was reading drafts. He said that your system, as far as he

could understand it, was terribly incomplete.

NM: (laughs)

ML: He said he could not find in it either a beginning, how the universe came into being, or how it 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 anybody who had a philosophical system, ought to have—let me finish—

NM: Let me just stress one point: I never heard of this before, that you have to have a beginning and an end to your philosophy. What about Logical Positivists? Do they have a beginning and an end?

ML: Well, he was an Aristotelian. That probably explains a lot. But he

also felt that you had no clear definition of Being. What he believed and what a lot of philosophers believe, is 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, 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, many years, this debate that we had. It kind of slowed things down although it didn't hurt me in the end,

~~Actually~~ ~~and everybody~~ ~~and you wrote~~ ~~about~~ ~~Marx, Freud, Kierkegaard, Sartre,~~ ~~Schopenhauer~~ ~~—it wasn't that you weren't familiar with some philosophy,~~

you were clearly interested in philosophical questions—but finally, I guess, that any philosopher who won't propose any 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. And so, reading over everything that we have done so far, I keep coming to the thing, we don't know, we can't be certain. And from a philosophical point of view, there's usually one rock somewhere.

NM: What if the rock is in transit? In other words when we say rock we mean something that is eternal. What if eternity is in passage itself? The simplest response I could give is that no philosopher has ever come up with

an answer to these questions that is satisfactory to us. No human, and I won't be the first either. What I will say is this. I have basic beliefs. I don't know what we've been talking about through these interviews. I thought I'd said it. God is not All Powerful and ^{not} All Good. God is comparable to a Greek God if you will. Zeus, if we need some model. I don't need one. In other words, God is a warrior engaged in trying to shape some very large part of existence. How large is ^{a question that goes} ~~absolutely out of our~~ ^{beyond our} (consciousness. I have no notion at all whether our God is a God for the solar system or includes some of the galaxies, or does not go beyond the earth and the moon. I have no notion whether God is in command of black holes in space or is terrified of them. My fundamental idea is that the cosmos is at war within itself and the God that has created us, the artist who

created us, is not the emperor, but the artist. This is my most basic notion of

God—of Being, if you will—~~that Being is~~ not a law-giver, but an artist.

Being is doing the best that He or She ~~or They~~ can do to introduce Their

notion of existence into the cosmos. There ^{may be} ~~are~~ other notions in existence

out there as well—other concepts of what turn the cosmos should take. We

humans are ^{part of} ~~God's~~ venture into the unknown. We humans are God's

soldiers, God's ability to change the given in the cosmos. To ask, then, that

the end be posited is philosophically misleading, since we commence with

the notion that the end ^{is not yet determined.} ~~is not known.~~

When I say that I am an existentialist, I mean it in the absolute sense

^{The purpose} ~~the end of~~ existence is not known. ^{is not known.} of that word. Existence is not predetermined. (It is open. God has a vision

of existence, and we look to fulfill that notion even as we often proceed to

deny it. In addition, given ^{His} the war ^{with} between God and the Devil that often

~~keeps~~ God ^{cannot always effect} from coming near (His or Her notion of how things should be,

Often God must dwell in intolerable states of frustration. That makes more sense

to me than that God ^{clearly} ~~clearly~~ knows ~~exactly~~ what He or She is doing and tells

^{If that is the case,} us how to do it, ^{extra,} so that we are no more than actors in a huge opera. I've said

this over and over. ~~But to get back to it~~ The end is open. Existence is

open. This notion that there is a predetermined place that we all will reach,

that there is a single point to existence which we will achieve by ^{fulfilling} ~~working~~ it

~~out, that we will fulfill~~ God's notion, is, if you stop to think of it, no more

than a personification of God as the director of ^{his} an immense opera ^{where} with a full ^{like}

is holding a full libretto ~~script~~ in hand. But I am saying it is more complex than that, more difficult.

More ennobling. We're not just serfs, not just children drawn in from the

play a part in
street to ~~look like part of~~ the children's chorus, but will not be allowed to

sachan),
sing. We are the base of that opera. So to demand ~~of me as~~ a philosophical

where I must
presentation that I say where we are going, is, given my point of view, an

unanswerable demand. All we can know at best is where we might be at the

present. Everything in existence fortifies this concept for me. I know where

I am at this moment. Within reason. But do I know where I will be in a

year? Will I still be alive? No. If I should remain alive for twenty years,

can I have any notion of where I will be then? Can I have a concept of

where society will be in a hundred years? Hardly. We live in the present.

That is all we are given. We do have instincts and they can be powerful. I

would go so far as to say I would go along with Goethe on this: These

powerful instincts are God-given. We are embodying God's plans, but such

plans are subject to change because the storms of the cosmos are not all

prerecorded. ~~God is an~~

~~artist, but not in total command of the ship of the universe.~~

ML: The moment of death carries more weight in your theological thinking than in any other I know of, but I don't see any consideration of what happens to, I believe it's 20%, of all people who die of strokes, heart attacks, aneurisms. I have a friend who died, so the doctor said, before he hit the ground—you know, there is no time for them to prepare themselves, there is no time to reflect, project, anything. Are they just unlucky, is this just a flaw in the way God did things given the importance of our state of mind when we go into eternity? These people have no chance.

NM: To begin with, the answer ~~is~~ ^{is the} here is the famous Catholic notion ~~that~~ ^{worth the inclusion}

Graham Greene was obsessed. Between the stirrup and the ground! Time, after all, to anyone who has had experience with even minor drugs like

will
 marijuana ~~(know)~~ that time *can extend or compress* is extendable; time telescopes, time compresses.

in a dream can
 One can have a tenth of a second that feels like five minutes in a dream. So

they tell me. In that sense, the notion that you die without warning, no. But

apart from that, even if you have very little time at the moment before your

death, that's not where death takes place. It takes place within us as we live

our lives. That is exactly where morality enters into everyone's

consciousness. The question, "Am I a good man, or a bad man?"

accompanies us from an early age. "Am I a good child or a bad child?" As

you get older and commence to think more about death, so you also think

more about judgment. Of course, not everyone believes in judgment. It is

disheartening that so often you will hear 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 look to the promise of being reborn, it is sad if life has been so corrosive that one does not care to be reincarnated. That suggests so deep a sense of defeat. If, as I presume, our human purposes look to align with God's purpose, we are then turning against God as well.

ML: 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 were. They were, according to you, extraordinarily important because that was the time you could really prepare yourself. You used the example of the people in the gas chambers who were cheated out of that moment and how terrible it was for them. But, you know, if you have a brain aneurism, you don't have a tenth of a second. You have nothing. Your brain stops.

There's no thought.

NM: Let's say that 99% of the people who are alive have a reasonable amount of time to think before they die.

ML: They do.

NM: All right. You are talking then about the one percent. And if I can't account for that one percent, then I can't. Everything I attempt here, if I may honor it with the assumption that it is philosophical, suggests that we don't look for one hundred percent in anything. I'm opposed to the notion that any kind of thought can be all that complete. It's one of the reasons I so detest fundamentalism. It insists on one hundred percent. What I have to say may be valid for 9/10ths of the people, or 99%, or 80%, but I do believe that, yes, our preparation for death is important. If you have just a few

minutes at the end, it isn't as if you are facing death for the first time; you have been facing it all your life. Let us say you are handing in the final submission.

Now, let me go back a moment. As I've indicated, I think reincarnation is a species of reward. To repeat, that's why I get depressed when people say, "Oh, I just want some peace." And mean it. Whereas others can feel ^{that} with all the ill they've caused, ~~that~~ there is still enough good in them to want another chance. I believe that God is sometimes ready to give that chance to the most impossible cases. I go back to my basic notion: God is the artist. A fine artist is never satisfied with what has been created. The artist ^{will} ~~can~~ look for another ^{opportunity} ~~attempt~~ to do ~~it~~ better. I even believe that the dullest human is still an intrinsic work of art beyond our measure. So, there

may be every reason for the Creator to want to see if this human can improve.

We are fascinated by the nature of God, but God, in His turn, may want to know more about many of us. God may want many of us to come back. God needs us. *To repeat* He wishes to take His notion of existence and carry it across the stars. And for that, God needs humans to become more extraordinary. But you don't create people who are wonderful by an act of will. Often, such development can come only from rebirth. If you are put in situations where you failed in one life, but succeeded in the next, then, yes, to that degree, you have strengthened God.

Let me offer a crude scenario. If, in one existence, you were terrified of heights, well, then possibly for the next, you are placed in a family of

mountain climbers. So the child may go through horrors ~~in its new early~~
stage. But now this child has guides to carry him or her into an aerie they
could ^{not} reach in their previous life.

To go back to your first question, I would say that maybe at the
moment of one's death, one has a better sense of what one did or didn't do
in one's life and what one might like to be in one's next life. Can that not
give a coloration to the soul at the last moment?

ML: All right. Let us say that such a person does become a successful
mountain climber. If you have a succession of such good reincarnations,
what happens then? Does a person ever get to be as good as it is possible
to become?

NM: No, no. We are so far from being anywhere near any kind of

perfection. Most of us are so highly imperfect, so underdeveloped, so frustrated, so small in relation to what we could have been, every one of us, even those of us who are relatively successful, that the question also becomes how much ^{has} God learned from us. It isn't that God understands us so well that all we need is a little tweaking. It's not like that. God learns along with us. Think of God as a protagonist in the cosmos. So, some of His divine decisions on reincarnation will work; others not. God's hope is that His works succeed more often than they fail.

ML: So most reincarnations would not show a clear improvement or a decline?

NM: Who knows? Who knows whether it is God who makes every single decision or if there are a myriad of monitoring angels. For that matter,

karma itself may be embattled. When too many people die at once, when a hundred thousand souls are incinerated in one second, that may create great damage. Karma may not be equipped to deal with so many deaths in an

instant. Might this not be one of the Devil's most profound urges? To ~~ret~~ ^{main}

^{grievously!}
Karma ~~forever!~~ Destroy reincarnation, destroy God's way of adjusting the balance.

ML: I don't see any reason why reincarnations can't go on for a couple of million years. Why not? No problem.

NM: The question here is how much time ^{does God have?} God has. ~~Does He have eons of~~
Auc eons more of time available,
~~time~~ or is it a cosmic race? There may be other visions of existence seeking

to overtake us in the universe, or worse, speed ^{far} away from us. So, God may

be in a great hurry. God may have less patience now than He possessed

hundreds of thousands of years ago.

ML: Well, to go back to the Ph.D. professor, there is usually some teleological sense among philosophers about how it's going to turn out in the end.

NM: I would say that God has a vision of existence which ^{He sees as} is more creative, and more useful to the future than other competing visions in the cosmos.

ML: What is that vision?

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

ML: OK

NM: Now give me another vision of existence. That we all are to sit in the heavenly fold and listen to hymns which are beautiful because God has put

us in heaven? What the hell is more final about that?

ML: 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 just exist not in just sugar land, amusement park or Club Med, but exist in pure intellectual bliss having been completely purged of all

weaknesses and corruptions and so forth. In many religions. The Hindus,

for exam p/c.
have that and

NM: That assumes *have really* that we're all there to get to a certain place. If we keep our lives clean enough, we will reach *such* heavenly bliss. *But I am* I'm saying heavenly *that*

bliss is not guaranteed. Everything we know about the nature of existence

also shows us
is that it's cruel, paradoxical, glorious, disappointing, tremendous, and often

more modest than we expected. And so I believe ~~that our best bet is to be~~

we are
 (part of a vast creative process that is attempting to go somewhere without
being able to guarantee
 necessarily knowing what the end is. In our lives, we certainly work

without knowing the end. The only ~~one~~ *certainly* we possess is that ~~we're~~ *we are* going to

die. We don't know what will ~~be our end after that~~ *follow that*. We can assume certain

answers, but we ought to know that ~~we're~~ *we are* only making an assumption. Let

me add that if every one of our understandings comes down to uncertainty,

why assume that God knows what the end is? That is a ~~very~~ *also* large

assumption.

ML: Does it fit or not fit in your theology that America has a special place

in God's vision?

NM: I've written about that lately. The quagmire in Iraq can be blamed on

American Exceptionalism. I would say that all of us, all humans, belong to exceptionalism. Not just Americans. All of the globe is part of God's exceptionalism. No particular country represents God's basic sense of how to do it. It's vainglory to think we Americans have a purchase on exceptionalism. How, for God's sakes, could God put up with suburbs and malls and superhighways and plastics?

ML: Well, maybe we've blown it. You know, in the beginning, the idea of American Exceptionalism came from the idea that they blew it in Europe.

There ^{were} ~~was~~ endless wars and corruption. And we were a new start.

NM: I won't argue. God may have had certain hopes for America. But I don't think He has had much hope since the Second World War. In the last five decades, we've cheapened the very surface of life. We've ruined the

freshness of the air, the cleanliness of the rivers. At this point I would say that America is not a country whose spiritual goodness holds up under examination.

ML: I know when Kennedy was assassinated somebody said, and you quoted it, that God ^{may have} ~~had~~ withdrawn his blessing from America.

NM: It was John Updike.

ML: And that remark moved you. You thought he might be on to something there.

NM: Yes.

ML: Several times in this and other conversations I've had with you, you've mentioned the possibility that God might have intended human beings to develop their telepathic powers. In your novel, Ancient

Evenings, some of the characters do employ ^{gach}telepathic powers. And

modern novelists can, in a sense, read minds. Because they're exploring what people are thinking. One of the great advances is when the novel moved into the human mind.

NM: In which century would you say that was?

ML: Well, it really only started around a hundred years ago.

NM: Dickens enters people's minds.

ML: Not much. Not like Joyce. Or Virginia Wolfe.

NM: All right.

ML: 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 heros. 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. We all have the experience of thinking of a song and someone in the room starts humming it. People who are married for a while often find they're thinking of something at the same time. We phone someone just as they are about to call us. But in terms of practical novel writing, I think we study everybody from the outside. Once in a while, through love, we do enter literally the inner presence of someone else. But, generally speaking, we observe. We study society. We try to understand how the social machine works. We try to understand characters different from ourselves. We work with the notion that there is a little bit of ourselves in the stranger. Certain characters do come alive even though they are vastly different from one's self. The best novelists can do that. All

the same, telepathy is a ~~very~~ small part of it now. I do believe, however,

God did want us to be telepathic. God did not necessarily envision

electronics. Electronics, I suspect, are the Devil's contribution. God just

assumed we would become more and more telepathic and in the course of

that, there would be less need for technology. Technology stifles God's

creation. Smog is not good for God's air. Static is not good for our ears. ~~X~~

Or, our souls. I

don't want to go through the old litany of all that is wrong with modern

civilization. I will add one notion, however, which is ~~now~~ that technology

being now?

is with us, we have to look upon human history as God's attempt to deal

with the Devil. If the Devil succeeds in establishing technological shoots

and outbursts and venues and avenues *throughout all of* ~~all~~ through society, God must engage

technology as well. But He comes in second. The Devil is the pioneer in

technology. So I would assert.

ML: Right. But one of the new phenomena of technology that is sweeping not just the US but the world—in fact, the united States, I understand, is

behind great portions 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 much higher than that. It's sixty, seventy percent. ^{Is this} ~~And, of~~

course, I'm pondering it. ~~Is the~~ opportunity to call up people all the time,

anywhere in the world, not creating a whole new set of communications in

the world that never existed before?

NM: ^{As} ~~I am an old curmudgeon.~~ I see it as ~~more of~~ a mess. ~~Because I'm not~~ ^{of}

all sure that instant communication with everyone alive is ideal. Not at all.

Very often ^{it is} ~~it's~~ the hunt for information that ^{stimulates} ~~creates~~ the development that we ^{shapes and stimulates} ~~creates~~ ^{shapes}

make of such information. We are stimulated by the hunt. The difficulty

a vital) becomes ~~part~~ of the intellectual process. *Today, everyone* ~~So, we do more with it.~~

so many are about ~~Everybody is talking these days of~~ gluts of information. *We leave all being* ~~We're all~~ buried

under mountain ranges of data.

ML: I remember, you were there at the birth of television and you had many

theories about it and have written about it. It seems to me that the cell

phone in many ways is almost equal in its power.

NM: With television, back in the early days, everybody who felt positive

was leaving the full effects ~~about it left the~~ *TV* ~~onus~~ of commercials out of the equation. ~~The~~ commercials

did a terrible thing to the American people. They introduced the

were obliged to ~~would~~ expectation that your powers of concentration ~~would~~ suffer a series of hits

through every hour that you watched.

ML: You've made it clear that, to your mind, ideation may be closer to the Devil than the Lord. Which made me think, what about language which is perhaps the most complex and subtle creation of intellect. Where does language fit into this discussion?

NM: Language does not come only from intellect. Language is the marriage of intellect and the senses. ~~That's a huge difference.~~ Whereas, technology is often divorced from the senses. Plastic, for example. Most electronic machines are not agreeable to employ. Think of the cast-iron vise in an old-fashioned cellar workshop. It makes cranking sounds as you use it, and you do get a feeling as you tighten ^{the screw} whether the piece in the vise is being held properly. Not being crushed and not too loose. You obtain very little of that with technological machines. At best you're reading dials, and

might even in
 your eyes find a little play with the subtlety of the dials. But you can't ask
 technology to do ^{any large} much enriching of your senses. Whereas, language comes
 out of the senses. Half of language is onomatopoeia. We are drawn to
 different languages by their qualities. I love German for its guttural
 vibrations on one's larynx, and French for the emphasis upon the nose, the
 centrality of the nose. I love English for the mannered postures available to
 your voice, and Spanish for the fire you can feel within it. Ditto for Italian
 with its sense of bravura. Hebrew for its primitive roots.
 All the reactions come from our senses. So I ~~can~~
 such
 separate technology and language—they exist at opposite poles of the
 intellect.

ML: I've never heard you speak philosophically about language.

NM: Well, I had all sorts of theories years ago which I tried to pursue in

superficial fashion. I never ~~really~~ got down to grips with it. I do have these notions still. I think certain consonants have associative 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, languor, libido. "S's" are sibilant. They suggest displeasure, sinuosity. I tried to make up a rule for all the consonants, but 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....

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

NM: That's pretty far beyond me, I ^{would say.} ~~think~~. 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 soul suffering—because dogs in my

opinion do have souls—and in fact parenthetically there is one very large but unascertainable notion that in Karma we may go back into the animal chain again. Who knows? In any event, this dog was extraordinary. He made sounds, ~~hideous~~ ^{searching} sounds in his throat trying to speak to me. Sounds you couldn't begin to spell out. I could make them for the tape recorder but no one could transcribe them. And that dog wanted to speak. So I think in a certain sense, God was discovering language through the eons of evolution and the sounds of His animals.

ML: 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've felt from the word go that George Bush is one of the Devil's

creatures. I suspect he's drenched with the Devil. And every time he feels that Jesus is talking to him, Satan is speaking. One of the Devil's greatest talents may be to speak like Jesus. The war in Iraq has been steroidal for America. So in that sense—I think the Devil is winning right now in America, yes.
