

speaking, spiritually speaking, that one must remain at a level of mediocrity, never reaching beyond the given. It's a great irony. Because many of them who are good Christians, or Orthodox Jews, are compassionate. I don't know much about Islam but I'm sure the same is true there—you can have fine people, wonderful people, fundamentalists full of compassion but they attach that tenderness—which as far as I'm concerned is godly, is, if you will, Christly—I can say in passing if God was ever going to mingle in our affairs, Christ is more than a metaphor. Compassion is probably the finest emotion we humans can have. When tears come to our eyes for the sorrow of someone else, that may be as close as we get to reaching the best element in ourselves. But, there again, it's difficult to know how pure any moment of compassion is. And when it is manufactured by constant adjurations and so forced into the daily habits of fundamentalists, it becomes the opposite of itself, turns compassion inside-out, and is an instrument for power.

Speaking crudely, if half the fundamentalists in the world are truly compassionate, the other half use it for an egregious power-trip. And the Devil is immensely present.

ML: You know, this always stops me. I try to think how you would translate your metaphysics, your cosmology, into an ethical system. It's not just the fundamentalists. Most religious systems say: OK, we have the theology, now let us show you how that translates into ethics. But what you tell me over and over again is, "We can't be sure." It would be very difficult to construct an ethical system by which to live one's life based on your scheme of beliefs. Have you thought of that?"

NM: I think your point is excellent. I do search for an ethic I can believe in. And that is where I go back to trusting the authority of my senses. They can also be—what's the word I'm looking for?—traduced. ~~They too—it's a perfect place for the Devil to set in.~~

~~They too.~~ To the degree that the Devil may affect our senses, ^{they} it's a

^{become a} perfect place for ^{him} the devil to get to us. That would be the Devil's

aim exactly—to enter our senses, make us feel we're having a godly emotion when in fact, we're having an emotion controlled by the Devil—warped to a degree, distorted from the point.

Nonetheless, the toughest thing in my religious ideas is that I don't have any bones to offer. The worst that can be said about fundamentalism is that it reduces people to the reflexes of a good dog. If a good dog is upset, give it a bone.

ML: It's comfortable.

NM: It's comfortable, but it's immensely limiting. I keep going back to Kierkegaard, who, for my money, was probably the greatest Christian. He not only searched into the complexity of our relations to divinity but to diabolism as well. He knew that we must take nothing for granted in the cosmos. We cannot sup forever on the pabulum is that is termed so conveniently God's mystery. "Don't ask, just obey!"

We can, of course, for the sake of this argument
~~Of course, a great many~~ fundamentalists do function with
 vigor. Their lives have been simplified. They don't worry over

pay another visit to the subject or fundamentalism. After all, & good many

questions that are debilitating. They function very well—at a ~~medium~~ ^{medium} median level. No great writer ever came out of fundamentalism.

Nor any great scientist. To my knowledge, very few talented actors came out of fundamentalism—or stayed with it for long.

Never a genius of any kind, not since Augustine and Aquinas.

ML: So perhaps fundamentalism is for the less daring, the less bold, the less gifted? But aren't you living on an ethical razor's edge, listening to inner voices to find the right word? That's not something everyone can emulate.

NM: Yes, people want to live in such a way that they will feel secure. But there may be no such security available. Right now, parenthetically, we are living in a time where we have to wonder if we will ever see the end of the 21st century. Or, will we destroy ourselves? In that sense, directly, there is no spiritual security.

So, the fundamentalists, beneath everything else, feel the same fears that existential thinkers suffer—that the whole thing can come to an end. Fundamentalists look to alleviate that fear by way

of the desperate belief that it's "God's will." Well, once again, this supposes that God is all good and all powerful, and will take the righteous to heaven. Of course, that offers nothing to the idiocies of human history, particularly that the more we develop as humans, the worse we are able to treat one another. Why? Because we now have the power to destroy each other at higher, more unfeeling levels. *This can be epitomized again and again* Epitomized by the concentration camps. Telling poor wretches that they're going to have a shower to get rid of lice—and instead they are given gas. They are even betrayed at the very last moment. They die with a curse in their hearts. That's more hideous, in a certain sense, than dropping a bomb on 100,000 people—on people you know nothing about. And yet you have fundamentalists carrying on and ~~carrying~~ on about abortion, speaking of it as thwarting God's will. What does it have to do with God's will if you kill a thousand people in one minute with gas? Or destroy hundreds of thousands in an instant of atomic

man-made lightning from the sky? What does that do to God's will?

We might assume that God, like us, is doing what can be done under the circumstances. God is our Creator. God put us here. We are God's artistic vision, we are God's children, if you will, and it's not a good parent who looks always to control the *child*. ~~children~~. The mark of a good parent is they can take joy in the moment when ^{*a developing*} the grown ~~child~~ begins to outstrip the parent ^{*(ways, in small)*}. God is immensely powerful but is not all-powerful. God is powerful enough to give us lightning and thunder and extraordinary sunsets, incredible moments where we appreciate God's sense of beauty. But if God is all-powerful, then how can you begin to explain the monstrosities of modern history? There are theological arguments by great theologians that these horrors are to test us. But this reduces our concept of God to a narcissistic form — now God is a stage director who says, "N" let the actors

then I'll show them what to do.
improvise for a while to see if they get nearer to the role." Do you
~~follow me on that? A heartless stage director.~~

ML: Yes. It's making me think a lot. But what was said earlier...

NM: Yes, I want to get back, sooner or later, to the question about
ethics—I think we can do it bit by bit

ML: In one of our earlier conversations, you said humans were
created by someone or something ~~marvelous, who is~~ *them* not that unlike
ourselves. So we are, in some way, created in the image of God?

NM: Yes. I believe that.

ML: ~~And the image of good?~~ *suggest we are* Doesn't that argue that we're more
good than evil?

NM: Potentially more good, ~~than evil.~~ *when a)* Potentially good. A good
man and a good woman have a child, ~~and~~ there's every reason to
But it's believe that child will be a good person. It's ~~not altogether~~
guaranteed. Good parents can have evil children.

ML: If ~~the children turn out~~ ^{they} if we're created in God's image and we're potentially good, but ~~if we~~ choose evil, ~~then~~ perhaps we were evil all along.

NM Look, ~~look, look~~—not evil all along. Obviously not. If at ~~the~~ ^{our} creation the Devil was present ~~at the creation of humans, that~~ ^{is} and entered us as well, then what we speak of as original sin ^{can be seen as} becomes God's obligatory collaboration with the Devil. We were born good and evil.

ML: Fifty-fifty?

NM: Who knows? Who would presume to say? The point is, whether it's 50-50, 60-40, 70-30, the odds change ^{in each of us}. ~~The odds~~ change because there's an intense war that goes on forever, not only between God and the Devil but—I've said this before—God and the Devil are within us. We make our own bargains with Them. God and the Devil do not have the resources to be in complete control of us all the time. ~~Let me put it this way:~~ It isn't as if we walk through a normal day and there's God on one

shoulder and the Devil on the other—not at all. They come to us when we attract their attention because it affects Their interest as well as ours.

NM: What I use as the notion behind these notions is that divine energy is analogous to human energy—it is not inexhaustible. God and the Devil are each ^{obliged to manage their} managing economies of energy, if you ^{that} will, which is to say ^{give more attention to} they will put more into certain elements of human behavior than ^{to} others. Very often they withdraw from certain people. Too much is ^{being given} going in, too little is coming back, ^{at least} to them in terms of what They are looking for.

Given this as my supposition, I feel a little more ready to make an approach to the question of ethics. ^{It must be} It's obvious in all I've said so far that ^{I am} I'm not only an existentialist, but ^{only} I would go so far as to say that we ^{only} simply do not know our nature. We find out ^{only} more about ourselves ^{only} as we proceed through life. And as we do, we open more questions.

Fix
Jean Malaquais once made a splendid remark—at least for me—during the course of a lecture. He was a brilliant lecturer and in the middle of a verbal flight—this was at the New School—some kid said bitterly: "You never give us answers. You only pose us questions." And Jean stopped in the full flight of his rhetoric and replied, "There are no answers. There are only questions."

The point is that the purpose of life may be to find higher and higher and better questions. Why? Because what I believe—this is wholly speculative but important to me—is that we are here as God's artwork, ^{here} ~~there~~ to influence His future as well as ours. We are God's expression, and not all artworks are successful. But we are here because God has a vision of existence that is at odds with other visions of existence in the universe. In other words, God is not a Supreme Being who reigns over everything—there may not be such a god. There we get into the real question of cosmic existence. There may be a major-domo at the core—maybe not.

There may be gods—we may be back in pagan times and these gods are fighting for dominance over one another. And God's vision can be polluted, or distorted, or warped by the Devil. He would just as soon take over God's creation and pursue his vision.

It's possible the Devil wishes to destroy both God and our creation

~~together~~. Start afresh. All these questions are ^{indeed} so large that as I ~~they are so large so large that as one pursues them~~ pursue my answers ~~one has to go further and further.~~ ^{into answering, one has to go on into the questions they create.}

Given that, we come back once more to "where is the ethic?"

And again we return to trusting the authority of our senses. What do I mean by that now? Isn't it true that as we free ourselves of false conceptions of what life might be, as we free ourselves of the maxims and injunctions other people have put into us from childhood, as we come more to have a sense of "whatever I am, I am beginning to have my own ideas," you do develop some sense that one is doing the right thing, or one is not. Or, all too often, one is not doing much. As we get older, "Not much at all" can take over most of our lives. If I am doing a crossword puzzle, there is

no high motive necessarily involved. Instead, the activity might be modestly on the side of evil—I'm consuming time that might be spent in better ways. Or, to the contrary, I might be preparing my system to get ready for something worthwhile. It's not a large question: I do the crossword puzzle and I don't think about it as good or evil at the time. And I don't think of myself as good or evil so much as probably leaning slightly in the right direction or the wrong one.

So if you ask where the ethic is at any moment, it can be no more than that one is the resultant of all the forces that are in you as that vector confronts all the forces supporting you, and/or opposing you. It's as if we live in a triangular relationship with God and the Devil, trying to sense the best thing to do at a given moment, be it a good thing or a bad thing. Let me go back to what might have been my lone visitation from the Lord. What God might have been trying to tell me was "Get over this notion of good, right, proper. Because very often when you're moving in a

direction you think improper, you might be helping Me more than when you're trying to be proper. Because when you're trying to be proper, you could be poisoning yourself with frustrated annoyance that makes you a colder person and a more hateful person."



So what I'm offering to people as an ethic is to have the honor to live with confusion. Live in the depths of confusion with the knowledge back of that, the certainty back of that, or the belief, the hope, the faith, whatever you wish to call it, that there is a purpose to it all, that it is not absurd, that we are all engaged in a huge cosmic war and God needs us. That doesn't mean we can help God by setting up a set of principles to live by. We can't, *why not?* Because the principles vary. The cruellest obstacle to creating one's own ethic is that no principle is incorruptible. *Indeed, to cleave* To ~~how~~ to a principle is to corrupt oneself. Of course, to shift from one principle to another can be promiscuous. Life is not simple. Ethics is almost incomprehensible, but it exists. It is there. There is a substratum of moderate, quiet, good feeling—generally, if I'm

doing things in such a way that the sum of all my actions at the moment seems to be feasible and responsible and decent, that certainly gives me a better feeling than if I am uneasy, dissatisfied with myself and not liking myself.

Now, obviously, there is room for error. We all know about vanity. There are people who, when they like themselves, are dangerous. When they think they are extraordinary and fabulous, they can be awful. So I keep coming back to this. One reason I know this putative theology of mine will never take off, will never be a religious movement, is that it's too difficult. It offers too little and demands too much.

ML: So it isn't so much that you have no ethical system. It's just an ethical system that cannot be abstracted, nor carved on tablets for people to carry around and consult whenever they have to make a decision. Life is always more complicated than any rule that can be laid down.

NM: What I'm asking for—this is an odd analogy, but not entirely—there are certain people who worship sex, good sex. I might be one of them. What I've noticed about good sex, when it's really good, is the extreme sensitivity with which you proceed. At a given moment, it's a creative dance. There is such a thing as a pure act of love when every moment is distinctive and lovely and fine. That does happen. For most people, it happens so rarely that they remember it—and then remember it and remember it. A sense of perfection does exist in sex.

In the same way, sometimes, for short periods in our lives, I think there's an analogous sense of perfection to all sorts of basic emotions—in love, in nurture, in caring for people, in grieving, in mourning—it's very hard to mourn, mourn openly and honestly. Mourning is an element in people's lives that can be duplicitous, even ugly. Take a wife who's been married to a man for forty years, whatever—and in her mourning, what if she detects a secret spot of glee? "That selfish bastard is finally gone." So mourning

can be shocking for people because they discover sides of themselves they never knew existed. Or the reverse. Sometimes people die ^{whom} ~~who~~ you thought you didn't care that much about, and you discover you have lost something or someone valuable to you.

~~MI: Someone you didn't appreciate enough.~~

~~NM: Yes.~~ And so there is the constant element of discovering yourself—not in the awful way people do in psychoanalysis where every little act has to be analyzed and re-analyzed until the air in the room is stale. Rather, just like making love, it's a matter of being sensitive to the moment, reflecting the moment as best you can. And that is not an easy matter. You want a few general ethical principles from me? Remarks I'd even offer to a stranger? Well, then, if possible, give up smoking. Because that tends to block a good deal of sensitivity in yourself. It serves the will. I used to smoke two packs a day—why? Because it served my will, particularly when it came to writing. Took me a year to learn how ^{to} ~~begin writing again once~~ ^{to} ~~write when~~ I did give up smoking. Perhaps I became a better

writer. My point is, anything that will enable you to get closer to yourself, good or bad—in other words, being close to oneself can be much more unpleasant than being ^{at a distance} ~~at a remove~~ from oneself.

That is why most people ^{do choose} live indeed ^{to be a bit removed} at a remove from themselves.

And so often it's why they smoke.

ML: But you know, I remember something else you said about getting close to yourself. It's stuck with me ~~forever~~. I don't even remember where you said it—you might have brought it up in conversation, but you declared: If you dig deep enough into yourself, you're going to come out your ~~own~~ asshole.

NM: [laughs]

ML: In other words, yes, there are doors and you must open as many of those doors, and the ensuing doors within doors, but every once in a while, you want to be careful about what you open.

NM: Well, of course you have to be careful about certain doors.

Anyone who flings everything ajar at once would be blown away
by a hurricane. A mighty change could rage through all the rooms

in your psyche. One of the most self-protective elements in human nature is protecting oneself from one's own dark corners.

So I don't think it's a real problem that we're going to open, by mistake, all the doors at once—we don't. We can't. What I meant by the closer you get to yourself, the closer you are to coming out ^{of} your own asshole has to do with something I'd like to attach to this ^{discussion} about the nature of defecation, shit, and waste. ^{It may} ~~be~~ ^{getting into} ~~worth going back to.~~ ^{we} (As a small premise, think of people who are terribly prudish about evacuation. They don't want to think about it, don't talk about it, it's beneath them, they hope it is terribly far away from them. I'd say ethically speaking, that's not a comfortable way to be. Far better that when you're sitting on the throne—parenthetically, it's interesting that we have that metaphor, "the throne," precisely for the toilet—when you're sitting on the throne, you do well to be regal about it and enjoy the sniffs of your own waste. Smell your own shit, and decide for yourself if you're a little more healthy or a little more unhealthy than you thought

you were the last time you sat down. That's part of being close to yourself. You take this notion that what comes out of you may be unpleasant but it's natural. It can be the nearest we come to a fact. It's like hearing your own voice

occasionally—~~and~~ so often it's too shrill, too arrogant, too peremptory, too spoiled, or too harsh. To the degree we can hear our own voice, we improve our relation with other people.

Because if we find our own voice unpleasant, then if the other person starts shrieking at us, we don't have to think, "How unstable is the other." Not if we can recognize that our own voice was ugly enough to incite the response.

That's one of the elements in a decent marriage.

ML: This being attuned and listening and paying attention to the self—as you were speaking, I kept thinking, "This is positively Jamesian." James would sense the tiniest shifts in perception.

Now he probably wasn't interested in smelling shit very much—not at all.

NM: That may have been his one deficiency. [Laughter]

ML: A while ago, you were hammering on Revelation as something to be rejected by human experience. In your view, is there any merit, or value in the holy books of the great religions, or do you think they should be seen as historical artifacts, quaint, useless curiosities?

NM: No, no.

ML: What is their use then?

NM: Well, if they're seen as general principles rather than as absolute dicta, they can be of great use. The Ten Commandments—most of us do react within the framework of the Ten Commandments. The point is not to build up an inner sense of self-righteousness—"I obey the Ten Commandments and therefore I am nearer to God." No, they're rough, ^{are} general guides. "Do not kill." Well, yes, do not kill. Does that mean you have to piss on your hand if you have a gun in your hand and you're face to face with Adolf Hitler in 1941? No, you kill him. At that point, I would not consider "do not kill" an absolute command.

Let's go through the ten commandments: most of them are so simple they apply to 90-95% of the cases. But you have some—"do not commit adultery." Well, there it gets more complex. Because when people are engaged in miserable marriages, miserable unions, their lives are foul; their children's lives are poisoned. And at a given moment there's an impulse to escape, to commit adultery to avoid doing worse things.

Where the Ten Commandments fall down is that there are times you have to do something worse than what you're supposed to do. Because if you don't do that something worse, you're going to get into ~~something~~ *actions* even more destructive, more evil, more unhappy, more toxic to others.

ML: So you're not interested in jettisoning the great holy books of the world, you just want to qualify them.

NM: Not qualify. I want us to cease looking upon them slavishly.

Once one becomes a peon in any part of one's mind, one is then

open to the counterpart of slavishness, the dark side of the moon, which is mass destruction.

ML: Your position is very much like Emerson's. He revered Jesus, he was interested in all the holy books, but he certainly wasn't going to be bound by them. His own quest for his own inner self, very much like yours, precluded that.

NM: I've read Emerson but only in passing, and that for a simple reason. One, I think he's a great writer, and two, I did feel close enough to him to think, "If I study him, I could end up an Emerson *trying to write* didact, ~~writing~~ wonderful pieces about Emerson." My arrogance, my vanity, if you will, is that I am my own mental springboard.

I've had that rare experience, probably analogous to Emerson's, of being successful enough at an early age so I didn't have to worry about making a living the way other people do. In return for that blessing, the least I could do was spend my time thinking. I have had that advantage, and it's an enormous one and I'm aware of it. I'm happy I'm aware of it because it keeps me modest rather than

vain. There were years when I was much too vain and I have paid for that. No need to get into it, but vanity is corrosive.

There are a few generalities you can count on—vanity is immensely dangerous. But nothing is absolute. Vanity may be terribly important for people who don't have enough of it. Even as it's injurious to people who have too much. But then the notion of moderation that the Greeks had can also be stultifying. If you apply it to dangerous activities, however, it becomes interesting.

What is moderation for a top-notch race car driver? What's moderation to a libertine? Well, you don't have to pursue every last fuck that's before you. What's the mark of moderation in a womanizer, a groper? Well, he doesn't have to feel every woman's ass he's tempted to latch his hand onto. He looks to be

discriminating. The road back to balance is discrimination, *when action is high. That is precisely the meaning of Cool.*

ML: A phrase comes to mind—I'm sure you won't like it—that,

crudely speaking applies to a lot of what you've been saying, and that's "situation ethics."

NM: You mean: do the right thing in the circumstances. It's Black. First, what does "do the right thing" mean? Blacks are talking about situations Whites have rarely considered in their full complexity. You're a drug dealer and you're cutting your stuff and there's a guy who, on the one hand is a fool—you can take him completely and give him plain talcum powder. On the other hand, you can see he really needs it, needs a drug at that moment. So "do the right thing"—don't cut his stuff to a ridiculous level. Lose a little of the profit.

At every level of human existence, no matter how evil certain activities may seem to others, there is a caution present along with the ugly impulse. (Except, of course, for those rare occasions when the impulse takes over entirely.) But short of such moments, I would say that even very unpleasant, especially ugly, nasty, horrible people will hold back on certain occasions because we all do have this sense of "do the right thing."

My basic argument is that ethics is not a system of rules. As you said, not something you can etch in stone. Ethics is a sensitivity to the moment and a sense of probably—and we don't always have it either—a sense of "this is better to do than that." This could even come down to calculation: you're bilking someone in a deal. But if you're going to bilk him, better to do it this way, not that way. Because if you do it in too ugly a manner, you'll create a desire for revenge in him, whereas this way, his feelings will be hurt but not as badly, it won't be as ugly. So what's your ethos at that moment? It's to reduce ugliness in the world system. By a little.

ML: In one of our earlier conversations, you spoke of a time in the distant future when, after "some definitive metamorphosis of existence, human vision would join God's vision—perhaps—and travel across the heavens."

NM: When did I say that?

ML: In one of our earlier conversations.

NM: Was that toward the end of Ancient Evenings or in Of a Fire on the Moon?

ML: Elements of that were there. You were looking around the corner, so to speak, you were anticipating, rare for you, how things might possibly turn out. "A definitive metamorphosis of existence," was part of the phrase, as I recall. Human nature would shift into a completely different level; human vision would become married with God's and, I assume, would then split off from the demonic. At that point something would happen—we would "travel across the heavens. . ."

NM: Well, that's apocalyptic. I would not see any way we're going to separate drastically or quickly from the Devil as well as from God.

ML: So you would not see. . .

NM: At present, I am more concerned that we do not destroy ourselves.

ML: What would be the necessary conditions for this metamorphosis of existence to happen? What would human beings have to become?

NM: ~~It's beyond me.~~ I wouldn't venture to say. Some of it ^{may} ~~would~~ be obvious: more, and then more self-awareness. More ~~and more~~ freedom from fundamentalism. More readiness for humans to accept the heroic demand that they stop leaning on God, stop relying on God, and start realizing that God's needs can be greater than ours, ^{and} ~~that~~ God's woes ^{may} ~~can~~ be more profound than our own. ~~That~~ God's sense of failure could ~~absolutely~~ mock our own sense of failure. God, I believe, is, at present, so far from fulfilling His own vision, is so mired in our corporate promotions all over the globe, our superhighways, our plastic, our threats of nuclear warfare, our heartless, arrogant ethnic wars, our terrorism, our sweep of pollution all over God's environment. How can God's sorrow not be immeasurably greater than ours?

Before we can approach any thoughts of apocalypse, we have to become human enough, brave enough, to recognize we cannot rely on God. Rely too much on God, and we become comparable to a tremendously selfish child who drives a parent into exhaustion, deadens the parent through endless demands. "Save me! God, please, can I have that beautiful dress I want for the high school prom? Thank you, God, deliver it to me, God." Pause. "If you don't, God, I'll be angry at you," is the underlying element in ~~the~~ so many of the prayers. Or, the abject beseechment—"God have pity on me, I'm a poor worm."

I think we become a hint more heroic if we recognize that God needs us at least as much as we need God. We do have to stand on our own. In that way, I can feel a certain respect for atheists. I have huge disagreements with them—the first might be their absolute refusal to consider the notion of karma for even a moment. Or any kind of hereafter—their determined intensity that there will be nothing after life. You're gone, that's it. This creates

its own sort of trouble. It fortifies the liberal notions that we have to take care of people we know nothing about and enter strange countries and provide them with democracy., etc., etc.

I have a tremendous distrust of what people think is the good. At any given moment, 90% of that is fashion. The war in Iraq is a perfect example of fashion—the bright idea that we are there to inject democracy into any country that needs it. That was a political fashion; it had no real basis in political reality. Of course, *one ~~way~~ warped form or another* it can be done, you can always inject democracy into a country if you have enough troops and ignore the cost.

ML: I want to come back one more time to love and courage. Here I'm going to use Henry James—his idea of the greatest human act, one that required both love and courage is an act of renunciation—at the heart of all his novels is an act of renunciation, and usually it's a quiet act, not even an act you take credit for.

NM: It's suspicious in James. Because James's life is also a study in renunciation. I distrust authors, especially very good authors,

when they lay out too full a program for their characters. They can be covertly supporting their own work. James had too little passion to get near to people he didn't understand. He worked out an immensely elaborate and beautiful art but it's full of renunciation. And we pay the price. If he had been greater as a writer, Americans would be that much better off. James is not much of a guide to the modern world. A marvelous guide when you're younger to understanding some of the subtly disproportionate things that go on in high society. He's a great guide to a very limited mountain pass that most people will not traverse. But renunciation did him in. If James had had a few passionate love affairs and had been able to write about them—

ML: He saw them as antithetical. It's the life/art division. James believed that you can have a life OR you can have the art and I'm going to have the art.

NM: Look, I agree, and it surprises me to a degree, particularly now that I'm old. I've been on record as saying if you want to be a

serious novelist, a large element of it is monastic. It's a dull life in the daily sense.

ML: That's very Jamesian.

NM: You don't have a lot of fun. You have to give up the idea of fun.

ML: Renunciation serves art. That was his dictum.

NM: In that sense, I do agree. But there is renunciation as a working sacrifice, a temporary renunciation, and there's visceral renunciation which can amputate a novelist's taproot.

ML: He should have broken off the reservation once in a while?

Is that what you're saying? Gone off on a hoot?

NM: Yes. Once you've had a wild time or two, you can often support your imagination for a long time. In the harshest sense, you can say the trouble with Henry James is he never fucked another human.

ML: I have one last question which I think you've already answered. Your position on Jesus seems to be very similar to the

position of the Muslims: they revere him as a teacher, a prophet, a guide—they do not recognize him as anything special beyond one in a long line—

NM: No. I wouldn't say I have that point of view. I would say I simply don't know. It's possible to me that Jesus is the son of God. If God wants to inspire humankind, which is after all His Creation, why couldn't He, why wouldn't He send a part of Himself to humankind? I can accept the miracle—miracles don't bother me. What irks me is the bric-a-brac put up to surround the miracle ~~for it~~
~~keeps you from coming near to the core~~

ML: So the incarnation—the Word made flesh is something—

NM: The Word made flesh gives me trouble. The Gospel of John makes me uneasy. I think John, more than Matthew, Mark or Luke, created some of the unhappier aspects of the church. The notion of the Word made flesh can be reversed—there's the danger. The flesh can be turned into the Word, can become injunctions, direct

communication, usually from above straight down. What is totalitarianism but the word being implanted in the flesh?

ML: But John said you have to believe revelation, it's all there, there's no other way. Whereas Thomas said you have to look inside yourself. John said "forget what's inside yourself, look to the gospels." So you'd have a natural animosity to John.

NM: I do—and say it again, the word is the flesh?

ML: The word was made flesh. The incarnation.

NM: The flesh was transmogrified into the word. Most of us by now are transmogrified creatures. We live with the word, not the flesh.

ML: But don't you find the Gospel of John superior in its writing?

NM: The writing is better, yes. Which is why people love John and follow John so much, and why he's, of the four, the most important. But he is tethered ~~to~~ to the word that he helped to create those loud-voiced ~~lying~~ Bible-thumping exhortationists on TV.

Metaphysical Discussions IV

I would like to take up again the question of saints. I think you may want to say more.
ML: ~~I want to begin by talking about saints.~~ In most religions, ~~saints~~

do
~~they~~ play a tremendous role. They intercede for lesser humans, they give witness to God's greatness, they are models for humanity by their ability to withstand suffering. Indeed, some of their suffering is self-imposed. Do you see saints in the same way as in the traditional religions?

NM: You reach me on a weak point. I don't know that I have a good deal to say on the subject. It does make sense to me that there would be certain people whom God would feel close to. I suppose the subtext to such a remark is that God may not feel equally near to each one of us. In truth, I would doubt that He does. After all, the Devil is always doing is best to obfuscate the divine venture. Most human beings are by now a complex mixture of good and evil. We're Devil-infested and God-illuminated. So, it's not easy to reach us. Very few of us ever get a message directly

from God or the Devil. (Of course, hysterics receive several a day.) Most of us are obliged to live with a subtle smudge over our senses. Spiritually speaking, we inhabit a complex and contradictory environment. Theologically speaking, spiritually speaking, we may not be as near to ultimates as perhaps we were centuries ago.

Now there are people who succeed, one way or another, of divesting themselves of most of the Devil. It's hard for me to believe, however, that a saint can exist with nothing of the Satanic still residing in him or her. I can assume that saints are relatively pure, but the notion that they are absolutely so—well, given my temperament, it begs too many questions. It makes everything too easy. Because if a saint is perfect, why the hell do they fail so often? Does the Devil overtake them? Or—let me advance an essentially medieval argument—is the saint so good that the Devil has to use extraordinary and exhausting efforts to create a defeat, and so the saint serves God's purpose by wearing the Devil out.

ML: But all saints are not defeated.

NM: Give me an example of some triumphant saints.

ML: Saint Peter.

NM: Saint Peter! He deserted Christ three times.

ML: But then he redeemed himself and started Christianity.

NM: Yes, and Christianity may still be laboring under the fact that it was Peter who commenced it. You've got a three-time treacherous associate there. . .

ML: There are other saints. . .

NM: I won't say that people can't repent, that they can't restore their spirit back to something finer, but nonetheless renegades do have to remain under suspicion.

ML: That, in a way, brings me to my next question. Your god and your devil are limited, and I assume—

NM: Not limited but finite. Certainly not infinite.

ML: I assume that human perfection is truly impossible for you, as you just said. If there were a human being who was all-good, she

or he would be better than God. And if we found an absolutely perfect human being, your theology would be hard-pressed to account for that person.

NM: I don't think I'm in any danger of having my theology, such as it is, overthrown by that premise. Of course, there will never be a perfect human being. It's not in the range of our thinking. After all, I am going so far as to say there's no such thing as a perfect divinity. The nature of the universe is provisional, existential, not finally determined. That is at the core of everything I present here. God's future is as open as our own.

ML: Let me return to saints. I can admit that Saint Peter was not perfect. But think of St. Francis of Assisi. . .

NM: Yes, he's perfect in a beautiful way that took care of a great many animals, and thereby brought us a little more into sympathy with creatures who often feel more life than ourselves, but I don't know that he improved human nature particularly, not even by his fine example. I'm asking, rather, about the kind of saints who are

trying to change human nature, and almost always end up as martyrs. Indeed, the way they become saints is that they were martyrs first.

ML: The one way we know a saint is a saint, at least in Christianity, is that they were martyred. St. Stephen was martyred, St. Sebastian was martyred. . .

But you mentioned animals. To shift for a moment: how far down does the chain of being—or, if you will—the war between God and the Devil manifest itself?

NM: I have no idea.

ML: You said that dogs have souls.

NM: Yes.

ML: Then I assume both sides have enlisted them. What about the other animals? Are you ready to say that some are on God's side? Are the eagles and the doves? The vultures and the snakes?

NM: For me to speak on these matters is equal to philosophical free-fall. I would rather rely on the sort of instinctive verdicts that

humans come up with after centuries of dealing with certain problems. For instance, my belief in God and Devil comes to a good extent from the fact that the majority of people, through all of recorded time, have believed in both evil spirits and good ones and, finally, in a god and a devil accompanied by angels and demons. If the majority have such beliefs, one does well to keep some respect for such notions. Error is our human signature, but not a constant incapacity to perceive anything beyond ourselves.

ML: Do you relate any of your ideas to modern concepts of disease?

NM: Well, I hardly subscribe to the modern notion that all disease is evil, and is to be eradicated at all cost, so that we can all live for centuries and populate the globe with ten trillion people. Life and death, I will repeat, do have an intimate relation to each other. Just as we cannot conceive of an existence where there is only daylight and never night, so I don't care to think of life void of death and rebirth. Since I think some of us come back again, I will say that I

don't have the remotest clue whom we may become in our next existence. It's possible, it's perfectly possible, that some or all of us have to descend to the bacteriological level and return from there. My guess, ~~however, is that it is not so~~, is it's not that elaborate a chain of reincarnation, ~~for that~~ that would propose a most complex universe in the after-life. I would rather assume there's a purpose to everything, including the biological agents that infect us and kill us. It may be there are agents of death with which God experiments as fully as God experiments with the development of human and animal life. ~~In that sense, life and death are counterparts of the same ongoing existence.~~

ML: You've talked a lot about the moment of death and the state of mind one is in at the moment of death—this follows, I think from what you just said. Peace of mind, I think, is important to many religions—peace of mind at death, none more so than Catholicism. The Church actually has a sacrament called Extreme

Unction, now called "Anointing of the Sick." It was created by the Church to give hope to people who were near death.

would you say that (arrived at such)
NM: How ~~did~~ the Church ~~arrive~~ at such confidence in its power?

ML: Well, over millennia, the Church created seven sacraments.

And the last one is Extreme Unction. I can't tell you which Father of the Church came up with the theology of it, but there is a sense of the Church reaching out to the individual at the moment of death and applying all of its powers to giving that person peace of mind as they passed over.

NM: Or, at least, giving them a belief in peace of mind. . .

ML: From the Church's point of view, Extreme Unction works—and I've seen people receive it—and you know, it does give them tremendous peace of mind.

NM: I can believe it's effective. Certainly for devout Catholics, it would be. Let me tell you a small story about a dear friend of mine, Eddie Bonetti, who was dying of cancer. I spoke to him a

day before he went. He was a marvelous fellow and you'll see from the conversation what his positive qualities were.

We were talking on the phone and he knew death was close. At a given moment, I said to him, "Eddie, are you scared?" He said, "Yeah, Norman, I am."

I said, "Eddie, it seems to me you have less reason to be afraid than anyone I know. Because you're the loyalest guy I've ever met. You never turned your back on a friend, no matter how much it cost you. I really can't believe that something bad is waiting for you."

He said, "You really believe that, Norman?"

I said, "I think so, I really do."

And the woman he was living with at the time told me he did die later that day with a smile. Which gave me heart because I loved the guy and so am tempted, naturally, to hope that my words had a little to do with his peace.

So, yes, I can believe that Extreme Unction can be wonderful for some. I will say I expect it's a human creation rather than a divine fact. There were no miracles announcing it, no revelation from God. This was a human attempt, if you will, to understand how God's mind works. Now it was brought into being as a sacrament, which is to say it had powerful backing, huge culture, much tradition, many decisions, synods debating over it, coming up with their sacraments one by one, developing them, using them, maintaining the ones that worked best.

So, all right, yes, I can believe Extreme Unction is there for a devout Catholic. It might not work for someone like myself. If someone came in and said, "You're going to die in peace," I'd probably say, "Let me go. If you don't mind, I'll fine-tune my own end—you don't need to do it for me."

Certain theologians would say, "Well, this is vanity. This is precisely why you're not going to have a good end." And my feeling is, "Hey, pal, it's open. None of us know. It doesn't matter

how much tradition is behind it. Tradition suggests there may well be something powerful behind it, but can it fit every human case?"

ML: Why is the state of mind at death so very important to you?

NM: Because I think it's our point of departure.

ML: So what? Everybody has a bad day. You could happen to have a bad day on the day you die.

NM: No, no—whenever you have a bad day, there's a lot of reason for the bad day. I can give you 20 causes for an ugly hour. Some are serious, some are passing. But, no, I won't let you hide behind the notion that a bad day is no more than a slot on the roulette wheel.

ML: But there are also days when we have false euphoria. We can feel good for no accountable reason and then the next day, say, "Why did I feel so good? I still have all these problems!"

NM: Whenever we have an emotion we can't account for, good or bad, I expect that the root is karmic. That may be the only visitation we receive from previous lives. By the laws of the game,

which may well be basic and necessary, we can't know who we were and where we were in previous lives. Nonetheless, intense and unaccountable emotions can come from one's karmic past.

But I'm not answering your question. I think at the moment we die, we are the sum of all the good and bad we've done, all the courage and cowardice we've exercised. And so, for example, if we die with a desire to be reborn, I think it means a great deal to God.

If you will, it's almost like we reach into a litter to select a pup, and the one who catches our eye ^{*because he wants us*} is the one we choose to take home.

Using that crude analogy, I would say that it's important to be ready. After all, that is the one situation we can't simulate, can't preempt. We can pretend to a huge number of emotions in our lives, we may well spend three-quarters of our lives being what we are not. I would go so far as to say that one of the reasons people get married is so that they can stop acting just a bit. They don't have to present a face to the world. People who live alone are always obliged to put on a face when they leave their room.

So, I would say that when one is close to death, that is, if one knows one's going to die, there can be a desire for another life, or a yearning toward peace or—and this is the worst condition—a wish to pass away altogether. The largest urge of the soul becomes, "I don't want to feel pain, so I will accept nothingness."

And really, suppose you're on high, looking people over, wondering which ones you'll refashion. Suppose there's a particular human being that God is most interested in, but at the last moment that person is pleading for stupor. God says, "Do I really want to go through this again? Or ^{will} ^{be} ~~is~~ this person, finally, a great disappointment? ^{again?"}

at the risk of being repetitive, I do,
You see, I believe our final judgment in this life is given by

the form of our rebirth. The only divine judgment we receive is our placement in the next life. Often, God's decision may be, "No. No need to be reborn. Off the board." True death. End of existence. If you have no desire to live again, that could be determinative.

ML: I want to explore this more. A nurse told me this recently, a hospice nurse, who cared for the dying, three times a week she went through this, and she had great experience—told me that at the end, often, because people were taking drugs, they'd be on morphine to cut the pain, and their personality, as she put it, "dissolves." That they were alive, they were functioning, but their soul was already gone. And so, for them, the death was before they died—the body was still breathing, the automatic systems were working but—but indeed, the people I have seen die, they revert to powerful impulses, powerful atavistic impulses. The desire to keep oneself clean—they get on the toilet when they're dying. The desire to remember one's mother or grandmother. Or when someone touches you, the desire to reach out, or, to the reverse, afraid you're going to be violated when you're lying on your bed. And I've seen that, the few deaths I've seen.

So people don't ordinarily die in moments of clarity like Eddie Bonetti. A lot of time when they die, they don't know who they are.

NM: I can't answer that. You can die spiritually an hour, a day, a month or five years before your death. I think the ^{more} closer your soul can remain intact up to the extinction of your body, the finer candidate you are for reincarnation. But that's just my notion.

ML: So risky. . . You mean someone who really wants to be reborn but goes into a coma loses their shot?

NM: Look, the soul can fight the body right down to the very end. The soul can say, "all right, I don't feel anything in my legs any more. Nothing in my fingers. I can't find my thoughts, but I know what I want. That way is more life. I want to be reborn." Or, to the contrary, the soul can feel it isn't worth it. "Let the body have its day. I've abused this body all my life, it's now demanding a cruel payment and—let me tell the truth to myself—I'm bankrupt..."

But I do think that the soul—taking this intelligence from your lady at the hospice—if the soul leaves a week or two before the body, I think, speaking in terms of the transmigration of souls, it could make for a few complexities in the travel schedule. You know, I have this feeling—so many talk about death as a vision: There's this wonderful white light, and relatives come out to meet you. I'm a touch dubious about that. For some people, yes. They were close to their relatives and their relatives do come out.

But there's an awful lot of spirit travel involved. The logistics of the hereafter interest me because God's energies, as I see it, are immense but, to repeat, not infinite. So there are all sorts of procedures to be followed after you die. Economic procedures, if you will, involving the energies available to the Hereafter. It may be much more complex and less adaptable than we assume. The more flaming, fiery, flamboyant sects, the ones that promise everything in the Hereafter, bring out my cynicism (which, after all, is my good shield against wishful thinking). Often, I expect, in

the immediate hours or days after our death there can be pauses, long waits. You may hang around in a vast hall—somewhat like the first day in the Army, when nobody knew what to do with you and you were not yet assigned to some sort of temporary training platoon. We can talk about limbo a little later if you wish. Limbo may be an absolutely realistic station for most people when they die. That is, they hang around for quite a while.

ML: Limbo can be for years.

NM: Well, I don't know. In the Catholic religion, there could be an eternity to limbo, but I think it could also be a matter of divine bureaucratic—dare I say it?—mismanagement. Because bureaucratic mismanagement on earth—I don't know that we necessarily have to assume all this changes in the Hereafter. I don't think angels are perfect any more than I believe demons are totally evil. I think the rarest condition in existence is absolute purity of any variety.

NM If God is a Creator, then God cannot be absolutely pure because creation consists in part of improving upon one's errors, and offering less purchase to one's vices.

ML: What about people—we've all heard about people who die after living lives of greed and misery, rotten people, detestable in every way, but at the last minute, the last few weeks, they call in the priest, they get a seraphic smile on their face, they have money, perhaps, they're surrounded by servants, and they go off into the hereafter feeling very good about themselves. Deluded, perhaps, about their ultimate worth, but nonetheless, smiling, saying their prayers. They haven't gone to a church or done anything decent—

NM: Well, you're creating an ^{improbable} ~~imaginary~~ person. . .

ML: There are people like that who die happy after living a miserable life.

NM: Who says they died happy? They could be acting right until the end.

ML: That's the moment you said you don't act.

NM: No. No. I said people who are serious about their death don't act. They may be acting for others, but not before eternity.

I'll give you an explanation why a truly rotten person can die happy, which is they were so rotten in their previous existence, the life before this one, that this life, bad as it was, proved to be a spiritual improvement over the previous one. They die happy because they feel, everything considered, considering how bad were their beginnings, and how absolutely loathesome the initial impulses they were born with, ^{that} they have ~~gotten better~~ gotten better than they were before. circumstances, We all know people who were total pricks their entire lives who mellow a little bit at the end. That's another human quality.

ML: But you said all the good and evil in one's life is summed up in death. I'm thinking of those who are miserable people for the first 95% of their lives and then they're sweet old people at the end—doesn't seem very just that they should have a happy death.

You'd think somehow they should have a miserable death. Where's the fairness in things?

NM: I think you're speaking too hypothetically. This person you're talking about—as a novelist I find him impossible to *draw for a book,* conceive. People who are rotten all their lives rarely end up sweet at the end. If they do—there is such a thing as truly evil and ugly impulses wearing out, burning out. Just as good people can sour, ugly people may sometimes die in a more benign state. They've used up the ugliness in themselves. They've been rotten, but maybe they feel a bit of contrition at the end. Catholicism is based on that.

ML: Absolutely.

NM: Between the stirrup and the ground. I've always found it excessively sentimental and too easy: be evil all your life and as you're falling from the horse, before your head is knocked off your body—

ML: Say a perfect Act of Contrition!

NM: Yes! I've always found that extreme. And a little convenient. The Catholic Church is not only a study in immense human wisdom, but what applied skill it has at maneuvering our thoughts around the tightest corners.

ML: It's thought of almost everything. It has an answer for almost everything, every issue.

You spoke a little bit about limbo but I don't recall that you said much about purgatory—as an idea, as a place, as a metaphor. Of course, it's a wonderful metaphor, we all use it. What is your idea of purgatory as a metaphor?

NM: Well, as a metaphor—tell me, purgatory is a temporary station?

ML: It may last for a millennia, but it's temporary.

NM: I confess I don't know these concepts well. Does limbo have any relation to purgatory?

ML: No. Limbo is the place for those people on whom God can't make a judgment. They died before they were baptized.

NM: Absolutely meaningless and silly.

ML: I agree. The Church doesn't even talk about limbo any more.

They've almost dropped it as a concept. But purgatory. . .

NM: Now purgatory. . .yes.

ML: Purgatory is not endless. There is an end to your suffering.

The amount of time you're there and what kind of suffering you have, according to the Catholic Church, depends on what your crimes were.

NM: I see purgatory in altogether different terms. The notion that if you suffer long enough you'll purge yourself—I don't see any reason to have that in the Hereafter. I would suggest instead that being reborn takes care of purgatory. For some people, life is, indeed, purgatory. For a few people, life is heaven—they're happy so much of the time. For ^{more}~~some~~ people, life is hell. I don't think we need these other structures. I think we pay our debts through our reincarnations. That makes much more sense to me than these immensely wasteful places called heaven and hell where nobody

does anything, where nothing's brought back into the divine economy, and people ~~are~~ just marking time.

I see God as ~~being~~^{as} Faustian, aiming to go further. God is not satisfied with His or Her creation, God wants it to become better. Therefore, wasteful procedure is anathema to God. So, I do see heaven, purgatory and hell, therefore, as wasteful procedures. Who can speak interestingly of heaven, after all? Shaw made the best single attempt and decided heaven was boring. And there is always the uneasy little feeling that people have that it could be like Club Med, a gated little tropical island. Whereas on earth,ⁱⁿ life, we do experience heaven. We experience it two, three, or four times in a long life, maybe for a minute, no more, but we know what heaven is. There's a kind of luminousness to the joy. Most of us, unfortunately, come closest to heaven through drugs. But, all right—we know what it is.

We certainly know what hell is. Hell can be as simple as having a bad case of gout. Or a screamer of a drug trip. Or a nerve gone crazy in a tooth.

ML: There's conscience. . .

NM: Yes. Purgatory, for me, is ^{the tension} a sense of ~~living~~ conflict between
^{Yes, indeed. There's also dread.}
 one's temptations and one's responsibility. (When we feel dread,
^{may not be}
 we're not that far from purgatory. We feel something very ²

important could be taking place in our soul but we don't know

what, ^{we are} ~~and~~ we're full of fear ^{at} ~~of~~ taking the next step ^{that} we now believe

is demanded of us. Most men ^{encounter ahead} meet purgatory (in terms of their

personal courage. If they're afraid—if they're afraid of playing

football, putting on the pads and going out to play can be

purgatory. Boxing can be purgatory. Skiing, if the trail is steep

and narrow, and the moguls are formidable, can certainly reduce

you. Bungee-jumping can be purgatory—brief but intense. Men—

now women are beginning to search for ^{such explanations into} that purgatory as well. It

used to be that women's purgatory was related to the terrors of

childbirth. After all, in the Middle Ages, there was one chance in

ten a woman would die in childbirth. That was a true terror. One

had to face ultimates to have a child.

ML: How limbo and purgatory came about, if I'm remembering correctly, ~~in the thinking of Christianity~~ ^{that Christianity} was they began with notions of heaven and hell borrowed from ~~other religions because~~ ^{there were} previous religions that had both. Then the structure of the church became more complex and people asked questions. What if you've been bad but not so bad ^{that} you should be condemned to eternal hellfire—you've only been sort of bad, ~~and the Church~~ ^{the Church} said, "you're right, we have a place for those people where they have modest suffering." Then people said, "what about people outside the Church? We've been told they're condemned but what if they haven't done anything evil? They died at three years old—a wonderful little child but never baptized. . ." The Church said, "we have a place for them too." So the Church was trying to create—I'm sure they would have created another place if they'd had to. But ultimately, the Church began to see the folly of limbo—what a ridiculous idea for people to live in a big empty space forever and ^{feel} no positive pain but no positive joy although the Baltimore

Catechism decided to offer these innocents "perfect natural happiness." No beatific vision would be available, but no unseemly suffering either. Just limbo.

We talked about saints but I never got to my question about demons. I remember you told me some time ago you had an encounter with a demon. Or a succubus or—whatever you want to call it, right here in a room you rented for a week one winter on Commercial Street in Provincetown. Would it be worthwhile to say anything about that experience?

NM: I won't get into it, Mike, because it takes too long to tell and there's no real point. I can certainly speak of succubi and incubi in the abstract sense. I think they would be useful instruments of the Devil. I only felt such a presence once in my life and it seemed to come out of nowhere, which is why I don't rush to talk about it because I don't understand why it was there. But I really felt as if there were some intangible creature fastened to my chest. I do have a story that may be worth telling about a poetess named Mina

Loy. Something like seventy or seventy-five years ago, she was staying in a small hotel in the Left Bank in Paris and one night in her room, she felt this hideous oppression, this monstrous, intangible creature, which seemed nonetheless most alive and had fastened ^{itself} to her chest. She lived in horror through the night and felt abominably wretched in the morning. To recover ^{a bit} she went downstairs to drink some coffee on the terrace of ^{the} ~~this~~ little hotel she was staying at, just across the street from the Seine. Alastair Crowley, the famous and notorious magician, was ~~at~~ there, a table or two away, and was talking about a man he detested who was also staying at the hotel. And Crowley said, "You know, last night I sent an incubus to invade him, yet when I saw him this morning, he looked perfectly all right. I don't understand it." Mina Loy's comment was, "Let no one say Alastair Crowley ^{is without} ~~has no~~ powers. ^{is} It's just that they are misdirected."

ML: Let me shift ~~then~~ to talk about wealth and poverty. I've listened to the last interview we did and you never addressed this at

all. Are they predetermined by God as karmic agents? How much of wealth and poverty is a result of what God gives you when you're born and how much comes from the accidents of the economic jungle?

NM: The poor believe they're going to be rewarded in the next life. The wealthy also believe—a good many of them at any rate—that they're going to be rewarded in the next life. The Egyptians, for example, believed you had no chance whatsoever in the Hereafter unless you were truly wealthy. You had to be buried in such a way that you were prepared to travel through the underworld. The Egyptians believed that when you died you had to pass through the underworld in order to reach their heaven, the Elysian fields. And for that you needed all sorts of protection. Priests had to pray for you, amulets were sewn onto your burial garments, you also needed prayers said by your relatives, you needed a tomb that would protect you from evil spirits when you needed rest—you would go out and explore the underworld, and

then you ^{would} come back to your tomb and your spirit ^{would} enter again into your embalmed mummy which rested, of course, in your highly decorated casket. After some rest, you ^{would} go out into the underworld again. ^{for another reconnaissance,} Finally, you ^{might make} made it through the underworld.

Sometimes you didn't. Rich Egyptians used to have a prayer: "Oh, Amon, do not let me die a second time in the Land of the Dead."

The Egyptians believed that the second death was final. The first was provisional, but if you were able to find a way through the underworld into the Elysian fields, you could live forever. So, for them, wealth was crucial. A poor man without the protection of priests, amulets, and a tomb had no chance at all. Which is why you have that long-lived phenomenon of an early civilization, where most people live at a subsistence level, but there is fabulous wealth at the top and they certainly know how to protect it.

I think that belief carries over. People who are abstemious might look with horror on rich people who have gold plates under the serving dishes for dinner. But the rich obviously believe that

the afterworld is structured to enable people who are rich to have more of a purchase on eternity. Not all rich people. Some rich people feel guilty. Late in life, they pursue philanthropy—they're terrified of the Hereafter. They know what they did to get that wealth and they are in terror.

Then some of the poor—some who are bitter and furious—feel they were absolutely denied any kind of chance at any existence at all. They are very angry at God. You also have the poor who believe that it's right and fair. I've lived a clean life, a good life, I've raised my children, done my best, I've never despaired and I'm going to go to a good place.

We have these separate outlooks, and we have an ongoing question for those who believe in a continuance after death. At a guess—my guess—I would think there's an ongoing negotiation between God and the Devil over who travels where. I'm assuming that not only is God not all-powerful but the Devil is not all-conquering either. The two systems are in deep contest with one

another. The Devil, therefore, would not wish to be excluded completely from the possibility of rebirth. The Devil might desire to have some of his rich people taken care of. Of course, there are rich people who are close to saintly, who manage to live with their wealth in such a way that it hasn't corrupted them. I think that's rare—but it does occur, we've all known a few. They are lovely people sometimes. Not all rich people are awful, but a great many rich people are certainly in no shape to pass through the eye of the needle. Nonetheless, you can find a lively energy in some of the rich. Some of them made their money, after all, through their huge energy. Not all people who gain power arrive ~~just~~ through foul means *alone*.

So, I expect God to be perfectly willing to discriminate. Certain of the rich, yes, absolutely, let's send them out to be born again. They're interesting.

ML: Are you saying that God will endow some to be born again into great wealth? Or into poverty?

NM: Yes. Why not? It's a species of testing. People who were born in rich and favorable circumstances in one life and grew spoiled and had lives that were disappointing might be reborn as poor people. Others who were poor ^{but} never turned bitter or felt that they were deprived ^{might be rewarded - a dubious reward} Some had a touch of aristocracy innate in them. And there are rich people who have the modesty of poor people. One function of reincarnation may be to give God further insights into us. I go back to the fundamental premise: God does not understand us completely any more than we understand our children. We can know them quite well in terms of their habits and attitudes, some of their virtues and some of their faults, but we certainly don't understand them in all ways. So God wants to know more about His Creation, whereas the Devil is attempting to muck up such clarity.

is wealthy and full of tests.

ML: I don't have any disputes on the individual level, but when I think of that phrase of Adam Smith's, "the wealth of nations," there are some peoples, some nations, who have lived in terrible, terrible

misery. Take one nation I know a little about, the Irish. For 500, 600 years they lived under British wealth and power and now it seems ~~almost~~ just that the Irish are richer than the English.

They're now the wealthiest nation in the European Union.

NM: I'll give you another example. For a thousand years and more, the Jews lived in the ghetto. ^{In most regions, they} ~~They~~ weren't allowed to hunt or fish or farm ~~in most parts~~, they were allowed to be money-lenders or inn-keepers or own shops in their own communities. So what did they do? They gave everything they had to their schools. I would say that the results got into the gene stream—those ghetto Jews put their emphasis on learning and intelligence because their own books, particularly the Talmud, ^{were} ~~was~~ all that was open to them.

ML: ^(But if) If you look at all the plusses and minuses of all the nations—great wealth in some and great poverty in others—how does that mesh in with the individual decisions ^{that} God and the Devil express ^{by way of} ~~with~~ reincarnation? It seems God may have to give up a whole country or a whole nation or whole race of people for long periods.

NM: I don't want to get carried away with understanding God's motives. I'm looking to find a few general principles. . .

ML: You're looking at individuals. I'm asking you to look at it from a national point of view.

NM: That means first, you have to believe in races. I do, to a certain extent. It's completely incorrect these days to talk about such matters, but I think no, the specific mixture of climate and language over many centuries does produce one kind of person as opposed to another. That may now be part of God's interest in us as individuals. "Will this particular man or woman turn out better or worse than I think he or she will?" God's also interested in races—how will they turn out?

ML: In nations.

NM: Yes. And also in nations—which, obviously, are not races. Far more complicated.

ML: God must be thinking a lot about China, with one billion people. . .

NM: God learns. I keep coming back to my fundamental mnemonic—God learns. This is why I'm so opposed to those religions which assume that God knows everything.

ML: Last time we spoke, you said that God was ^{developing} ~~learning about~~ evolution as He went along.

NM: Yes. God learns.

ML: Then in those early periods of time, when land had just been created, you indicated that God was in the slime of early creation, yes, in there evolving with everything else. Yet you also said with great assurance that God is the creator of the world and the solar system. I have trouble reconciling God in the slime and God as the creator—

NM: Suppose God is the lord of the solar system but at the same time, had to learn how to develop the system from the slime on up.

ML: Yes, but when did God put the souls into creation?

NM: The key to the notion is that it's all been a huge experiment, an ongoing, developing experiment with countless results, good

and bad, but most of them were good enough so that evolution continued despite its failures. God learns. And so God invests Himself or Herself in all sorts of creatures en route. Not only animals but flora as well.

I don't subscribe to the iron authenticity of the Old Testament, and the New Testament. ~~[[NM notes pp. 41-43 — discussion of the Bible that follows — might go in a separate file. ML notes it might simply be cut.]]~~ Both were written by committee. The Old Testament was put together over a long period by a series of very talented committees, much more talented than the latter-day Bible-builders who composed the New Testament. On the other hand, the people who wrote the New Testament were good enough scholars to be familiar with the best remarks that had been made up to that point in the Old Testament and by many a sage, prophet, and mystic. They used that. They were also attached to a concept that may or may not be true. Which is that Jesus was the son of God. They were serious men, but they were also a committee. So,

as literary works, the Old Testament has some faults, and the New Testament a good many. To accept them, therefore, as the absolute map of our spiritual universe is comparable to using the kind of charts Christopher Columbus had before him when he set out for the West. For instance, even our present idea of the beginning as presented in the first three sentences of Genesis is a false concept.

In fact, ^{one summer} I studied Classical Hebrew ^{on my own,} ~~at one time~~ and the first sentence of Genesis—have we discussed that?

ML: No.

NM: Well, as you know: "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth." Or so it goes in English. Actually, the first word of the Old Testament—in Hebrew—is most singular. The only place it exists in all of the language is in that first word of the Old Testament, "barashith," and the second ^{word} is "bora." There are many interpretations of "barashith" but I came up with "out of the pits. . ." or "out of the depths. . ." "Bora" is "being" or "creating" So the first two words say, "being becoming," or "^{4 out of the pits}being coming"

~~came being~~
~~out of the pits.~~ The next words are not "the heavens and the earth," but "the firmament above" and "the firmament below," as if to declare that there are two species of existence from the commencement. And then the next sentence? "The breath of God moved upon the waters. . ."

ML: "The breath of God upon the waters. . ."

NM: It's not "breath of God" at all. The word used here for breath is "ruach." In Classical Hebrew there are three varieties of breath to signify God's presence. There's "ruach," "nefesh," and "neshamah." "Neshamah," if I recall correctly, is the gentle breath.

And "nefesh" is a normal wind. "Ruach" is the fierce breath, the angry breath, God's rage. So the line really says, "and the rage of God roared over the waters." So to go back, the first two sentences can well be translated as, "Being-becoming," ~~out of the pits~~ ^{came Being and} God created the firmament above and the firmament below. And God's fierce breath roared over the waters."

ML: Much different.

NM: Altogether different. I'm suspicious of committees. *Even the great one who gave us the King James Bible*
ML: We've spoken a bit about technology. I'd like to go back to a

basic level. Most of humanity sees it as a way to free us from drudgery, and give us leisure time to read and think and travel, so forth. Why shouldn't it be seen on balance—on balance—I understand all the bad things about it—but why shouldn't technology be seen as largely salutary?

NM: I have four words to describe technology which I've used several times now: more power, less pleasure. I think there's no getting around it: we can't pretend more pleasure comes to us from technology. It tends to crimp our senses and reduce us to people who *are able to* ~~can~~ live in a closed environment. My notion—it's a sentimental notion, doubtless, is that God would have preferred us to be able to do the things we now achieve through technology by means of our spirit alone. In other words, instead of having television, we could reach into our dreamlife and enjoy organized and marvelous dramas that we could create for ourselves or send

by telepathy to our friends. The ultimate aim was for every human being to be immensely creative. Being psychic as well, we would not have needed electronic communications. If I wanted to talk to you, I would be able to put my mind in contact with yours even if you were in a far-off place. We all have small intimations of that possibility. It seems to me such mental powers become more reduced with every advance in technology.

As a specific example, I now use hearing aids and I can't hear without them, most of the time, not with most people. But my own small remaining ability to hear gets reduced further by using my hearing aids. In parallel, I think technology tends to curtail our possibilities and accelerate our dependencies.

After all, the great strides that have been made in technology came from previous generations. Maxwell discovered some of the differences between electricity and magnetism. He and Farraday took imaginative, metaphorical leaps. Abraham Lincoln and Winston Churchill didn't have to study previous speeches to come

up with the Gettysburg Address or "I have nothing to offer you but blood, sweat, toil, and tears—" They came out of a past that depended on independent human beings rising up to exceptional solutions at incredible moments. They were not dependent on electronic machines they did not really understand

As a small example, I don't know anyone with a computer who doesn't talk about the glitches.

ML: Look, the first person to use a wheel after the drudgery of dragging things—~~they~~ must have felt great pleasure. I don't see—

NM: Wait a moment, there are crucial turning points in the advent of modern technology. The center of all that is ~~now~~ electronics.

Whereas the first wheel was made of wood, and sharp stones were used to shape it. These were things people could comprehend, they came out of the earth. Then people began to learn how to smelt ore. Dangerous business, tricky, but they found the means to get fire to melt the ore and so could separate the slag from the molten metal. The Iron Age began.

I say there's a profound difference between early and later technology. Early technology, lasting through to the 19th century, consisted of dealing with very powerful and explosive elements in nature and mastering them, so there was awe and excitement to it. Huge excitement for the railroad when it was developed—people loved to travel on them. They might be cramped and could ~~smell~~ ^{reek of} ~~their own foul coal smoke~~ bad, but they were exciting. Now, traveling on airplanes is ~~not~~ disagreeable. Everyone thought it'd be immensely exciting but it isn't. It's reductive. You don't feel like a voyager so much as a ~~piece of packaged goods~~ ^{transported} ~~is~~ ^{is} the great divide—the watershed between what I would call good technology and bad. Because no one knows what electronics is. I defy a physicist to reach my mind with an explanation I can comprehend. For that matter, we don't even know what electricity is. A current of electrons, yes, but do we know anything about the makeup of an electron? Does it possess its own consciousness or does it not?

ML: So that's the pivot point, then? That's when technology becomes a miserable activity? But when you were a boy, the radio—you must remember the radio—the crystal set and all that.

NM: You had to be able to solder, yes. But even then, you had to buy your vacuum tubes. People assemble computers today out of factory parts. I did model airplanes when they were made of balsa with glue. Then plastic came along. In my childhood, plastic was not common. Bakelite was the nearest you got to it. Now plastic is omnipresent. And it's inert. It doesn't bring on any sense of the uncanny. It offers an inkling of non-existence. I'm just paranoid enough to believe it's the Devil who loves plastic because it's going to deaden God's sensibillites before it's all over. God won't be able to get to us through shields of plastic. About the time, oh, thirty years ago when women began to wear plastic clothing—the stuff stank, you remember, the awful smell of plastic clothes? I began to think that may be the point where the ballgame was lost. If women with their finer sensibilities were adopting plastic.

ML: Very good. My last question: Great religious ideas have great followings and they last for millennia—some do fade, some die, but the greatest last for millennia. And I'm assuming there's a reason for that. Your faith in the theological and intellectual efficacy of your system is strong. I've observed it for many years and it's deep-rooted inside you. But you have also said your system is not going to be adopted by many other people.

NM: Not in a hurry. No. There's no immediate solace ^{offered} for our fears. Only an appeal to our human pride.

ML: Does this bother you?

NM: No. I suppose that if I had developed these ideas when I was 30 or 40, I would have wanted to become a religious leader. But that is not in my capacity. If there's any validity to any of these thoughts, if they take root in people to some extent, then, yes, ~~some~~ of these notions may yet be adopted by ^{some} many. Because I do believe that there are two elements now on the horizon that can yet destroy the world as we know it. One of them is technology and

the other is organized religion. The second drives people into stupidity. It can take intelligent children and deprive them of their ability to look at existence. They're obliged to force their thought to fit a mold that may never have existed. And certainly doesn't exist now. That drives people to extremes. So I do feel that my existential sense of God as a Being who needs us as much as we need Him could yet reach many. But I feel no inner directive to convince people right away. *I am just sure enough to recognize how far that is beyond my means.*