

is not only the strongest who survive. Nobody will go near this argument because it's so Hitlerian. It may be that Hitler was not only the Devil's greatest achievement, but, in fact, one of the things he did was to destroy any possibility of thinking along the lines he laid out. People shrink the moment you say courage is important. They think, "Start saying that and you end up a Nazi." Hitler did more than anyone to spoil the possibility of exploring our time—the world was left with no more than conservatism and progressivism. The more interesting human philosophies, like existentialism, were cut off.

To this day, people don't like existentialism because it's not comfortably grounded. They hate the notion that their philosophical feet cannot always be placed on a familiar floor. Well, keep living in the familiar contexts, and it can prove stultifying. Liberals can be most stultifying. That dreadful remark—"It's a human life you're talking about"—as if all human lives are equal, as if no human life should ever be extinguished—

these are the staples of political correctness and political correctness is the fierce, unruly, and manic child of progressivism. So, when you present these things, I would prefer to come back with a gentle, broad answer, to say, yes, life is certainly more comfortable than it used to be, and there are more opportunities for most than there ever were, although, of course, they may be used in more mediocre fashion than similar opportunities were used a hundred years ago. But lives may also be more drenched in anxiety of a sort we can't locate, an anxiety that lives in us in such a way that we don't even have nightmares any longer—what we have are various stretches of poor sleep and uneasiness. And whether the human creation, psychically speaking, is stronger than it was a hundred years ago—I don't think so. I think we're weaker, we're more confused, and I think we wander all over the place—we're also louder and more loutish.

You can ask yourself: Is this society better when it has every creature comfort that's been developed up to now, and has a

president like our present prize—as, say, opposed to Abraham Lincoln 140 years ago? Perhaps. Or perhaps we have less progress than we supposed. Those are my rough answers.

ML: In our first interview, you said you believe in God's existence and in His limited nature. It's also true that many, if not most humans, have an inherent, or an imprinted, or intuitive belief in God as all-powerful. They can't think of God in any other way. We have lots of people who could say, "My intuitions are as good as Norman Mailer's, and I can't imagine a God who isn't all-powerful."

NM: Their intuition may be more powerful than mine. Let me, however, go through my beliefs—sketchily—when I was a child, I believed in an all-powerful God. Of course. Most children do. Then there was a period when I was a fierce atheist. For many years! By now, philosophically speaking, atheism is more incomprehensible to me than the notion that there's a Creator. And to this day, if I were arguing with an atheist, I would suggest: "The

burden of proof is on you. You have much more to explain how we're here if there's nothing behind it."

But I would certainly never argue that fundamentalists don't have intense feelings. They're immensely intense. Too intense. But I think what it is—if I may presume to speak in such large terms, I think it is their defense against how really terrifying the whole thing is. The horror for all too many would come down to this: If it all ends badly, we humans are also responsible. You see, the beauty of the all-powerful God is finally, you're not responsible. Just keep your nose clean, observe ritual, and you'll be taken care of after you die. I think fundamentalism is a reflection of the true fear people have about dying. They feel if they follow all the rules, they won't go to something worse. They take to fundamentalism because it pulls in the boundaries of their responsibility.

I remember in my play, The Deer Park, at the end, its hero, who is dying, says, "Where I go, I do not know. It may be for

worse." And that is the terror supporting fundamentalism. Police systems are built on it. The phrase "keep your nose clean"—that is an aspect of fundamentalism. And the true believers' dependence on Revelation is also immense for just that reason. I would go so far as to argue that fundamentalism is one of the Devil's strongest tools: the Devil adores fundamentalism because it keeps people from thinking. So long as people don't think, then they can't begin to carry out God's notions. The irony is that by subscribing (they think) to God's will, they become blind to God's will. They freeze themselves out. They cannot collaborate with God's will even if they long to.

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

NM: I'm less familiar with them, so I feel less negative. I still feel wholly suspicious of them. If I were a serious theologian, which I am not, I would devote my years right now to studying the Koran

and reading up on Buddhism, but I don't, because there are other things I wish to do with the remaining years. Still, my suspicion is great that I would find the Koran as difficult to live with as the Old and New Testaments.

With Buddhism, it's another matter entirely. That's the opposite of fundamentalism. It's a trackless universe which I don't pretend to understand. I get irritated sometimes by Buddhists saying, "well, you're very much a Buddhist whether you know it or not." And I don't know what they're talking about.

ML: I think you're really a Gnostic.

NM: That has no meaning for me either.

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

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

ML: It's the Zoroastrians who really believe in the happy ending.

The Manicheans believe good will win but it won't be a total victory. They believe that evil will have stolen some of the light.

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

ML: Nor do they.

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

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

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

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

NM: I can believe that. Absolutely. Remember, I'm a novelist. We tend to think that way. For us, it's a natural way of thought. Nothing is one hundred percent. The point of writing novels is to show what the costs are in human activities. If I may quote myself again, at the end of The Deer Park, Eitel is told by a former wife, "Charlie, you have real dignity now," and he thinks it's a nice compliment. "Because what was dignity, real dignity, but a knowledge of the cost, the frightful cost, of every human desire?" I've always liked that line because for me, it's the essence of the novel, the frightful cost of human desire.

So why not extend that to the frightful cost of divine desire, where the loss is greater? God might have had an earlier conception of human existence more beautiful, much more beautiful than the one He's left with now.

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

NM: I know her work slightly. Dwight Macdonald used to write about her with adoration.

ML: Well, she's not afraid to think in bold terms—but I don't know if you'll agree.

Here's one of her ideas: she believes that God became limited in the course of creating the universe. She saw the act of creating the universe as a an act of renunciation, one of power-sharing with humans.

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

ML: Because God existed alone in His endless powers, so on.

Then suddenly He created something—He's giving something away. She believed that humans had a role to play because of this power-sharing, as did the Devil who profited immensely by God's creative act.

NM: She also believes in the existence of the Devil?

ML: Oh, yes, and she believes the Devil gained when God created people.

NM: I think that's true, but I think it's also a sterile image. There's God in the empyrean and He decides to come down and mix with us—it's a little bit like the rich boy who decides to spend some money on the street and see what happens. And so I find that a tiresome notion. I take it for granted that everything has its cost.

ML: Well, she's saying God lost by doing this.

NM: God lost and God gained. God gained knowledge by creating us that God could not have had without creating us. So it's not that God lost. That gets us into reverential notions of God again. Ideally, what I'd like to keep is huge respect for the fact that we were created by something or someone marvelous, who is not wholly unlike ourselves. Therefore, we can identify with that God, identify with God's drama as well as our own and thereby feel larger. Not, "Oh, God, oh, God, don't punish me, please!" Or, "God, dear God, please help me!" The reason I've never found

Islam the least bit attractive, is, you know, the prayer ritual. Kneel down, present your buttocks to the sky, and recognize that you are totally weak before the wrath of God. Well, we're totally weak before anything and everything vastly larger than ourselves. If that's what religion consists of, our recognition of being totally weak, and God taking care of us, provided we never, ever, ever cross any one of a thousand carefully laid-out lines—then I think existence is cramped. And, of course the unspoken root of the nightmare in so much of Islam, is precisely their present deep-seated fear. "What if we're wrong?" they must be thinking.

"We've been doing it this way for 1500 years—and now, where are we?" It's like someone who's been married for 50 years saying,

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

ML: Let me shift our subject. What are the reasons—as far as you are able to surmise them—that a soul is chosen for reincarnation?

Does God or His aides choose to extinguish some hideous souls, or must the souls acquiesce, give up and, in effect, commit eternal suicide?

NM: Suicide?

ML: Yes. Give up, go out of existence.

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

ML: Gary Gilmore.

NM: His soul was not too weary. On the contrary, he didn't want his soul to die. He's the exact opposite. He wanted his body to die so his soul wouldn't be extinguished. He felt if he didn't seek the death penalty but stayed in jail for his remaining 20 or 30 years, that his soul would expire from the sheer misery of living in jail, the emptiness of it, the ongoing, endless, emptiness of living in prison if you'd used up all its few vital possibilities, as he had. But there are other people who say, "Let my soul expire, it doesn't

deserve to go on." Which, by the way, is a thought that can also come to the rottenest human alive, a part that says, "You really are a swine; you don't deserve to live any longer. You're much worse than you think you are." We all have comparable sentiments (in lesser degree) when we arrive at a reckoning with ourselves. But for some, it's terminal. They are drenched in a mortal weariness of themselves, of their soul. So, certain souls expire; they are ready to.

Generally speaking, however, I don't think most souls die that easily. On the other hand, the soul may not be around for endless reincarnations. A cat has nine lives—what does a human soul have? Three or four lives? It's boundlessly speculative. One human has two lives, one has 22? All that's beyond us. Cosmically so. But then, you are asking: How does God choose? How do God and His aides choose?

ML: Can God execute a soul?

NM: Absolutely. Why not? How not? God can create us, God can end us. Which is part of the huge fear people have of God. God can terminate us. Absolutely.

But I think the vital notion is to go back to the notion of God as the great artist. God hates to give up on an interesting artistic possibility in a human. So let's say He might take very bad people and have them reincarnated. Why? Is it to fill out the picture, to have a certain darkness, shadows for a certain corner? That is one of the conventional explanations for why God tolerates evil. Of course I would argue with that. I would say God sees wonderful potentialities in these awful people. One of the reasons they were so awful was because they had wonderful potentialities that became frustrated early (or late) and turned into their opposite. So God wants to try again with this particular soul. There might be someone else who is perfectly bland and pleasant, good and decent, yet God is not interested. That soul has done about what it's going to do and it is no longer interesting. God might then

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

By better, I don't mean easier. It could be more challenging. For example, if someone has an adventurous soul, but physically they were weak through their life from early childhood illnesses, or through a genetic disposition that was not powerful, because they were born for other reasons than to be strong, then God can decide that if they grow stronger physically next time out, it would be more interesting for God and for the person. So God could send them out to stronger parents. But that could produce terrible trouble. To justify God's new intention, you might have to become

a heavyweight champ. Think of what you'd endure to get there.

Does this soul, interesting at present, have such a capacity or not?

God is experimenting. God is looking to find out. God, like a parent, learns from what the children accomplish and what they fail to do. We're all part of an enormous spiritual laboratory.

ML: But I'm still having a little bit of trouble understanding how evolution—

NM: A little? You're better off than I am.

ML—how evolution and reincarnation—which are both part of your scheme, mesh. How do they mesh in your scheme of things?

Let me elaborate, let me give you a little bit more. . .

These are some of the things revolving in my head:

evolution and reincarnation, did they begin simultaneously?

Evolution with its attempts to make species stronger, better, more durable—it fits your scheme well. And reincarnation is often seen as an upward ladder, although souls can often go down as well as up. The idea of reincarnation, after all, is improvement, moral

progress. Are both reincarnation and evolution completely controlled by God? Are their purposes intertwined?

NM: I've been saying all along—you haven't gotten the first thing I'm saying: God does not control our destiny.

ML: No, I understand, but. . .

NM: God can move in and control our destiny in special cases.

Economically speaking, it is not economic to look to direct every one of us. God does not have those kinds of resources.

ML: Well, that's why He has evolution.

NM: He learns from us—We learn from God and God learns from us. This is a family relationship of the deepest sort. The parent can be enriched by the child, the child acquires strength and wit from the parent.

We can't think of God in terms of age, but we can certainly see ourselves in that manner. There are periods where we may get more from God, when we're young, for example, and when we're old, we may be obliged to give more back. Not necessarily to

God, but to the way we influence other people, the way we relate to others, the way we seek to amplify His or Her vision or worsen it.

God is not the football coach, He's not the band director. God can be the impresario for some, but the impresario is a bit above the fray. Some things God can only learn from our direct experience. So God may also be with us much of the time. With certain people, I think God and the Devil are there every hour in every way. Certain kinds of highly dynamic people, certain kinds—just to take a flier on it—certain kinds of entertainers—may be full of God and the Devil every moment they are on stage because there's such charisma in them, and such lightning changeability. It's so difficult to know if you're dealing then with someone who's good or evil or just impossible.

Then there are other people who only get a little nudge from God, or from the Devil, once a month. I won't try to systematize this.

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

NM: What would it be? We're talking about the macro-economic and the micro-economic. Reincarnation is micro. My point is, that to the degree that careful attention is given to one particular reincarnation, finally, it's not perfect. There are times when God's better at it than at other times.

It may be that after the Holocaust, the double blow of the Holocaust and the atom bomb, reincarnation was mucked up badly for a long period. There was just too much to do all at once. A perfect example would be the ugliness of cities totally flattened by the war and the way they were rebuilt was with dreadful by-the-numbers architecture. It may be that people are finally much less interesting today than they were 100 and 200 years ago when they didn't have flush toilets.

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

ML: Back to macro and micro.

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

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

Metaphysical Discussion III

MIKE LENNON: You've spoken of the authority of the senses many times, quoting St. Thomas Aquinas, quoting Hemingway. What exactly is this authority based on? What empowers it? If God is your answer, then to complicate the question a bit, can't we say that evil in all cultures has almost always been associated with the flesh and the senses?.

NORMAN MAILER: All right. My basic premise which I'll look to return to again and again, proposes that God and the Devil are both in us, are now part of us. I assume that eons ago, the Devil entered the relationship. By now, I would suspect there's a mixture of God and the Devil in every one of us. In different ways. Some of that variety creates the shape of our character. You'll hear one person say about another, "He's a good guy, he's stand-up, but he sure can be a son of a bitch." In ourselves and others, we find this constant interplay of good and bad.

Now, the organized religions, particularly the fundamentalists, have preempted the prevailing public notion of God and the Devil. Those two incredible committees, who first put together the Old Testament and then the New Testament, refer everything to the Book. They set up the parameters: this is good, that is evil—just look to the Book. Refer to the Book.

But if we are going to talk about these matters, I think we have to approach them with the confidence that humans have the right to explore anything and everything—at our spiritual peril, but we do have the right. It seems to me—how to put it?—I see no reason for a divinity to put everything into a Book and expect that to be our sole reference and only guide. He gave us free will. Or She gave us free will. Once again, let's leave gender out of it. If we were given free will, then the Book is the first obstacle to it. The Book is destructive of free will.

ML: What's the role of the senses?

NM: I haven't gotten there. . . The point is that we're a complex mix, each of us, of God and the Devil. So when you come to the senses, a huge question presents itself.

I would say the senses were certainly given to us by God. I would even go so far as to say, if I'm ready to go in for speculations such as these, that mind may have been the contribution of the Devil more than God. How can I justify such a remark? Animals seem to function extraordinarily well on instinct and their senses. And to a large degree they have community—ants, bees, all the way up to dogs and primates. There is an extraordinary amount of communication we can witness in animals and they are undeniably superior to us in one way. They don't go around slaughtering each other in huge excesses of massacre. In every other moral way, we see ourselves as superior, but, there it is—animals left to themselves are never going to destroy the universe. So, it may be a true question: Did the Devil invent

mind? Or is this still God's domain? Or, most probably, does it belong to both?

There's no question in my mind that the Devil did enter mind. And not being the first Creator, did His or Her best—again, let's avoid gender; I don't want to say "Its," so let's say "His" for convenience—did His best to invade the senses as well. To corrupt the senses. If fundamentalists see sex as a corruption of the senses invented by the Devil, the question is more complex than any of us can resolve, but the key may be this: never assume that the senses are wholly God-given or Devil-ridden.

ML: But the line you quoted, which has puzzled me for decades, is "Trust the authority of the senses."

NM: St. Thomas Aquinas said that, and Hemingway, in his way: "If it feels good, it is good." I've never read Aquinas in depth but I was taken with the notion that the most formal of the Catholic philosophers had pondered this rule of thumb. I never explored it.

At this moment I might wish I had in order to give more of an answer.

But what I think it means—leave Aquinas out of it—is that we must trust the authority of the senses because that is the closest contact we have to the Creator. However, it is a most treacherous spiritual investment. As anyone who's ever enjoyed a drink knows, the authority of the senses on a boozy spree, is exceptional. You feel so much, see so much—and that's even more true on marijuana. You trust the authority of the senses until, perhaps, they become so intense that God and the Devil seem to be there working with you full time. We've all had the experience of an extraordinary trip on drink, and/or pot, but what I know is that the end result ends as often in disaster as happiness. I won't pretend that every time you get drunk beyond measure, nothing good will happen. It occurred to me at a certain point in my life that I had never, up to that moment, gone to bed with a woman for the first time without being drunk. Since some of the most important

experiences of my life occurred that way, I can hardly wish to argue that drink serves the Devil alone.

Given the rigors of modern society, it's possible we'd never get anywhere without liquor, or pot.

ML: So it makes me think of Blake's line—and it makes me wonder how you'd respond to: "the road of excess leads to the palace of wisdom."

NM: It's implicit in what I just said, but I think I'd be happier if the line had gone: "the road of excess might lead at times, rare times, to wisdom." I'm not in favor of excess because I've ruined too much of myself in just that way. Blake did have an apocalyptic mind that he served manfully. Full-time. It's one of the reasons his remarks inspire the highest flights of fancy. But on the other hand, he is seen by our modern spirit as impractical.

ML: The other thing you said that gave me pause was how the Devil invades mind. On more than one occasion you have suggested that scientific thinking undercuts metaphoric, intuitive

thinking, and I wonder if that is what you see as the invasion of mind by the Devil. Scientific method, logic, linear thinking, is opposed to the leaps of intuition in metaphor.

NM: Yes—often. It seems to me our minds work on two disparate systems. One is based on the senses. Metaphor, for example, is almost impossible without being somewhat attuned to nature, to mood, the often subtle impact of change at a given moment. That depends so much on one's senses. But then there's the other faculty of mind and that can be as cold as the polar cap. Indeed, it's a readiness to repel the senses, distrust them, see them as powers of distortion. This readiness to free oneself from the senses may belong much more to the Devil.

Almost everything I dislike in the modern world is super-rational: the corporation, the notion we can improve upon nature, the readiness to tinker with it egregiously, dramatically, extravagantly. Nuclear bombs are one example. All this came out of reason. It's not that a scientist filled with an acute sense of his

or her own senses brought those intimations to the atom bomb. On the contrary. It was an abstraction from the senses, pure flights of mind that came to the conclusion that it was possible to make the bomb, and then, that it had to be done. Not only to defeat Hitler, but for the furtherance of science itself.

ML: This may be related. I'd like to talk about Thomas's Gospel where it's made clear that human beings have the obligation to bring forth what is within.

NM: You had better say what this particular gospel is.

ML: Thomas's Gospel is, of course, not in the Bible, but is a suppressed gospel, discussed most recently by Elaine Pagels. In her book,[note to JML—is it "The Gnostic Gospels," or "Beyond Belief: The Secret Gospel of Thomas"? Amazon has both.]

Thomas's Gospel states that as human beings, we all have the obligation to "bring forth what is within." And if we do, it will save us. If you keep in what is in, repress it, whatever it is—it will destroy you.

NM: I used to believe that entirely. I now think it is generally true, but risky. Because what does it mean to bring forth what is within? I work on the notion that there's godliness within us and diabolism as well. So to bring forth what is within you, it is necessary, very often, to expel the worst elements of yourself. Because if they stay within, they can poison you. That is much more complex than saying, "Get it out! Act it out. Be free, man! Liberate yourself." Because very often what comes out is so bad that it injures others, sometimes dreadfully. You could say that every crime of violence is a way of getting the ugliness in oneself out, acting it out, doing it. You could even advance the argument that there are people who will contain what is ugly within them—and that's their honor. It's a complex matter—often there are people who will sacrifice themselves in order not to injure others. For example, if you act out something dreadful in yourself, if, for example, the need to get falling-in-the-gutter-drunk thereby intensifies the miseries of everyone in your family, it is doing

nothing good for others. Or excessive gambling. Or beating children. To the degree that certain things are done, others are injured terribly by your freedom. I could argue that it is often the Devil's urge to get you to act it out.

You have to ask yourself at a given moment, "Who is speaking within me? God or the Devil?"

ML: How do you answer that?

NM: Well, I'll give you one story: I don't know if I told it to you already. It's fascinated me for years. At a certain time in my life I was getting pretty rocky. My third wife had decided she didn't want to go on with the marriage and I had been thinking, "Finally, this may be the time I can start to build a life." She was a very interesting woman but easily as difficult as myself. So when she broke it up, I just didn't know where I was. And I remember one night wandering around Brooklyn in the semi-slums—not the hard slums but some of the tougher neighborhoods a mile or two out from my house in Brooklyn—not even knowing what I was

looking for but going out, drinking in a bar, sizing up the bar, going to another bar—looking—this is ironic but in those days, you actually would go to a bar and look for a woman. I think they still do, but it's been so long now since I did it that I can't speak with authority. Anyway, found nothing. I went into an all-night diner—because I realized I was hungry, not only drunk but hungry—and ordered a donut and coffee, finished it. Then a voice spoke to me. I think it's one of the very few times I felt God was speaking to me. Now, of course, one can be dead wrong. I go back to Kierkegaard—just when you think you're being saintly, you're being evil; when you think you're being evil, you might be fulfilling or abetting God's will at that point. In any event, this voice spoke to me, and said, "Leave without paying."

It was a minor sum—twenty-five cents for coffee and a donut in those days. I was aghast. Because I'd been brought up properly. One thing you didn't do was steal. And never from strangers! How awful! I said, "I can't do it." And the voice—it was very

much amused—said, "Go ahead and do it." Quietly, firmly, amused at me. So I got up, slipped out of the restaurant, and didn't pay the quarter. And I thought about this endlessly. If it was God—as I said, this was the closest I ever came to trusting the authority of my senses—my senses told me this was a divine voice, not a diabolical one. It seemed to me that I was so locked into petty injunctions on how to behave that on the one hand, I wanted to be a wild man and I couldn't even steal a cup of coffee. To this day, I think it was God's amusement to say, "You little prig. Just walk out of there. Don't pay for the coffee. They'll survive, and this'll be good for you."

Now, I've thought about this often because it's a perfect example of how difficult it is for us to know at a given moment whether we're near to God or to Satan. Which is why fundamentalists drive me up the wall—constantly, dependably, predictably. To me, the certainty they have is the single most misleading element in their lives. It demands, intellectually

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?—translated. 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, it's a perfect place for 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!"

Of course, a great many fundamentalists do function with vigor. Their lives have been simplified. They don't worry over

questions that are debilitating. They function very well—at a 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. 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 children. The mark of a good parent is they can take joy in the moment when the grown child begins to outstrip the parent. 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, "I'll let the actors

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 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? Doesn't that argue that we're more good than evil?

NM: Potentially more good than evil. Potentially good. A good man and a good woman have a child, and there's every reason to 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. . . 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 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 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. 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 managing economies of energy, if you will, which is to say they will put more into certain elements of human behavior than others. Very often they withdraw from certain people. Too much is going in, too little is coming back 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's obvious in all I've said so far that I'm not only an existentialist, but I would go so far as to say that we simply do not know our nature. We find out more about ourselves only as we proceed through life. And as we do, we open more questions.

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, 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 altogether. Start afresh. All these questions are so large that as I pursue my answers—one has to go further and further.

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 because the principles vary. The cruellest obstacle to creating one's own ethic is that no principle is incorruptible. To hew 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 who you thought you didn't care that much about, and you discover you have lost something or someone valuable to you.

ML: 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 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 remove from oneself. That is why most people live indeed 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 your own asshole has to do with something I'd like to attach to this about the nature of defecation, shit, and waste. It's worth going back to. 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'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, 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 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 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.

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."

NM: 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 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. That God's woes 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, 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 so to the word that he helped to create those loud-voices lying Bible-thumping exhortationists on TV.

Metaphysical Discussions IV

ML: I want to begin by talking about saints. In most religions, 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 his 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 is it's not that elaborate a chain of reincarnation for 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.

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 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 is this person, finally, a great disappointment?"

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 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.

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

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 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, they have gotten better under the 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 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 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 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, 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.

ML: There's conscience. . .

NM: Yes. Purgatory, for me, is a sense of living conflict between one's temptations and one's responsibility. When we feel dread, we're not that far from purgatory. We feel something very important could be taking place in our soul but we don't know what, and we're full of fear of taking the next step we now believe is demanded of us. Most men 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 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 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 you should be condemned to eternal hellfire—you've only been sort of bad—and 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 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 to her chest. She lived in horror through the night and felt abominably wretched in the morning. To recover, she went downstairs to drink some coffee on the terrace of this little hotel she was staying at, just across the street from the Seine. Alastair Crowley, the famous and notorious magician, was 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 has no powers. 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'd come back to your tomb and your spirit entered again into your embalmed mummy which rested, of course, in your highly decorated casket. After some rest, you'd go out into the underworld again. Finally, you 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.

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 never turned bitter or felt that they were deprived. 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.

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. 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, was all that was open to them.

ML: 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 God and the Devil express 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 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, I studied Classical Hebrew 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 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 "being coming

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 roared over the waters." So to go back, the first two sentences can well be translated as, "Being becoming, out of the pits 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.

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 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 bad, but they were exciting. Now, traveling on airplanes is 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. Electronics makes up 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 sensibilities 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 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 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.

Metaphysical Discussion V

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 i 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 OOMM. 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 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 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 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 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 Doctorial 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,

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 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 absolutely out of 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 are other notions in existence out there as well—other concepts of what turn the cosmos should take. We humans are 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 of not known.

When I say that I am an existentialist, I mean it in the absolute sense 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 the war between God and the Devil that often keeps God from coming near His or Her notion of how things should be, God must dwell in intolerable states of frustration. That makes more sense to me than that God clearly knows exactly what He or She is doing and tells us how to do it 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 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 an immense opera with a full 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

street to look like part of the children's chorus, but will not be allowed to sing. We are the base of that opera. So to demand of me as a philosophical 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, here is the famous Catholic notion that Graham Greene was obsessed. Between the stirrup and the ground! Time, after all, to anyone who has had experience with even minor drugs like

marijuana knows that time is extendable; time telescopes, time compresses.

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 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 can look for another 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. 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 couldn't 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 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 roil 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 God has. Does He have eons of time, or is it a cosmic race? There may be other visions of existence seeking to overtake us in the universe, or worse, speed 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 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 have that and

NM: That assumes that we're all there to get to a certain place. If we keep our lives clean enough, we will reach heavenly bliss. I'm saying heavenly bliss is not guaranteed. Everything we know about the nature of existence 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 part of a vast creative process that is attempting to go somewhere without necessarily knowing what the end is. In our lives, we certainly work without knowing the end. The only one we possess is that we're going to die. We don't know what will be our end after that. We can assume certain answers, but we ought to know that we're 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 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 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 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 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. 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 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 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. And, of course, I'm pondering it. Is the opportunity to call up people all the time, any where in the world, not creating a whole new set of communications in the world that never existed before?

NM: I am an old curmudgeon. I see it as more of a mess. Because I'm not all sure that instant communication with everyone alive is ideal. Not at all.

Very often it's the hunt for information that creates the development that we

make of such information. We are stimulated by the hunt. The difficulty becomes part of the intellectual process. So, we do more with it.

Everybody is talking these days of gluts of information. 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 about it left the onus of commercials out of the equation. The commercials did a terrible thing to the American people. They introduced the 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 it 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

your eyes find a little play with the subtlety of the dials. But you can't ask technology to do 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. All the reactions come from our senses. So I can 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 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 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.

Metaphysical Interview VI [might be placed as last]

MICHAEL LENNON: I know you've been thinking about Intelligent Design and I have, too. But aren't you an unlikely person to find credence there?

NORMAN MAILER: Why?

ML: Because it's a pet theory of the fundamentalists.

NM: The last of my concerns is what the fundamentalists think. I start as a novelist, and we can't afford to be ideologically bound, although in practice we tend to tie ourselves up through our style.

Take Henry James or Hemingway. Both were fabulous stylists, but they paid for the huge achievement of their separate styles by being able to write only about certain kinds of things. They were locked into self-limiting modes of perception. As I've said often enough, Picasso had a huge influence on me. For him, style was not a part of one's person, but could serve as a tool with which you could attack reality. Different styles for different kinds of obscure or complex reality.

This prelude to the side, let me admit that I come to the question of Intelligent Design with almost no cognizance of the subject. On the other