

Note: P. 12
Chk for Clarification.

But you do
care, and how
said so. Clarity?

INTERVIEW VI

Intelligent Design

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,~~ ^{even if,} ~~would often tie ourselves up by way of style.~~ ^{many of us}

Take Henry James or Hemingway. Both were fabulous stylists, but they paid for that huge achievement by being able to write only about certain matters. Their style locked them 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 a tool to use for making a particular attack on reality. Different tools for engaging different kinds of complex reality.

*is not
to
confusing* ← *said,* This ~~prelude to the side~~, let me admit that I come to the question of Intelligent Design with ~~almost~~ *great* no cognizance of the subject. On the other hand, the premise behind these interviews, is that I won't be embarrassed by my lack of knowledge. Theologians—no matter at what high level they *as I have already suggested* celebrate—are trapped by their already-received religious systems. They are obliged to do their thinking with ideas they are not all that free to change. (~~As, for our most famous example, God is All-Good and All-~~

~~Powerful.~~) So theologians build the innovations in their philosophies by *particularly when it comes to All-Good and* way of mental gymnastics. And, no surprise, they avoid many questions *All-Powerful!* they cannot begin to confront.

The tsunami comes to mind. *What was offered by them* All they offer for explanation ~~here is~~

was that God is a great mystery, ~~and~~ His ways are unfathomable. They ~~are~~ *were* hiding behind the "Mystery" one more time—let us say for the twenty-eighth thousandth time.

My feeling, as is obvious from these interviews, is that God strives to find a better, more well-adapted creation than His latest design. Remember my remark that the dinosaurs, at one point, may have been a large part of

God's élan. He had dared to create this immense animal who might be able to rule the jungles, the mountains, and the plains. Then, He came to discover that He had misdesigned it. Back to the drawing board. God, like us, makes mistakes. I must say that if Intelligent Design is being welcomed by fundamentalists, they are asking for considerable trouble in the future.

ML: Well, I don't want to say they invented the idea. It's been around since the 18th century when the world was conceived to be virtually a clock, it was so perfectly designed. Intelligent Design grows out of the Enlightenment.

NM: Perhaps I have a misunderstanding of what is meant by Intelligent Design. I can only speak of it on the basis of a little reading. Does it not offer the notion that there is a presence in existence which occasionally inserts a more advanced design into a slow evolution? I do deem this to be perfect for what I am talking about. Because, yes, I do think that God is always looking to make existence better, more finely designed. And in corollary to that, God looks to improve on His errors.

ML: Can't you see how such ideas can lend support to people opposed to evolution? Intelligent Design shows the hand of the Creator.

NM: Yes, but that doesn't make Him an All-Powerful divinity.

Fundamentalists have no understanding of an artist. As they see it, the

Creator saw it all at once, did it perfectly (in a week) and brought it out. Lo and behold, it's been perfect ever since. He never failed once. The design was extraordinary from the start. They are charging full-speed into a profound contradiction of themselves.

ML: Here is what I understand to be the position of present-day Intelligent Design. It would say: we don't know exactly which processes of natural selection, mutation, evolution, are directly related to the Intelligence used to create the world, but we are saying that what does exist out there in nature speaks of the presence of an Intelligence behind it at some level—maybe at some removes back, but it is certainly opposed to those fundamentalists who would say God created the world in one instant six thousand years ago.

Intelligent Design people do say that evolution cannot explain all the appearance of design that we see in natural life. Intelligence had also to be involved.

NM: It certainly makes great sense to me that Intelligent Design is one of the elements in evolution. What I find comfortable, even agreeable about it as a notion, is that if we do have a God who created a universe as manifold as ours—how indeed could it have been done without Intelligent Design, without having notions that this is where to go here, this is how to change that, here we can develop this species, right there is what is wrong with that

Q: It's all about that it may need explanation

last attempt to develop this particular
species. The other element present, which I must emphasize over and over is that if God is not all-powerful, His creations went out into an existence that didn't necessarily receive them with generosity. In many circumstances, God might well have ^{not} to say to Himself or Herself, "I didn't anticipate this."

ML: Tectonic plates. . .

NM: Exactly. How much simpler to assume God didn't expect that disaster.

He was aghast.

ML: Or, to engage the argument, the tectonic plates are just another example of the randomness and the chaos of the universe.

NM: But, the artist works to extract order from chaos. I would not even say that chaos is a lack of order. Chaos is a mix of sets ~~of orders~~ that are too complex and too disparate to be ordered within the onlooker's consciousness. If you will, each element in chaos can have its own set of laws and processes, but that organization comes into conflict with another set of orders and they are incompatible. They tear each apart. I also would postulate Malign Design occurring throughout our universe. By which I would posit forces not at all congenial to God's concepts of creativity. How do I arrive at this? Because nowhere in existence do you find a free ride. Anything that comes along which seems wonderful in the beginning, meets

~~encounters~~
opposition enjambments. Sooner or later a forward motion is ~~paralyzed~~
stunned, hindered, or stopped.

ML: Do you then espouse a theory of Intelligent Design that has imperfect design?

NM: The design can be excellent until it runs into chaotic elements that could not be anticipated.

ML: That's imperfection.

NM: Perfection may not be the word to use here. Sometimes you see creatures in the universe who are so exquisitely designed that the moment

one speaks of Intelligent Design, you say, of course! Orchids, snow flakes,

~~panthers,~~

~~tigers.~~ Evolution, by trial and error, could not have produced some of the

~~more~~ beautiful forms we see in the animal world. Race horses. Certain dogs.

Even if we find most insect forms repellent, nonetheless, when we look at

them under the microscope, we can see the extraordinary work that went

~~their development.~~
into ~~them~~ It becomes harder to believe that evolution said, "yes, the six

joints on this particular leg will have curves as wonderful as scimitars

because this is the only way this species can survive." It is easier to believe

that the limb was designed for beauty as well as for function.

ML: You know the old cliché. You put a million monkeys in a room with a million typewriters—eventually one of them will produce War and Peace or Hamlet.

NM: Go to a computer for that. The number is too vast to be interesting.

ML: Let me give you another refutation of Intelligent Design. —

NM: I'm listening.

ML: In the vastness of the universe, there are billions of stars and solar systems and galaxies. By our limited knowledge, of the ones we've looked at, not one comes close to having the basics to design a universe—that is, the water and rain, the flora and fauna that went into creating our amazing, organic system that has been able to work together over a period of time. There's nothing like that anywhere else that we can see in the universe.

Couldn't it be we're just a statistical fluke of the cosmos? In so vast a universe with so many possibilities, finally there is one planet that developed out of the equivalent of mega-billions of monkeys pounding out Hamlet.

NM: But I would call that an argument for Intelligent Design. Because we find nothing elsewhere that works like anything on earth—all the fineness of detail we have here—I see that precisely as a powerful argument for Intelligent Design.

ML: What then is the function of all the other stars and galaxies?

NM: All we can say with any authority is that in our solar system, the earth seems to be the only planet that is now alive with creatures. So it may be that other gods—conceivably gods more powerful than ours—have had even larger failures. It is possible that the earth succeeded in accomplishing something other planets were unable to do. Given the limited powers of astronomy today, there seem to be no near galaxies that are comparable. But there may be. There very well may be. There are so many possibilities. All we can begin to say is that it seems reasonable to posit a god for our universe.

ML: For our solar system.

NM: For our solar system. It may be that this God failed with other planets. Prior to the earth. I won't even begin to approach that. It's too easy and too fanciful. I will say that it is far more difficult to conceive of our existence if God does not exist. Because then we are back to the monkeys writing Hamlet and that is hard to believe. It is much easier for me to suppose that Hamlet is a part of human design. And if it's not, if it did take a nano-trillion of monkeys to produce an equivalent of Hamlet, what a waste. There has to be the assumption, along with everything else, that existence is moving toward a goal. It is certainly possible that existence itself in the

deepest, most cosmic, sense, is in peril. Of necessity, therefore, it is moving forward. It is as if we will have a rendezvous with extinction if we do not reach a certain period or place by a given time, as if indefinables have to be achieved in order to protect the continuation of this existence.

This is what I would term reasonable paranoia. By which I mean one can try to think about it without diving into dire declines or flaming into manic outbursts. But if there is some reason to this last assumption, then Intelligent Design is a crucial part of it.

ML: Fine. I want to take a chance with this discussion. ~~I want to take a flyer, so to speak.~~ You tell us that if you think at all like a philosopher, it is because you have been a novelist all your life. Splendid! I want to see what you can do with a parallel that's apparent to me. Novelists, after all, create worlds.

NM: We do try to, at times.

ML: Good. Let's take the notion of Intelligent Design in relation to the novel.

NM: Well, as I did say before, true artisans like Henry James and Hemingway gave themselves over entirely to design. It's as if their works were designed to live entirely by themselves. Perhaps, as creators, they felt less need to look for support in the breath and raw facts of existence.

ML: All right. Let me take another leap. Is there any relation between your assumption that Intelligent Design is confronted and altered by existence and your disdain for plot in your novels?

NM: That's a good and challenging question. Before I get into it, let me say a word or two about James Joyce. Unlike Hemingway and Henry James who are not only great novelists and avatars of Intelligent Design so pure that their works, once designed and fashioned, tend to live by themselves, Joyce, to the contrary, plays at the very edge of chaos. Which is why it is very hard to get near to Joyce. A common reflex is to look to avoid all that. But Joyce did undertake to organize whole areas of chaos.

ML: I don't want to lose my point. In many essays, many interviews, you have said in effect, I don't worry about plot. Plot is much less important to me than character. You always have a storyline, but your plots are not. . .

NM: They're not clockwork.

ML: No. So I've wondered if for you to have a plot that is neat and tight and ordered would run counter to your ideas of metaphysics.

NM: Good. Plot, if you will, is Intelligent Design. It is interesting to me—and I thought about it a lot in the years I wrote Harlot's Ghost because the CIA is a perfect example of plot, that is, Intelligent Design, coming into contact and conflict with the world. The reason I don't like plots to prevail

is that they don't allow the figures in the book, the characters, to push the limits of wholly pre-designed plot to the point where life finds the plot unacceptable, and so throws the design into another set of conditions no longer as definable.

Borges is the brilliant model of this process. Borges wrote five and six page short stories that start with incredible plots. Then the plots get shattered. All in five or six pages. Incredible stories. He, like Joyce, was fascinated with making attacks on the nature of chaos. Borges showed us for all time—talk about a novelist's novelist! He said to us: "Look at what you're all doing. You take yourselves too seriously. You miss the fact that once a plot is shattered, life still goes on. Another species of life begins and you have to deal with it."

Take this back to Intelligent Design. God looks for Intelligent Design. Then that Intelligent Design gets itself worked upon by existence. The Wright brothers designed an airplane. Don't we know that! And after they got it up in the air for the first time, and it flew a few hundred feet, they went back to the drawing board to refine the knowledge received. Intelligent Design cannot exist without experience. So long as it remains Intelligent Design, pure but untested, it remains analogous to any number of very talented young novelists who never publish because they never get

their book to the point where they want it to be seen. They will not put their book out on the waters. Whereas God, I will obviously argue, launches each Intelligent Design to see what happens to it. That is how God learns, how God proceeds to the next Intelligent Design.

Let me enjoy one wild aspect of this notion. In my book about Henry Miller, I spoke of three men coming into a hostess's living room, Henry

James, Hemingway, and Henry Miller. Each takes off his hat and behold!

To their vast surprise — they had no prior inkling that
~~There's~~ a cow turd on each head. James, I then go on to say, might have

perished from an experience that awful. Hemingway would have gone into a depression—he would have seen it as emblematic of the nature of life.

Just when life seemed something you could enjoy, unexpected disasters

shattered your mood. And Miller would have said, "Good Lord, how did

~~that shit~~ ^{turd} get on my head? And ^{just} look at the hostess. ~~Are~~ [≡] her nostrils

quivering, or is it her twat? She is so excited and perturbed—what a

wonderful moment!" Miller is an example of someone who couldn't stay with a plot for five minutes because he wanted to run right into the world and discover something new about himself and/or the world. He is at one extreme, Henry James at the other. Between them lies the effective use of Intelligent Design.

ML: But what would Joyce have done?

NM: Joyce is so much of a genius I won't try to trim his coattails. I don't know what he would have done with the cow turd.

ML: I think he would have appreciated it.

NM: He might have looked for a conflation of the twenty-two words in fifteen languages that enrich the concept of shit. What would be the wonderful sound he would come up with? On the other hand, he could have felt removed from the situation. It was not life he was interested in so much as language.

ML: I disagree. The first person to wipe his ass in a novel is Leopold Bloom.

NM: Your point..

ML: You recently criticized Sartre's existentialism for being "floorless." Without floor.

NM: Without a foundation.

ML: Because, as you put it, "It is, after all, near to impossible for a philosopher to explore into why we are here without entertaining some notion of what the prior force might have been." Therefore, if we grant your limited God as that prior force, then I'm compelled to ask what force preceded your God? I assume you would choose infinite regress rather than a Prime Mover?

NM: Again, I refuse to be ^{blindsided} ~~trapped~~ by such questions. They are the atheist's last line of defense. There's a story you're probably familiar with, of Bertrand Russell and an old lady—Russell is talking about the origin of the universe and how it is not knowable. An old lady in the audience speaks up. She says, "On the contrary, Professor Russell. I know the basis of the universe." He says, "What is it, Madam?" She replies, "The universe is resting upon a turtle." "Madam, that's very helpful, but what is the turtle resting upon?" And she says, "It's turtles all the way down!"

ML: I do remember that.

NM: I'm not going to get trapped in arguments that ask me to explain what came behind the God I'm talking about.

ML: But you beat Sartre over the head because he won't allow for a force behind humanity. Why can't we then try to find out—I'm not trying to refute you, but—

NM: Let me put it this way: we first have to become close enough to God and helpful enough to God—large questions we haven't ^{not} even entered—the ~~relationship of humankind to God is something we haven't even touched upon—but~~ until we can feel we are some kind of great help ^{to} for God, why should God trust us? You remember, at the end of Harlot's Ghost, Hugh Montague goes off on this—to me—intriguing speech that God, having

decided that the advent of humans was not to be trusted, ^{yet} ~~then~~ ^{proceeded to} create the illusion of evolution. ^{Instead,} ~~In reality,~~ the earth was created entire, ex nihilo, by God in six days, ^{but} ~~He~~ then laid in evidence all over the earth and in the seas that evolution had done it instead over millions of years. ~~That way,~~ ^{people could not get near to God's roots.} Implied in all that is a suggestion that ^{when} ~~we~~ get close enough to God to feel we are in some kind of alliance, ^{can we} ~~why,~~ then we might begin to have some knowledge of ^{what might} ~~who is~~

^{be} behind God. But that won't happen until we get nearer to God.

ML: ~~But~~ you do see that as a possibility, ^{however?}

NM: Ultimately. If things go ~~for~~ better than I expect they will.

ML: I don't know if you're familiar with the philosopher David Hume—

NM: Yes, in college. I had him. Vaguely, you might say.

ML: Well, Hume got into the ^{argument for} Intelligent Design argument. One of the proofs of St. Thomas Aquinas for the existence of God is ^(indeed) the argument from design. It goes back that far, ^{hundreds of} a thousand years. Aquinas has many proofs of God's existence but the fifth one was that design is so perfect in the universe—he didn't even see beyond the solar system—

NM: Right there, you run smack into the most obdurate aspect of Catholicism, the insistence of Catholicism on God's perfection. What characterizes my idea of Intelligent Design is that it is partial. We do well

to grasp the notion that these are partial attempts. I'm glad I have the novel to fall back upon as a metaphor for this. When I write a novel, it's an attempt to come up with a piece of intelligent design, but it's never perfect. Some parts are better than others. If it goes into publication, the critical returns come back. Very often those returns have little relation to what you had written. Occasionally, they do. Slowly, over the years, you learn more. By the end of your life, you may be wiser as a novelist than when you started. The heart of one of my notions then is that God, too, is always looking to become wiser. What you create, may, in the beginning, not be understood all too well, *or, for that matter, be fashionable well enough yet.*

ML: Listen to this collision between Aquinas and David Hume: Hume criticized the argument from design. In particular, he emphasized there is no legitimate way to infer the properties of God from the qualities of the world, His creation. For instance, Hume questioned, how can we be sure the world was not created by a team? Or this may be but only one of many attempts at creation, the first few having been botched? Or, on the other hand, our world could be the puerile first attempt of an infant deity who afterwards abandoned it, ashamed of his lame performance.

NM: That last doesn't fulfill my notion of the passion implicit in the artistry of God. I can't conceive of a great artist ever junking a work and moving on

because it's lame—not if that has been his major opus. I certainly do lean to the notion that our world is God's major opus. But Hume did put it well on the argument for a perfect universe. From my point of view he was correct in seeing that as near to intolerable. The notion of a perfect universe scrambles people's brains.

ML: All the same, the Catholic Church is a fabulously successful institution—and probably because of that insistence on a perfect universe.

NM: Fabulously successful, yes, but you could also say the Jewish religion has been fabulously successful in one way—the Jews didn't perish. But, what a price they paid! And I'd add, what a price Catholics have paid. To have created a Church that brought so much architectural beauty to the world, so much musical beauty, so much ritual beauty—and then be locked into a set of notions they can't let go of, notions that explain nothing, but elevate contradictions and magnify spiritual and moral confusion.

You know, when they are beautiful, the services of organized religion move me. I feel "How tragic. How painful." All this devotion, all this loyalty, and it goes into an intellectual sump. It explains nothing. All you are finally asked to believe is that God will be there to hear your prayers, God will welcome us when we die—as if that's all God has to do,

~~in place of~~

ML: What about Hume's idea that the universe might have been created by a team?

NM: Not impossible. Not impossible. It explains one of my basic notions. The team soon fell out of sorts with one another and we ended up with God and the Devil.

ML: A joint endeavor—

NM: Like those South Seas Companies in the 1700s, the 1800s.

ML: If, as you say, the Creator is an artist, and not all creative works are equally successful, wouldn't this lead quite easily to racism? That is, couldn't the "inferior race," however it's defined, whether the non-Aryans scapegoated by the Nazis, or the "ice people" of the Afro-centric extremists, simply be one of God's less successful creations?

NM: Well, I reject the language of the question. One of the absolute disasters that Hitler brought to human understanding was an abuse of the concept of race. Because race offers us great clues. It is perfectly possible—and here again, one can only speculate—but it is perfectly possible that races, in the beginning, were Intelligent Design for different situations. In other words, for people in the tropics, God was saying, "well, how can I design the heating system of their bodies so they can bear the excessive warmth more easily?" And made separate adjustments for the

north. We're discovering that living in separate climates produces different relaxations and strictures of the throat. Languages reflect that. Mind you, God as the artist, might be discovering within the material itself, where the continuation might be. Certain sculptors talk about how they do not know exactly what the work will become until they cut into the marble. The marble reveals what they must do with the next stroke. The same thing may be true with human designs, or animal design. The environment plays its great role.

ML: Your conception of God as artist assumes that God is both vastly-but not all—good and vastly—but not all—powerful. But why couldn't God be not very compassionate at all and instead immensely curious? He could be fascinated by, but not especially compassionate toward creation, much like a child who winds up toys and watches them slam into each other and chortles at the smashup. You say, "In other words, why are there volcanoes? Because God was not a perfect engineer." Or because like a two-year-old, God found the noise and fury fascinating and amusing. Maybe even the shrieks of the dying fascinating and amusing. To use the ultimately reductive phrase, you keep assuming God is a nice person. That seems a bit arbitrary.

NM: It is arbitrary, and it could be my conditioning. I grew up in a household that was as religious as the next—it wasn't a dogma-driven household, but I remember my mother on Friday night praying before a lit candelabra, praying to the ^{Shekhina} ~~Shekhina~~, who is, of course, the wife of God, and there were tears in my mother's eyes and a feeling of great tenderness came from her. I think I always took it for granted that God was compassionate in relation to us.

Now, the arguments you just raised cannot be refuted. How can I declare, "No, God is not going in for capers." Of course, God could engage in mean acts. But to me, the notion that God and the Devil are in conflict with one another makes more sense. So, I believe, we've got this one God who is more good than not..

ML: Well, your mother's father was a rabbi.

NM: Yes. He studied to be a rabbi in Lithuania but by the time he came over here, the only way he could make his living was as a peddler. Then he moved to a ~~small~~ town ^{where} called Long Branch in New Jersey where he opened a ~~butcher~~ shop. ~~There~~ he worked as a butcher. There was only one synagogue in Long Branch, so when the rabbi was ill or off on vacation, my grandfather stood in for him. And my mother was very proud of this. The

fundamental snobbery of the Jews—it was much better to be a rabbi than a butcher. I was delighted, it gave two different strains to develop in myself.

ML: Well, I'm thinking of your mother's devotion and the tear in her eye—obviously, she must have come from a pretty religious household.

NM: My grandfather was most religious—he began studying the Talmud when he was four years old. The best thing to be said about the Talmud is it's very hard to become a fundamentalist while studying it. It's all too easy when living with the Bible but difficult when reading the Talmud. Unlike the Old Testament, it inquires into the nuances of things. For instance, in that long-gone age, people brought animals to the temple to be sacrificed. Very often there were small disasters—a poor man might have decided to sacrifice his prize heifer because his child was ill. But on his way into the synagogue, the heifer would defecate. Well, the Talmud is ready to focus on just where it defecated. Was it outside on the patio? Or did it defecate on the steps? In the vestibule? In the aisle? At the altar approach? Was it on the altar? For all these are separate violations of the most holy, and so call for different penalties. In certain cases the animal can still be sacrificed. At other sites, the animal is lost completely—if it defecates too close to the altar, it must be disposed of completely. It cannot be eaten. In the Talmud, there are all these efforts to find zones of relative compatibility

between God and humans—so it becomes the exact opposite of the Old Testament, and the New Testament where the law is, in effect, inflexible.

~~"This is the way it is. Don't argue."~~

ML: Well—there is a certain measure of Orphic ambiguity in the utterances of Christ.

NM: I wouldn't call it ambiguity. I see it as the wars of committees who are looking to fix what His behavior might have been. For their theological purposes, not his.

ML: Did your mother talk much about her father?

NM: She adored him, and he was a very kind man. One story I loved when I was a kid. She once said, "My mother worked so hard in the butcher shop, and we as children worked hard, too. So, we'd get angry at my father because whenever a poor woman would come in and he'd weigh the meat she bought, he'd put his finger under the scale so it cost her less. And we thought, "That's all very well, but money is being taken away from us."

ML: So he was a compassionate man.

NM: I was only four when he died. But I like to think so.

ML: Here's a question on ritual: All your ideas have an underlying assumption that God has a continuing, even a profound interest in some individuals, and certainly in the ultimate fate of the human species and the

rest of His creation. This is completely at odds with some of the earliest recorded religious expression, namely from the Sumerians, whose prayers were always begging the gods to "Remember!" Prayer and ritual were a constant attempt to engage the attention of forgetful and indifferent gods who had created and abandoned humanity. This, by the way, wasn't a notion emerging from disasters and dislocations but could be found even as their civilization flourished. Can you comment?

NM: It's the other half of the equation. The obverse side of prayer is that it rarely gets answered. So rarely, indeed, that people at religious meetings cite such events as miracles. Prayers are not usually answered. I always felt the Lord has enough to take care of without having to listen to all that. Think of God wading through an avalanche of prayers: "Oh, God, let my team win the game!" "Oh, God, let me get some money. Let me sell this old heap that's no good and get something better," all that, all that.

I don't think God listens to prayer. The Sumerians, as you describe them, were relatively sophisticated people who recognized that they might pray but answers did not come that often.

Now let's suppose some people have a child who's ill, and they pray to God with great sincerity for their child to live. I'm willing to accept the

idea that that's not something to sneer at. I'm not saying it helps or it works but humanly speaking, we can certainly feel for the parent.

ML: When you were talking about Gandhi, you said: "But there are a few oxymorons that are vital and immensely valuable. One of them is "heroic passivity." One's wisdom has to become the arbiter then. We can be encountering heroic passivity, or only the quasi- heroic variety and the latter might be a disaster." Along that line, what would you say about the contemplative life? By that I mean the cloistered orders who don't run hospitals or schools, just pray for the world. This is a strong Christian tradition, ditto for the Buddhists and some Hindus, and probably the Jews have some variant of that. Do you see a value in this kind of passivity?

NM: I would answer yes. I'm not opposed. If we're going to come nearer to God, to find the God behind the God, it's perfectly conceivable to me that the God of whom I speak does pay attention to transcendental sincerity. I have a crude analogy to offer. Occasionally, after having worked on a novel, you come across a review that's so intelligently written and gets so close to what you were attempting to do, or, even better, offers insights you never saw, that your work is illumined for you. Well, that critic makes me feel better about the act of writing. So, do I also think that there are people who contemplate existence, who pray in depth to God and are qualified to

do so. They are not petty. What I hate about prayer is that most of the time
 it is greedy, and looking for an undeserved advantage! I'm a mediocrity, ^{they say} I'm

kind of stupid, God, but maybe you'll help me because I'm praying to You. ^{They}

^{do it as if modesty is the only passport you need,}

ML: This is about Buddhism: what's your take on the Buddhist notion of

the bodhisatva vow? Reaching nirvana is a catch-22—if you have

achieved a level of deep compassion, enough to reach nirvana, you can't go

happily off into it while other sentient beings are still here struggling and

suffering. So, even though you personally have a free-pass out of this far

from perfect world, you voluntarily reincarnate as a "bodhisatva"—a

helper, a teacher, a way-shower—and keep reincarnating until everyone has

achieved nirvana. Devout Buddhist lay people of many persuasions, and all

the monks and nuns, take the "bodhisatva vow" at an advanced stage of

their training.

NM: I think it's a beautiful notion. The difficulty I've always had with

Buddhism is nirvana. As I see it, the point of existence is not to rise above

^{one and leave them behind} all petty feeling, ^{these} but on the contrary, to be able to struggle with ~~one~~ petty

feelings in such a way that we lift them into more vigorous feelings.

Nirvana always struck me as a place I had no interest in reaching. Whether

it existed or not—I had no idea—it didn't appeal. I remember talking to a

friend of mine who's a good Buddhist and I got into a polite rage over a few

drinks: "You Buddhists always talk about nothingness, at how to arrive at nothingness. I'm a writer, and I can tell you, I live with nothingness every minute I'm working. I sit at my desk and for the first half hour there's nothing—I have to pass through that nothingness in order to get to a few ideas. I said, you're not really talking about nothingness. Nothingness is an awful state! It's an empty state. Why don't you talk about what it really is you are looking for which is the ineffable? When you get into the ineffable, then you have something to talk about!"

I like to think he was struck with the thought, even a little.

Back to the boddhisatva: I would say it's a noble conception.

Whether true or not, is another matter. How can any human choose to reincarnate rather than going into Nirvana? In that sense, I'm beyond my range. But it is a beautiful notion.

ML: At the end of your last interview, you said that in many ways the Creator was like a Greek god—strong yet not all powerful, flawed but noble, well, you know Greek myths are full of incidents where the gods took human form, or animal form. Apart from the well-known stories of Zeus turning up as this or that to impregnate some human woman, there are also stories of Zeus turning up as a beggar. In one story, peasants take in a wretched beggar overnight, share their far-from abundant meal with him,

treat him very well, and next morning, find his bed empty and a sack of gold in his place—Zeus came calling, and rewarded them for their kindness to the poor! God showing up on earth is an idea embraced long before Christian theology.

NM: I don't see any need to answer the question. I just take it for granted. If God wants to appear as a human, why not? And indeed, He would. But I think what's more interesting is the belief that if you're good when you don't have to be good, something wonderful happens. Which I think is also part of human nature. Humans live for revenge—but they also live for the belief that we are capable of goodness. For me, the brunt of these stories, is the human desire involved. I want to be capable of goodness and indeed, there is something in the universe that rewards you for goodness. Prayer, I would argue, is all too often the ugly stepchild of that emotion.

To shift the course of this discussion, there are some remarks I want to add. I have been thinking about this for a long time. Part of the interest I've had in theology, not my fundamental interest, but still vital, has always been political. In other words, what kind of political system would God like? And I'm not sure God is certain. In different times, God may have been partial to Monarchy, to Communism, and certainly was interested in Democracy, in Capitalism. These systems are not without comparison to the

designs of His animals. Which ones work best? I think a great deal was put into Communism at one point. However, I also have this notion that the Devil is at war with God, so, even as Communism ended badly, ~~we~~ ^{democracy} could end badly. It's why I speak of an existential God.

You may ask: Where is the positive element in all this? What might give us a sense of beauty, religious awe, or even a feeling that I might want to be near to God? What do people like me believe? What are our positive intimations of God? Well, I do believe there are elements of compassion in our world, elements of goodness. I might even believe that love may be more of a life-giving force than hate. The majority of us are working, after all, to create a world where there is reasonable equity. What political form could that world take? If we start with the brilliant arguments of writers as great as Nietzsche, we argue that it is wrong to pay great attention to the weak, the poor, the hungry, the meek, the mediocre, the inferior. They are, Nietzsche argues, a huge drag upon existence. They are filled with hatred. They wish to destroy all that is noble or aristocratic, beautiful or fine. It is a sustainable argument—Nietzsche is probably the most interesting and powerful conservative who ever wrote. Yet, as an argument, it only goes so far before it falls short, even crashes. And for a very simple reason. It is that the aristocracy was corrupt, the oligarchs of capitalism are corrupt.

Conservatism is as filthy in its practices as its opponents. If the poor are malodorous, so are the rich. And the rich have advantages that the poor do not have.

On the other hand, Socialism has never worked. Why? Because it refuses to live with the notion that God exists and is part of the human balance. So a built-in difficulty intrudes on what was conceived as an equitable system. It is that the ~~people~~ ^{majority of leaders} who come to power under socialism ~~who~~ ^{and} do not believe in the existence of God, are soon engaged in a hegemony of the ego. My feeling, then, is that to advocate socialism with no existential sense of religion as a foundation, is to make a profound error. The beauty of Christ—what Christ was saying to all of us—is that the poor have as much reason to exist as the wealthy. I don't want to oversimplify Nietzsche's argument, but finally he did feel that Christ was not only speaking to the unwashed but arousing a great rage in them, and this rage would yet destroy all that was noble in civilization. I would argue that unless we have a profound understanding of the needs of the poor, and the rights of the poor, and the passion of the poor to become more than they are at present, we are looking to bypass the horrors of society. So I say that socialism without belief in an existential God cannot work well, whereas socialism with ~~a~~ belief in a God who wants much of what we want can open

life and society for us. If that is workable, if a socialist society should ever exist with a belief in an existential God, I think we might begin to find some of the real beginnings of human equity. Let me say, since I have a great distrust of large organizations and obsessive government power, that I also think small business must be a viable part of any state socialism. Let the largest organizations be socialist rather than corporate. Because the corporations cannot be trusted. The corporation is—I've called it the Big Empty. The corporation is psychopathic. It does not care about its past, it has very little interest in its previous history; it has very little interest in its future.

ML: It does have an interest in its future.

NM: Things are done without looking to the long future. For example, outsourcing is an immediate way of making profits. They have to show a profit every year, just like the psychopath has to feel that he and his ego are larger today than yesterday. Otherwise, they will go into a depression. By contrast, under existential socialism, it would be natural to have an interest in the past and the future. The idea: You don't look for huge profits, but for the well-being of all, the ongoing enrichment of the culture of all. To keep such socialism alive, small business has to be encouraged, and the notion of community, of neighborhood. Behind it all would be the idea that we

might even be working with God. Not working to obey Him, to praise Him, to slave for His vanity, but on the contrary, to live with the idea that God shares desires with us, that we are at last working together, yes, finally, after centuries and millennia of hatred of god, beseechments of God, intense if mindless prayer, valleys and promontories of ritual, attempts to take God by force, attempts to do without God, attempts to glorify Him at the expense of all reason, there might be at last an agreeable sense that, yes, we are working with God, and God is working with us, and we don't understand God altogether and God doesn't understand us altogether, but we even might have a certain regard for each other. If you have a society built on the religious notion that God needs us as much as we need God, that does offer a little more promise than the ongoing notion of corporate capitalism that greed is good, and the free market has to be our only Valhalla.

—yes, ~~Yes~~ who will have the prevailing ego? who will lead?
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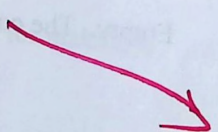
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Empty. The corporation is psychopathic. It does not care about its past, it

community, of neighborhood. For
small business may be more
~~one~~ innovative than socialism,
more on a par with inventors,
~~managers~~ artists, ~~and~~ gamblers, ~~and~~
adventurers ~~and~~ teachers, more
~~experiments~~ in proportion to the scope
of human wit. ~~whereas the~~ ~~the~~ concerns
~~of~~ ~~of~~ corporate ~~the~~ management
are for power and profit, ~~not~~
~~personal wealth~~, but exceptional
~~profit~~ overweening profit for
the top.

Behind ~~an~~ existential socialism
with an open regard for small
business lies the idea that we
might even be working



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INTERVIEW VI

Intelligent Design

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: I start as a novelist, and we can't afford to be ideologically bound, even if, in practice, ^{*we are. Many*} many of us tie ourselves up by way of style.

← Take Henry James or Hemingway. Both were fabulous stylists, but they paid for that huge achievement by being able to write only about certain matters. Their style locked them into ^{*narrower*} ~~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 a tool to use for making a

particular attack on reality. Different tools for engaging different kinds of complex reality.

This said, let me admit that I come to the question of Intelligent ^{once again,} Design with no great cognizance of the subject. On the other hand, the premise behind these interviews, is that I won't be embarrassed by my lack of knowledge. Theologians—no matter at what high level they cerebrate—are trapped, as I have suggested, by their already-received religious systems. They are obliged to do their thinking with ideas they are not all that free to change. So theologians build the innovations in their philosophies by way of mental gymnastics, particularly when it comes to All-Good and All-Powerful. And, no surprise, they avoid many questions they cannot begin to confront.

The tsunami comes to mind. What was offered for explanation by ~~the high religious spokesmen~~ ^{for one more time,} ~~them~~ was that God is a great mystery. His ways are unfathomable. ~~(They~~ were hiding behind the Mystery ~~one more time~~ let us say for the twenty-
eighth thousandth time.

~~My feeling,~~ ^{my feeling} ~~As~~ is obvious from these interviews, is that God strives to find a better, more well-adapted creation than His latest design. Remember my remark that the dinosaurs, at one point, may have been a large part of God's élan. He had dared to create this immense animal who might be able

to rule the jungles, the mountains, and the plains. Then, He came to discover that He had mis-designed it. Back to the drawing board. God, like us, makes mistakes. I must say that if Intelligent Design is being welcomed by fundamentalists, they are asking for considerable trouble in the future.

ML: Well, I don't want to say they invented the idea. It's been around since the 18th century when the world was conceived to be virtually a clock, it was so perfectly designed. Intelligent Design grows out of the Enlightenment.

NM: Perhaps I have a misunderstanding of what is meant by Intelligent Design. I can only speak of it on the basis of a ^{my own comprehension of it,} little reading. Does it not offer the notion that there is ^{an element} a presence in existence which occasionally inserts a more advanced design into ^{an ongoing} a slow evolution? I do deem this to be ^{opt} ~~perfect~~ for what I am talking about. Because, yes, I do think that God is always looking to make existence better, more finely designed. And in corollary to that, God looks to improve on His errors.

ML: Can't you see how such ideas can lend support to people opposed to evolution? Intelligent Design shows the hand of the Creator.

NM: Yes, but that doesn't make Him an All-Powerful divinity.

Fundamentalists have no understanding of an artist. As they see it, the

Creator saw it all at once, did it perfectly (in a week) and brought it out. Lo

and behold, it's been perfect ever since. He never failed once. ^{like we} ~~The design~~ the patsties, we ruined it by not keeping our noses clean enough to breathe in all of God's laws and directions. But God's

design perfect
 (was extraordinary from the start. *The fundamentalists* They are charging full-speed into a profound contradiction of themselves.

ML: Here is what I understand to be the position of present-day Intelligent Design. It would say: we don't know exactly which processes of natural selection, mutation, evolution, are directly related to the Intelligence used to create the world, but we are saying that what does exist out there in nature bespeaks the presence of an Intelligence behind it at some level—maybe at some removes back, but it is certainly opposed to those fundamentalists who would say God created the world in one instant six thousand years ago.

Intelligent Design people do say that evolution cannot explain all the appearance of design that we see in natural life. Intelligence had also to be involved.

NM: It certainly makes great sense to me that Intelligent Design is one of the elements in evolution. What I find comfortable, even agreeable about it as a notion, is that if we do have a God who created a universe as manifold as ours—how indeed could it have been done without Intelligent Design,

without having notions that this is where to go here, this is how to change

now. And here, at last, we can improve the development
 that here we can develop this species, right there is what is wrong with that,

the last attempt to develop *that* this particular species. The other element present,

which I must emphasize over and over is that if God is not all-powerful, His

creations went out into an existence that didn't necessarily receive them with generosity. In many circumstances, God might well have had to say to Himself or Herself, "I didn't anticipate this."

ML: Tectonic plates. . .

NM: Exactly. How much simpler to assume God didn't expect that disaster. He was aghast.

ML: Or, to engage the argument, the tectonic plates are just another example of the randomness and the chaos of the universe.

NM: But, the artist works to extract order from chaos. I would not even say that chaos is a lack of order. Chaos is a mix of sets that are too complex and too disparate to be ordered within the onlooker's consciousness. If you will, each element in chaos can have its own set of laws and processes, but

that organization comes into conflict with another set of orders and they are incompatible. *They erode each other when they do not* ~~They~~ ^{other} tear each apart. I also would postulate Malign Design,

~~occurring throughout our universe.~~ By which I would posit forces not at all congenial to God's concepts of creativity. How do I arrive at this? Because nowhere in existence do you find a free ride. Anything that comes along which seems wonderful in the beginning, meets opposition, encounters enjambments. Sooner or later a forward motion is, stunned, hindered, or stopped.

ML: Do you then espouse a theory of Intelligent Design that has imperfect design?

NM: The design can be excellent until it runs into chaotic elements that could not be anticipated.

ML: That's imperfection.

NM: Perfection may not be the word to use here. Sometimes you see creatures in the universe who are so exquisitely designed that the moment one speaks of Intelligent Design, you say, of course! Orchids, snow flakes, panthers. Evolution, by trial and error, could not have produced some of the more beautiful forms we see in the animal world. Race horses. Certain dogs. Even if we find most insect forms repellent, nonetheless, when we look at them under the microscope, we can see the extraordinary work that went into their development. It becomes harder to believe that evolution said, "Yes, the six joints on this particular leg will have curves as wonderful as scimitars because this is the only way this species can survive." It is easier to believe that the limb was designed for beauty as well as for function.

ML: You know the cliché. You put a million monkeys in a room with a million typewriters—eventually one of them will produce War and Peace or Hamlet.

NM: Go to a computer for that. The number is too vast to be interesting.

ML: Let me give you another refutation of Intelligent Design. —

NM: I'm listening.

ML: In the vastness of the universe, there are billions of stars and solar systems and galaxies. By our limited knowledge, of the ones we've looked at, not one comes close to having the basics to design a universe—that is, the water and rain, the flora and fauna that went into creating our amazing, organic system that has been able to work together over a period of time. There's nothing like that anywhere else that we can see in the universe.

Couldn't it be we're just a fluke of the cosmos? In so vast a universe with so many possibilities, finally there is one planet that developed out of the equivalent of mega-billions of monkeys pounding out Hamlet.

NM: But I would call that an argument for Intelligent Design. Because we find nothing elsewhere that works like anything on earth—all the fineness of detail we have here—I see that precisely as a powerful argument for Intelligent Design.

ML: What then is the function of all the other stars and galaxies?

NM: All we can say with any authority is that in our solar system, the earth seems to be the only planet that is now alive with creatures. So it may be that other gods—conceivably gods more powerful than ours—have had

~~even larger~~ failures. It is possible that the earth succeeded in accomplishing something other planets were unable to ~~do~~ ^{exercise}. Given the limited powers of astronomy today, there seem to be no near galaxies that are comparable. But there may be. ~~There very well may be.~~ There are so many possibilities. All we can begin to say is that it seems reasonable to posit a god for our universe.

ML: For our solar system.

NM: For our solar system. It may be that this God failed with other planets.

Prior to the earth. I won't even begin to approach that. ~~It's too easy and too fanciful.~~ ^{repeat} I will say that it is far more difficult to ~~conceive~~ ^{comprehend the complexity} of our existence if

God does not exist. Because then we are back to the monkeys writing

Hamlet and that is hard to believe. It is much easier ~~for me~~ to suppose that

Hamlet is a part of human design. And if it's not, if it did take a nano-trillion of monkeys to produce ^{the} an equivalent of Hamlet, what a waste.

There has to be the assumption, along with everything else, that existence is moving toward a goal, ^{and therefore lives within the boundaries of} ~~It is certainly~~ ^{also} possible that existence itself in the deepest, most cosmic, sense, is in peril. Of necessity, therefore, it is moving forward. It is as if we will have a rendezvous with extinction if we do not reach a certain period or place by a given time, as if indefinables have to be achieved in order to protect the continuation of this existence.

This is what I would term reasonable paranoia. By which I mean one can try to think about it without diving into dire declines or flaming into manic outbursts. But if there is some ~~reason~~ ^{reason} to this last assumption, then Intelligent Design is a crucial part of it.

ML: Fine. I want to take a chance with ~~this~~ ^{our} discussion. You tell us that if you think at all like a philosopher, it is because you have been a novelist all your life. Splendid! I want to see what you can do with a parallel that's apparent to me. Novelists, after all, create worlds.

NM: We do try to, ~~at times~~ ^{some of us, sometimes}

ML: Good. Let's take the notion of Intelligent Design in relation to the novel.

NM: Well, as I did say before, true artisans like Henry James and Hemingway gave themselves over entirely to design. It's as if their works were ~~designed~~ ^{put together} to live entirely by themselves. Perhaps, as creators, they felt less need to look for support in the breath and raw facts of existence.

ML: All right. Let me take another leap. Is there any relation between your assumption that Intelligent Design is confronted and altered by existence and your disdain for plot in your novels?

NM: That's a good ~~and challenging~~ ^{But} question. Before I get into it, let me say a word or two about James Joyce. Unlike Hemingway and Henry James

who are not only great novelists and avatars of Intelligent Design so pure that their works, once designed and fashioned, tend to live by themselves, Joyce, to the contrary, plays at the very edge of chaos. Which is why it is very hard to get near to Joyce. A common reflex is to look to avoid all that. But Joyce did undertake to organize whole areas of chaos.

ML: I don't want to lose my point. In many essays, many interviews, you have said in effect, I don't worry about plot. Plot is much less important to me than character. You always have a storyline, but your plots are not. . .

NM: They're not clockwork.

ML: No. So I've wondered if for you to have a plot that is neat and tight and ordered would run counter to your ideas of metaphysics.

NM: Good. Plot, if you will, is Intelligent Design. It is interesting to me—and I thought about it a lot in the years I wrote Harlot's Ghost because the CIA is a perfect example of plot, that is, Intelligent Design, coming into contact and conflict with the world. The reason I don't like plots to prevail is that they don't allow the figures in the book, the characters, to push their own limits of ~~wholly pre-designed plot~~ ^{they make} to the point where life finds the plot unacceptable, and so throws the design into ^{chaos} another set of conditions ~~no longer as definable.~~

offer
Borges is the brilliant model *to underline this risk* of this process. (Borges wrote five and six page short stories that start with incredible plots. Then the plots get shattered. All in five or six pages. Incredible stories. He, like Joyce, was fascinated with making attacks on the nature of chaos. Borges showed us for all time—talk about a novelist's novelist! He said to us: "Look at what you're all doing. You take yourselves too seriously. You miss the fact that once a plot is shattered, life still goes on. Another species of life begins and you have to deal with it."

Take this back to Intelligent Design. God looks for Intelligent Design. Then that Intelligent Design gets itself worked upon by existence. The Wright brothers designed an airplane. Don't we know that! And after they got it up in the air for the first time, and it flew a few hundred feet, they went back to the drawing board to refine the knowledge received. Intelligent Design cannot exist without experience. So long as it remains Intelligent Design, pure but untested, it remains analogous to any number of very talented young novelists who never publish because they never get their book to the point where they want it to be seen. They will not put their book out on the waters. Whereas God, I will obviously argue *tends to* ~~launch~~ each Intelligent Design to see what happens to it. That is how God learns, how ~~God~~ *He* proceeds to the next Intelligent Design.

Let me enjoy one wild aspect of this notion. In my book about Henry Miller, I spoke of three men coming into a hostess's living room, Henry James, Hemingway, and Henry Miller. Each takes off his hat and behold!

To their vast surprise—they had no prior ~~knowledge of this~~ a cow turd on

~~each head~~ ^{is steaming under each hat} James, I then go on to say, might have perished from an

experience that awful. Hemingway would have gone into a depression—he

would have seen it as emblematic of the nature of life. Just when life

seemed something you could enjoy, unexpected disasters shattered your

mood. And Miller would have said, "Good Lord, how did that turd get on

my head? And just look at the hostess. Her nostrils ^{are} quivering, or is it her

twat? She is so excited—what a wonderful moment!" Miller is an example

of someone who couldn't stay with a plot for five minutes because he

wanted to run right into the world and discover something new about

himself and/or the world. He is at one extreme, Henry James at the other.

Between them lies the effective use of Intelligent Design.

ML: But what would Joyce have done?

NM: Joyce is so much of a genius I won't try to trim his coattails. I don't

know what he would have done with the cow turd.

ML: I think he would have appreciated it.

NM: He might have looked for a conflation of the twenty-two words in fifteen languages that ^{magnify} ~~enrich~~ the concept of shit. What would be the wonderful sound he would come up with? On the other hand, he could have felt removed from the situation. It was not life he was interested in so much as language.

ML: I disagree. The first person to wipe his ass in a novel is Leopold Bloom.

NM: Your point..

ML: You recently criticized Sartre's existentialism for being "floorless." Without floor.

NM: Without a foundation.

ML: Because, as you put it, "It is, after all, near to impossible for a philosopher to explore into why we are here without entertaining some notion of what the prior force might have been." Therefore, if we grant your limited God as that prior force, then I'm compelled to ask what force preceded your God? I assume you would choose infinite regress rather than a Prime Mover?

NM: Again, I refuse to be blindsided by such questions. They are the atheist's last line of defense. There's a story you're probably familiar with, of Bertrand Russell and an old lady—Russell is talking about the origin of

the universe and how it is not knowable. An old lady in the audience speaks up. She says, "On the contrary, Professor Russell. I know the basis of the universe." He says, "What is it, Madam?" She replies, "The universe is resting upon a turtle." "Madam, that's very helpful, but what is the turtle resting ~~on~~ on?" And she says, "It's turtles all the way down!"

ML: I do remember that.

NM: I'm not going to get trapped in arguments that ask me to explain what came behind the God I'm talking about.

ML: But you beat Sartre over the head because he won't allow for a force behind humanity. Why can't we then try to find out—I'm not trying to refute you, but—

NM: Let me put it this way: we first have to become close to God and God is not only an element in existence but a helpful to God—large questions we haven't even entered. Until we can feel

we are some kind of great help to God, why should God trust us? You remember, at the end of Harlot's Ghost, Hugh Montague goes off on this—

to me—intriguing speech that God, having decided that the advent of humans was not yet to be trusted, ^{then to} proceeded to ~~then~~ create the illusion of evolution. In reality — so goes Harlot's Thesis — Instead, the earth was created entire, ex nihilo, by God in six days.

He then laid in evidence all over the earth and in the seas that evolution had done it instead over millions of years. Implied in all that is a suggestion that

inward presence

until we get close enough to God to feel we are in some kind of alliance, can we begin to have some knowledge of what might be behind God. But that

won't happen until we get nearer. *Scentre doesn't let us point in that direction at all*

ML: You do see that as a possibility, however?

moral relations between God and humans

NM: Ultimately. If things go better than I expect they will.

ML: I don't know if you're familiar with the philosopher David Hume—

NM: ~~Yes~~, In college. I had him. Vaguely, you might say.

ML: Well, Hume got into the argument for Intelligent Design. One of the proofs of St. Thomas Aquinas for the existence of God is indeed the argument from design. It goes back that far, hundreds of years. Aquinas has many proofs of God's existence but the fifth one was that design is so perfect in the universe—he didn't even see beyond the solar system—

NM: Right there, you run smack into the most obdurate aspect of

Catholicism, the insistence of Catholicism on God's perfection. What

characterizes my idea of Intelligent Design is that it is partial. *(not perfect, but partial - a part)* We do well

~~to grasp the notion that these are partial attempts~~ *(improvement)* I'm glad I have the novel

to fall back upon as a metaphor for this. When I write a novel, it's an attempt to come up with a piece of intelligent design, but it's never perfect.

Some parts are better than others. If it goes into publication, the critical returns come back. Very often those returns have little relation to what you

a partial improvement

Clarification — not perfect, but partial — a partial improvement. I'm glad (etc)

had written. Occasionally, they do. Slowly, over the years, you learn more. By the end of your life, you may be wiser as a novelist than when you started. The heart of one of my notions then is that God, too, is always looking to become wiser. What you create, may, in the beginning, not be understood all too well, or, for that matter, ~~be~~^{not} fashioned well enough yet.

ML: Listen to this collision between Aquinas and David Hume: Hume criticized the argument from design. In particular, he emphasized there is no legitimate way to infer the properties of God from the qualities of the world, His creation. For instance, Hume questioned, how can we be sure the world was not created by a team? Or this may be but only one of many attempts at creation, the first few having been botched? Or, on the other hand, our world could be the puerile first attempt of an infant deity who afterwards abandoned it, ashamed of his lame performance.

NM: That last doesn't fulfill my notion of the passion implicit in the artistry of God. I can't conceive of a great artist ever junking a work ~~and~~^{just} moving on ~~because it's lame~~—not if that has been his major opus. I certainly do lean to the notion that our world is God's major opus. But Hume did put it well on the argument for a perfect universe. From my point of view he was correct in seeing that as near to intolerable. The notion of a perfect universe scrambles people's brains.

ML: All the same, the Catholic Church is a fabulously successful institution—and probably because of that insistence on a perfect universe.

NM: Fabulously successful, yes, but you could also say the Jewish religion has been fabulously successful in one way—the Jews didn't perish. But, what a price they paid! And I'd add, what a price Catholics have paid. To have created a Church that brought so much architectural beauty to the world, so much musical beauty, so much ritual beauty—and then be locked into a set of notions they can't let go of, notions that explain nothing, but elevate contradictions and magnify spiritual and moral confusion. ~~The Catholic Church is a social~~

You know, when they are beautiful, the services of organized religion move me. I feel "How tragic. How painful." All this devotion, all this loyalty, and it goes into an intellectual sump. It explains nothing. All you are finally asked to believe is that God will be there to hear your prayers, God will welcome us when we die—as if that's all God has to do.

ML: What about Hume's idea that the universe might have been created by a team?

NM: Not impossible. Not impossible. It explains one of my basic notions. The team soon fell out of sorts with one another and we ended up with God and the Devil.

ML: A joint endeavor—

NM: Like those South Seas Companies in the 1700s, the 1800s.

ML: If, as you say, the Creator is an artist, and not all creative works are equally successful, wouldn't this lead quite easily to racism? That is, couldn't the "inferior race," however it's defined, whether the non-Aryans scapegoated by the Nazis, or the "ice people" of the Afro-centric extremists, simply be one of God's less successful creations?

NM: Well, I reject the language of the question. One of the absolute disasters that Hitler brought to human understanding was an abuse of the concept of race. Because race offers us great clues. It is perfectly possible—and here again, one can only speculate—but it is perfectly possible that races, in the beginning, were Intelligent Design for different situations. In other words, for people in the tropics, God was saying, "well, how can I design the heating system of their bodies so they can bear the excessive warmth more easily?" And made separate adjustments for the north. We're discovering that living in separate climates produces different relaxations and strictures of the throat. Languages reflect that. Mind you, God as the artist, might be discovering within the material itself, where the continuation might be. Certain sculptors talk about how they do not know exactly what the work will become until they cut into the marble. ~~The~~ *which discloses* marble reveals what they must do with the next stroke. The same thing may

discovery

It is the process of

^{present in}
 be ~~true~~ with human ~~designs~~, or animal design. The environment plays its
 mighty ^{great} role.

ML: Your conception of God as artist assumes that God is both vastly ^{but} but not all—good and vastly—but not all—powerful. But why couldn't God be not very compassionate, ^{but} at all and instead immensely curious? He could be fascinated by, but not especially compassionate toward creation, much like a child who winds up toys and watches them slam into each other and chortles at the smashup. You say, "In other words, why are there volcanoes? Because God was not a perfect engineer." Or because like a two-year-old, God found the noise and fury fascinating and amusing. Maybe even the shrieks of the dying fascinating and amusing. To use the ultimately reductive phrase, you keep assuming God is a nice person. That seems a bit arbitrary.

NM: It is arbitrary, and it could be my conditioning. I grew up in a

household that was as religious as the next—it wasn't a dogma-driven ^{atmosphere} do household, but I remember my mother on Friday night praying before a lit candelabra, praying to the ^{Shekhina} Shekhina, who is, of course, the wife of God, and there were tears in my mother's eyes and a feeling of great tenderness came from her. I think I always took it for granted that God was compassionate in relation to us.

spelling

Shekhina

Spelling

Now, the arguments you just raised cannot be refuted. How can I declare, "No, God is not going in for capers." Of course, God could engage in mean acts. But to me, the notion that God and the Devil are in conflict with one another makes more sense. So, I believe, we've got this one God who is more good than not..

ML: Well, your mother's father was a rabbi.

NM: Yes. He studied to be a rabbi in Lithuania but by the time he came over here, the only way he could make his living was as a peddler. Then he moved to a town in New Jersey called Long Branch where he opened a shop and worked as a butcher. There was only one synagogue in Long Branch, so when the ^{regular} rabbi was ill or off on vacation, my grandfather stood in for him. And my mother was ~~very~~ proud of this. The fundamental snobbery of the Jews—it was much better to be a rabbi than a butcher. *As a contrarian Jew,* I was delighted, *me* it gave ~~two~~ different strains to develop ~~in myself.~~

ML: Well, I'm thinking of your mother's devotion and the tear in her eye—obviously, she must have come from a pretty religious household.

NM: My grandfather was most religious—he began studying the Talmud *One of the* when he was four years old. The best thing *to* be said about the Talmud is it's very hard to become a fundamentalist while studying it. It's ~~all too~~ easy *if you live only with the Torah* when living with ~~the Bible~~ but difficult when reading the Talmud. Unlike

the Torah Cuduck is the first five books of
 the Old Testament *(the Talmud)* inquires into the nuances of things. For instance, in

that long-gone age, people brought animals to the temple to be sacrificed.

Very often there were small disasters—a poor man might have decided to sacrifice his prize heifer because his child was *carefully* ill. But on his *entrance* way into the

synagogue, the heifer would defecate. Well, the Talmud is ready to focus on just where it defecated. Was it outside on the patio? Or did it *do the job* defecate

on the steps? In the vestibule? In the aisle? At the altar approach? *Did* Was it *defecate* on the altar? *Outrageous!* For all these are separate violations of the most holy, and so

call for different penalties. In certain cases the animal can still be

sacrificed. At other sites, *like the altar,* the animal is lost completely—~~if it defecates too~~
~~close to the altar,~~ it must be disposed of completely. It cannot be eaten. In

the Talmud, there are *nonetheless* all these efforts to find zones of relative compatibility

between God *God's laws/needs* and humans—~~so it becomes the exact opposite of the Old~~ *the Talmud*

Testament, and *needless to say* the New Testament where the law is, in effect, inflexible.

ML: Well—there is a certain measure of Orphic ambiguity in the utterances of Christ.

NM: I wouldn't call it ambiguity. I see it as the wars of committees who are looking to fix what His behavior might have been. For their theological

purposes, not his. *So, occasionally, they were at odds. But each side of the disagreement was inflexible.*
 ML: Did your mother talk much about her father?

NM: She adored him, and he was a very kind man. One story I loved when I was a kid. She once said, "My mother worked so hard in the butcher shop, and we as children worked hard, too. ~~So~~, we'd get angry at my father because whenever a poor woman would come in and he'd weigh the meat she bought, he'd put his finger under the scale so it cost her less. And we thought, "That's all very well, but money is being taken away from us."

ML: ~~So~~ ^{obviously} he was a compassionate man.

NM: I was only four when he died. But I like to think so.

~~Interview VII is a (funny) top, than VII here with what follows~~
ML: Here's a question on ritual. All your ideas have an underlying

~~It will introduce us to the question of~~
assumption that God has a continuing, even a profound interest in some

individuals, and certainly in the ultimate fate of the human species and the rest of His creation. This is completely at odds with some of the earliest recorded religious expression, namely from the Sumerians, whose prayers were always begging the gods to "Remember!" Prayer and ritual were a constant attempt to engage the attention of forgetful and indifferent gods who had created and abandoned humanity. This, by the way, wasn't a notion emerging from disasters and dislocations but could be found even as their civilization flourished. Can you comment?

NM: It's the other half of the equation. The obverse side of prayer is that it rarely gets answered. So rarely, indeed, that people at religious meetings

Prayer: