

Mailer's Cosmology

The impetus to asking Norman Mailer if he would engage in discussion of his religious beliefs, was a reading of an early draft of his novel, *The Castle in the Forest* sometime in the summer or early fall of 2002. Although his novels and narrative nonfiction back to the 1950's are shot through with his ideas on God and the Devil and the struggle in which they are locked, this material was there largely as a backdrop, a sort of cosmic context for the journeys and struggles of his characters. Before *The Castle in the Forest*, the direct interventions of angels and demons were surmises. But Dieter, an assistant to the Devil, changed everything. Now Mailer had invested his characters with his beliefs about the tripartite division of power in our solar system (God, Devil and humanity). Dieter, as we now know, narrates the novel and also and also communicates with the Devil, whom he refers to as the E.O. (Evil One). On a purely functional

level his choice of Dieter, who has powers verging on omniscience, allowed Mailer to retain a first person voice and still have access to the thoughts of the Hitler family. After a half century of tantalizing his readers with glimpses of his quasi-Gnostic belief in the existential struggle between good and evil, Mailer decided to present a key battle in this war, one that took place in Austria at the end of the nineteenth century.

In the early 1980's I wrote an essay on Mailer's cosmology (appended to this volume), and I remained persistent in my conviction of the importance of his idiosyncratic beliefs to serious readers of his work. So, I was excited to read of the demonic and divine machinations surrounding Hitler's birth and early life. Shortly after I read the first 100 pages of the novel, in draft form, Mailer asked me to help on a fundraiser for the Provincetown Theater. He wanted me to play a role in a staged reading of G. B. Shaw's *Don Juan in Hell*. Mailer would direct the play and take the part of Don Juan. His wife, Norris Church Mailer would play Don Juan's wife, Dona Ana, and I would play her father, the Commodore. Gore Vidal, in a brilliant bit of casting, would take the part of the Devil. Shaw's play is set in Hell and the exchanges between the four characters, especially Don Juan and the Devil, gave me another slant on Mailer's ideas. For the week of rehearsal preceding the one-night production, my brain was on fire with

speculations about the interplay between the ideas of Mailer and Shaw, ~~Not~~ to mention the fascinating interplay between two novelists who had feuded so famously in the 1970's, were now collaborating.

In the Spring of 2003 I visited Mailer's home in Provincetown and proposed that we begin the conversations collected here. He agreed immediately. His only proviso was that my questions remain with me until we met so that his answers would be spontaneous (he once said that his favorite word was "improvisational"). The first conversation took place on June 17, 2003 and they continued, sometimes six months apart, until June 14, 2006. All of them took place in the third floor study of his house where from the big window one can see the swerve of shore and bend of bay of Provincetown harbor.

The transcripts have been cleaned up a bit, mainly to eliminate redundancies and correct a few names and dates. They are presented in the order in which they took place. The titles given to them are not summative, but merely a reflection of my opening questions.

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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: I've thought about it a good deal. Put it this way: I have high suspicions about ritual. It seems to me that at best, it's a mixed blessing. You know one of my favorite remarks is that repetition kills the soul. Well, obviously that remark has to be explored before we go further. Any number of kinds of repetition are, I will admit, crucial to the human venture. It is, after all, one of the ways by which we learn. And there is such a thing as creative repetition. Nonetheless, I'm suspicious of ritual. Where, after all, does my theology start? What occasions it? What stimulates it? I would answer (as I did in the preface) 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, novelists 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 fine novel does not keep repeating itself. That is exactly the hallmark of a dull work. So, most good novelists are wary of repetition. Moreover, most people I don't approve of 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. 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 which was in 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 a little boring. At the commencement of the practice each day, you were supposed to empty your head for twenty minutes. You did your best not to allow much thought 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. I've been practicing Transcendental Meditation willy-nilly.

Now, during my initiatory ritual, they said a few words in an Asian language, and then gave me a mnemonic to repeat. I forget what it was. It was something like Allen Ginsberg's OM. ²Alen Ginsberg's old OMMMMM. I kept repeating whatever the sound was in my head for twenty minutes. Whenever an errant thought came into my brain, I had to be ready to use the mnemonic to wash the thought away. It was a 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 the 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. God, recognizing its efficacy, and determined not to lose any soul unnecessarily, entered ritual as well. I

think ritual is composed then of the presence of God and the Devil. It does tend to 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 he has a sense that powers are present. Anyone who reads Homer will find nothing strange about this. So, I think my answer would be that I don't scoff at ritual, but I don't trust it. I would be happier if we lived without it, yet I have to recognize that my upbringing, my tastes, my life has had little to do with rituals. Nonetheless, they are fascinating. Because 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. Wrestlers do have to grasp each other.

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. 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 performed 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 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 a parapet. They varied between eight inches in width to so much as a foot and a half, so there was no great risk unless you lost your head. But I would suspect that the spirit world if you will, does pay close attention to people engaged in unusual events. We started by talking about ritual. Now, we are involved with rote. Whenever people engage in rote, in other

words, express a superstitious fear by going in for repetitive moves when a good deal is at stake, that can draw the attention of the gods. So athletes who are going to be playing in games that will have a large emotional effect on many people, are going to attract such attention. I think many have the feeling that one is not alone, but is among accompanying spirits. At the least!

ML: I never told you this story, but when I was writing my Doctoral thesis on you, I had a chapter on your cosmology. I had to face two or three English professors plus a Philosophy professor on the Ph.D. committee. 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." After all, you have written 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, you present no ultimate nature of God answer to any of these questions. And so, reading over every have done so far, I keep coming to the same thing—we don't know, we can't be certain. Yet, from most philosophical points of view, there's usually one rock somewhere.

NM: What if the rock is in transit? In other words when we say rock we mean something that is eternal. What if eternity is in passage itself? The simplest response I could give is that no philosopher has ever come up with an answer to these questions that is satisfactory to us. No human, and I won't be the first either. What I will say is this. I have basic beliefs. I don't know what we've been talking about through these interviews. I thought I'd said it. God is not All Powerful and not All Good. God is comparable to a Greek god if you will. Zeus, if we need some model. I don't need one. In other words, God is a divine protagonist engaged in trying to shape some very large part of existence. How large is a question beyond our means. Of course! I have no notion at all whether our God is ^{only} a master of the solar system or ^{even makes} includes the galaxies, or to the contrary, 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 who created us is

not the emperor, but the artist. This is my most basic notion: God—Being, if you will—is not a law-giver, but an artist. Being is doing the best that He or She can do to project a new notion of existence into the cosmos. There may be other notions out there as well—other concepts concerning which turn the cosmos should take. We humans are part of God's venture into the unknown. We humans are God's soldiers, God's ability to change the given in the cosmos. To ask, then, that the end be posited is philosophically misleading, since we commence with the notion that the end is as yet undetermined.

When I say that I am an existentialist, I mean it in the absolute sense of that word. The purpose of existence is not known. It is the presence of life not the formulation of it. God may often dwell in states of bewilderment. That makes more sense to me than that God knows clearly what He or She is doing and tells us how to do it. If that is the case, we are no more than extras in a huge opera. I've said this over and over. The end is open. Existence is open. The notion that there is a predetermined place we all will reach, that there is a single point to existence which we will achieve by fulfilling God's notion, is, if you stop to think, no more than a personification of God as the director of an immense opera. There He stands, holding a full libretto in hand. But I am saying it is more complex,

more difficult, more ennobling. And the libretto is not done. It is still being written. We are not just serfs, nor the children of patrons drawn in to sing a note in the children's chorus. We are the base of this opera. So to demand a philosophical presentation where I must say where we are going, is, given my point of view, not an answerable 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? I don't know. If I should remain alive for twenty years, can I have any notion of how I will be then? Can I have a concept of where society will find itself in a hundred years? Hardly. We live in the present. That is what we are given. We do have instincts and they can be far-reaching. I would go so far as to say that I would go along with Goethe's belief that 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, nor, and this is essential, foreseen. Even God's vision of the future his of the world is not yet written. The Devil, after all, curves and warps human affairs.

ML: Here, I wish to enter a relevant note. 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

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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 may lie in the famous Catholic dictum with which Graham Greene was obsessed: There is always time to repent! Between the stirrup and the ground! Time, after all, to anyone who has had experience with minor drugs like marijuana will know that time can extend or compress. A tenth of a second in a dream we are told, can feel like five minutes. But apart from that, even if you have no time at the moment before your death, I would say that death takes place within us as we live our lives. The recognition of death is always present at the point where morality enters into consciousness. The question, "Am I a good man, or a bad man?" accompanies us from early age. "Am I a good child or a bad child?" As you grow older, so you also think more about judgment. Of course, not everyone believes that such a process exists. 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 there has been too punishing an existence, too deep a sense of defeat.

ML: 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 to prepare yourself. You used the example of 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 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 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 wholly complete once it looks to engage the meaning of life. That is another reason for detesting fundamentalism. It

insists on one hundred percent. What I have to say may only be valid for some people, but I do believe that, yes, our preparation for death is important. If you have just a few minutes at the end, it isn't as if you are facing death for the first time; you have been facing it all your life. Let us say you are handing in the final submission.

Now, let me go back a moment. As I've indicated, I think reincarnation is a species of reward. To repeat, that's why I get depressed when people say, "Oh, I just want some peace." And mean it. Whereas others can feel that with all the ill they've admittedly caused, there is still enough good in them to want another chance. I believe God is ready to give that chance to the most impossible cases. I go back to my basic notion: God is our artist. A fine artist is never satisfied with what has been created, but looks for another attempt to do better. I even believe that the dumbest human is still an intrinsic work of art. It is just that virtually none of the potential was realized. Still, there may be some reason for the Creator to wish to see if this human can improve.

God needs us. To repeat: He wishes to take His notion of existence and carry it across the stars. And for that, God needs humans to become more extraordinary. But you don't create people who are wonderful by an act of will. Often, such development can come only from rebirth and

endless small steps of development. If you are put in situations where you failed in one life, but manage to succeed 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 as a child in this new existence, you may go through horrors. But now you have guides to carry you up to an aerie you could not reach in your previous life.

So, I would venture to say that at the moment of one's death, one may have a better sense of what one did or didn't do in one's life and what one might like for the next life. Can that not give a coloration to the soul even 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: I don't think so. Most of us are so highly imperfect, so underdeveloped, so frustrated, so small in relation to what we could have been, every one of us, even those of us who are relatively successful, that the question also becomes how much has God learned from us. It isn't that

God understands us so well that all we need is a little tweaking. God learns along with us. Continue to 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 than they fail.

ML: So most reincarnations might not show a clear improvement?

NM: Who knows? Karma itself may be embattled. When too many people die at once, when a hundred thousand souls living in Hiroshima are incinerated in one second, that may create incalculable damage. Karma may not have been equipped to deal with so many deaths in one instant. Might this not be one of the Devil's most profound urges? To maim Karma irreparably? Destroy reincarnation, which is to say, destroy God's way of adjusting the balance?

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

NM: The question here is how much time does God have. Are eons more of time available, or is it a cosmic race? There may be other visions of existence seeking to overtake us in the universe, or worse, speed far away from us. So, God may be in a great hurry. God may have less patience now than He possessed hundreds of thousands of years ago.

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

NM: I would say that God has a vision of existence which He sees as 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, 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 exist not just in sugar land or Club Med, but exist in pure intellectual bliss having been completely purged of all weaknesses and

corruptions and so forth. Many religions hold this belief. The Hindus, for example.

NM: That assumes we're all here ideally to get to a certain place. If we keep our lives pure enough, we will reach such bliss. But I am saying that heavenly bliss is not guaranteed. Everything we know about the nature of existence also shows us that it's cruel, paradoxical, glorious, disappointing, tremendous, and often more modest than expected. And so I believe we are part of a vast creative process that is attempting to go somewhere without being able to guarantee what the end is. In our lives, we certainly work without knowing the end. The only certainty we possess is that we are going to die. We don't know what will follow that. We can assume certain answers, but we know, or ought to know, that we are making no more than 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 also a 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 on occasion. 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 Gods basic sense of how to do it. It's vainglory to think we Americans have a purchase on exceptionalism. How, for god's sakes, could God put up with suburbs and malls and superhighways and plastics?

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

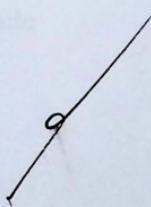
There were endless wars and corruption. And we were a new start.

NM: I won't argue that there may have been certain divine hopes for America. But I don't think He has had much of that since the Second World War. In the last five decades, we've not only roiled the depths but cheapened the surface of life. We've ruined the freshness of the air, the cleanliness of the rivers, the integrity of the earth. At this point I would say that America is not a country whose spiritual goodness is guaranteed to hold up under examination.

ML: I know when Kennedy was assassinated somebody said, and you quoted it, that God may have 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 exactly such 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 Woolf.

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 heroes. 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 daily 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 novelists observe. We study society. We try to understand how the social machine works. We try to understand characters who are 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 far apart from our notion of our self. The best novelists can do that. All the same, telepathy is but a small part of it now. I do believe, however, that God did want us to be telepathic. The Lord 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 His ears or ours. 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 that technology being now with us, we have to look upon human history as God's attempt to deal with the Devil as well as with us. If the

Devil succeeds in establishing technological shoots and outbursts and venues and avenues throughout all of society, God must engage technology as well. But He comes in second. The Devil is the pioneer in technology. So I would assert. Unless it is we humans who outstripped the Devil.

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 development, certainly in 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~~ ^{eighty} seventy percent. Is this opportunity to call up people all the time, anywhere in the world, not creating a whole new set of communications in the world that never existed before?

NM: I see it as the kind of mess that comes from an over-reliance on comfort. I'm not at all sure that instant communication with everyone alive is ideal. Not at all. In the past, it was often the hunt for information that shaped the development we made of the information. We were stimulated by the hunt. The difficulty in obtaining information was a most vital part of the intellectual process. Today, we talk about gluts of information. We are all being 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 was leaving the full effect of commercials out of the equation. TV commercials did a terrible thing to the American people. They introduced the expectation that your powers of concentration were required to be ready to suffer a series of hits (interruptions) 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. Whereas, technology is often divorced from the ^{latter} better. Plastic, for example. Most electronic machines are not agreeable to employ. Think of the cast-iron vise in an old-fashioned cellar workshop. It makes cranking sounds as you use it, and you do get a feeling as you tighten the screw whether the piece in the vise is being held properly. Not being crushed and not too loose. You obtain very little of that with technological machines. At best you're reading dials, and your eyes might

even find a little play in the subtlety of the dials. But you can't ask technology to enrich your physical reactions. Whereas, language does come out of the senses. Half of language is onomatopoeia. We are drawn to different languages by their qualities. I love German for its guttural vibrations on one's larynx, and French for the emphasis upon the nose, the centrality of the nose. I love English for the mannered postures available to your voice, and Spanish for the fire you can feel within it. Ditto for Italian with its sense of bravura. Hebrew for its primitive roots. All such reactions come from our senses. So I 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 but I never got down to grips with it. I do have these notions still. I think certain consonants have associative qualities. I would say that in English "R" almost always has to do with anger, rage, ire, fury, redness, roar. "L" may be related to love—lassitude, leisure, likelihood, languor, libidos, luxury. "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 beyond me. But, 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 can know? In any event, this dog was extraordinary. He made searching sounds in his throat trying to speak to me. Sounds you couldn't begin to spell out. I could make them for the tape recorder but no one could transcribe them. And that dog wanted to speak. So I think in a certain sense, God was discovering language through the eons of evolution and the sounds of His animals.

ML: All right, here's my last question. Have recent geopolitical events reaffirmed or undercut your theological beliefs? I mean, has the reelection of George Bush confirmed your belief system?

NM: I've felt from the word go that George Bush is one of the Devil's clients. I suspect he's been infiltrated by the Devil. And every time he feels that Jesus is talking to him count on it—Satan is in his ear. 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, yes—I think the Devil may be winning right now in America. But, it's still coming down to the wire.

INTERVIEW VII

Michael Lennon

MICHAEL LENNON: I know you've been thinking about John Updike's *Disgrace* and I have, too. But wasn't your an unlikely person to find *Disgrace* there?

NORMAN MAILER: Why?

ML: Because it's a sort of history of the religious nation.

NM: I start as a novelist, and we can't afford to be ideologically bound, even if, in practice, we are. Many of us do be ourselves as, by way of style. Take Henry James or Hemingway. Both were religious writers, but they paid for that huge achievement by being able to write only about certain matters. Their style locked them into narrower 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

INTERVIEW VII

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 of us do 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 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 Design with, once again, 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 religious spokesmen was that God is a great mystery. His ways are unfathomable. One more time they were hiding behind the Mystery.

As is obvious from these interviews, my feeling 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 my own comprehension. Does it not offer the notion that there is an element in existence which occasionally inserts a more advanced design into an ongoing evolution? I do deem this to be apt 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. We're the patsies. We ruined it by not keeping our noses clean enough to breathe in

all of God's laws and directions. But God's design was perfect from the start. The fundamentalists 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 that now. And here, at last, we can improve the development of this species, and right there is what is wrong with the last attempt to develop that

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 tear each other apart. I also would postulate Malign Design. 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, ^{complex} 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 large failures. It is possible that the earth succeeded in accomplishing something other planets were unable to exercise. Given the limited powers of astronomy today, there seem to be no near galaxies that are comparable. But there 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. I will repeat that it is far more difficult to 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 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 equivalent, 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 an economy. It is 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 footing to this last assumption, then Intelligent Design is a crucial part of it.

ML: Fine. I want to take a chance with 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. 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 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 question. But, 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 to the point where they make the plot unacceptable, and so throws the design into chaos.

Borges offers brilliant models to underline this risk. 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 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 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 that because of 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 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?" 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 helpful to God—large questions we haven't even entered. God is not only an element in existence but a moral presence. 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, proceeded to then create the illusion of evolution. In reality—so goes Harlot's thesis—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 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. Sartre doesn't let us point in that direction at all.

ML: You do see moral relations between God and humans as a possibility, however?

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 partial 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 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, 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—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.

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. It is the marble which discloses what they must do with the next stroke. The same process of discovery may be present in human or animal design. The environment plays a mighty 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, but 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, but I do remember my mother on Friday night praying before a lit candelabra, praying to the Shekhina, who is, of course, the wife of God, and there were tears in my mother's eyes. 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 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 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, it gave me two different strains to develop.

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. One of the best things to be said about the Talmud is it's very hard to become a fundamentalist while studying it. It's too easy if you live only with the Torah but difficult when reading the Talmud. Unlike the Torah (which 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 fearfully ill. But on his entrance 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 on the steps? In the vestibule? In the aisle? At the altar approach? Did 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—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's laws and human needs—so the Talmud becomes the opposite of the Old 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. 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: He was obviously a compassionate man.

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

pp. 24-29
used
in chapter
"prayer"

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.

Compare
to
p. 2
"Prayer"
repeats

many pray
for forgiveness, for
peace, for someone else,
for world peace - perhaps
the majority!

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 ^{in my opinion,} 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 boddhisatva 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 "boddhisatva"—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 "boddhisatva vow" at an advanced stage of their training.

What
can
you
infer
this?

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 all our petty feelings and leave them behind, but on the contrary, to be able to struggle with those 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 bodhisatva: 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.

~~1, 2, 3~~
 1, 3, 4, 9, 11, 17, 22, 23
 7, 8, 13, 14, 24, 26, 30, 31
 1, 10, 13, 14, 16, 25
 1, 2, 3, 14, 3, 7, 9, 10, 11
 12, 13, 3

INTERVIEW VI

~~Rite~~ ~~OK~~
Ritual, Rate and Telepathy
 Rite

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