

PREFACE TO THOLOGY BOOK

I have ^{often} ~~always~~ been an advocate of ^{an amateur} ~~amateurish~~ approaches to weighty

subjects. The perils are obvious ^{then} and hardly need to be cited, but there is one

advantage—you do not need to be loyal to any ^{start all the} ~~expertise~~ you have ~~painfully~~

studiously, even vigorously acquired over many years. ^{Your} One's mind is free to

be innovative, without having to ^{celeigh} ~~offer backward looks~~ at the displeasure of

one's learned colleagues ^{on the loss} ~~nor fear the overturn of decades~~ of scholarly

investment in hard earned erudition. before the face of a radically new concept, Instead, you are free to move quickly.

Of course, ^{you} ~~one~~ can miss often, ~~but less is lost~~. I offer the interviews

that follow ^{an} ~~therefore~~ as ^{working with the intellectual} ~~example of these amateurish methods~~. I am

tools of an amateur. I am obviously ^{woefully} ignorant of most of the ^{intellection} ~~established knowledge~~ required of a

competent theologian. My colleague in these interviews, a richard Lennon, who is no

while not a formal theologian, is at least reasonably well-versed in the concepts we

discuss. But what will be evident to anyone who has studied ^{such} these matters ^{is} more than myself is that I how truly untutored ^(I am) in these subjects. I have nothing to offer but my own ideas and that is usually ^{which is classically} the prime error of the amateur.

How then can I defend the venture? My answer may be legitimate. I have spent the last fifty years trying to contemplate ~~what might be~~ the nature of God. If I speak specifically of fifty years it is because my pride in the initial thirty-odd years of my life was to be an atheist—how much more difficult and honorable I considered that to be ^{than belief} ~~as compared to those who~~ believed in an All-Mighty Divinity. I was a novelist after all (as will be repeated frequently in these interviews), so I was intensely, even professionally, aware of the variety, complexity and ^{near to} ~~so often close to~~ unrecoverable nuances of human motivation and ^{monotony} ~~activity~~. It took a good number of years ^{an} ~~and an~~ immersion for half a decade in the revelations offered

two yrs in immersion

~~by a few exceptional marijuana trips~~ to recognize that I did believe in God,
 — ~~that is, believed there was a divine~~
~~presence in existence and even contemplated~~
~~and believe there was one, and even, on occasion, took on the possibility of~~
~~philosophical~~
~~talented to approach, that~~
~~approaching the enigma of such a presence. Whenever I tried, however, to~~
~~reading~~
 advance such notions by ~~looking into~~ works of theology, I was repelled.

They were studies, for the most part, of the unstated but dictatorial
 injunction to have faith. They were short of a sense of ~~exploration~~ ^{inquiring.} They
 were also full of command.

To repeat, I was a novelist. The best of us spend our lives exploring
^{In consequence,}
 reality, so ~~the~~ conviction grew that I had a right to believe in the God I could
 visualize; an imperfect, existential God doing the best He (or She) could
^{that was,}
 manage against all the odds of an existence ~~not~~ entirely controlled by our
 Creator. ~~But~~ [≡] note the possessive: Our Creator, ~~not the Creator~~. God, as I
^{being,}
 could visualize such a ~~presence~~, was an artist, not a law-giver, ^a mighty
 source of creative energy, an embattled moralist, a celestial general engaged

in a celestial war, but never a Divinity who was All-Good and All-Powerful.

Since theology offered me nothing for my intuitions, I ~~played, then~~ grappled,

with my own speculations for decades before Michael Lennon proposed

these interviews. Of their shortcomings I am aware and, doubtless also,

unaware, but these private philosophical reconnaissances are, after all, not so

unique. A good part of humanity may also be devoted (usually in their own

deepest privacy) to exploring what might be their notion, their intuition, of

what God and the Devil might be all about. They, too, explore into all those

aspects that no church seems ready to approach.

All apologies now delivered, I invite
~~Publishing these interviews may offer a confirmation or rejection of,~~
the reader to these dialogues, I
~~the previous sentences.~~
hope (and expect) they will be
rewarded with a few new ideas.

MAILER'S COSMOLOGY

Lennon

Ever since it was concluded that Yeats' system of cycles and gyres was not a matter of personal belief but an imaginative construction designed to buttress and justify his poetics, it has been difficult for any contemporary author to receive a fair hearing on his cosmology. Norman Mailer is a good example. Although he has introduced the "conception of God as an embattled vision which had terrified him from the hour he first encountered the thought" in almost every one of his works from *The Deer Park* (1955) on, most critics have either ignored his belief or slighted it, even though Mailer has stated unequivocally that "every other one of his notions had

followed from that [conception]." My intent in this essay is to delineate Mailer's cosmology, which he says "is obviously the most ticklish, dense, incomprehensible and for most readers perverted part of my thicket."

Mailer has described himself as an existentialist for over twenty-five years but I cannot conceive of any figure in the mainline, Sartrean school who would take as "a working stance" the notion "that life is probably good- if it isn't good, then our existence is such an absurdity that *any* action immediately becomes absurd." Sartre and his followers, "alienated beyond alienation from their unconscious" and its "enormous teleological sense," and disbelieving in what Mailer calls "a mysticism of the flesh," can only begin with the premise of Sartre's Roquentin that "really there is nothing, nothing, absolutely no reason for existing." Yet, if Mailer's fleshy intuitions convince him of purpose in the cosmos, he is just as unwilling as Sergius O'Shaughnessy, the hero of *The Deer Park*, to believe that 'the universe is just an elaborate clock.' Such a mechanistic assumption, "O'Shaughnessy says, is unacceptable, because then one must agree with W. Somerset

Maugham that "nobody is any better than he ought to be." (*The Deer Park*, p. 88).

Mailer's universe is neither clock nor chaos; his first premise is the exact opposite of Roquentin's, yet in several ways Mailer still must be considered an existentialist, and some aspects of existential thought must be considered if we are to grasp all the implications of his belief. But if we hope to enter the most confusing patches of his cosmological thicket, we must consult the American Romantics' vision of a dynamic universe in which each fact resonates with analogical meaning, man more than any other fact because he alone mirrors the entire design of the universe.

The most concise statement of Mailer's belief comes in *St George and the Godfather* (1972); "The world's more coherent if God exists. And twice coherent if He exists like us." Mailer's most profound intuition, however, is of "a charged and libidinous universe," a universe he compares to a complex and recalcitrant lock whose "key was metaphor rather than measure" Unlike atheistic existentialists who see the extramental world as neutral, gratuitous

or indecipherable, like the forehead of the White Whale, Mailer senses meaning in the cosmos. In *Of a Fire on the Moon* (1970) he says, "It was in the complacent assumption that the universe was no majestic mansion of architectonics out there between evil and nobility, or strife on a darkling plain, but rather an ultimately benign field of investigation which left Aquarius in the worst of his temper" (pp. 101-02). Mailer is here closer to Emerson than Melville (who like Ahab wondered if there was "naught beyond" the appearances of reality) for he cannot, even for the sake of argument, believe the universe lacks meaning.

But insofar as Mailer believes that God 'exists like us,' that "He is imperfect in the way we are imperfect," that "He too can suffer from a moral corruption" (Advertisements, p. 351), his position is not incompatible with that of Melville who also conceived of the possibility that frailty and evil could exist on a cosmic scale. Faced with a world of "abysmal idiotic disproportions," Mailer says, "it becomes too difficult to conceive of an all-powerful God who is all good." (Playboy, Interview, '72). Melville brooded

over that notion of Zoroastrianism which (like Manichaeism) postulates a cosmic struggle between good and evil. Mailer also takes seriously the Manichaean-Zoroastrian belief in the division of power throughout the universe, but, as the following quotation demonstrates, he is as undogmatic on the subject as was Melville. What distinguishes Mailer's theomachy or, war of the gods, from Melville's is that it is existential. Zoroastrian belief calls for good to prevail at the end of time. Mailer's God, like man, cannot know his final destiny.

The first full statement of Mailer's beliefs came in a 1958 interview with Richard G. Stern:

MAILER: ...I think that the particular God we can conceive of is a god whose relationship to the universe we cannot divine; that is, how enormous He is in the scheme of the universe we can't begin to say. But most certainly, He is not all-Powerful; He exists as a warring element in a divided universe, and we are a part of—perhaps the most important part—of His great expression, His enormous destiny; perhaps He is trying to impose upon the universe His conception of being against other conceptions of being very much opposed to His. Maybe we are in a sense the seed-carriers,

the voyagers, the explorers, the embodiment of that embattled vision' maybe we are engaged in a heroic activity, and not a mean one.

STERN: This is really something

MAILER: Well, I would say it is far more noble in its conception, far more arduous as a religious conception than the notion of the all-powerful God who takes care of us.

STERN: And do you take o this conception for its perilous nobility, or do you take to it because you believe in it?

MAILER: I believe in it.

STERN: You believe in it.

MAILER: It's the only thing that makes any sense to me. It's the only thing that explains to me the problem of evil. You see, the answer may well be—how to put it?—that God Himself is engaged in a destiny so extraordinary, so demanding, that He too can suffer from a moral corruption, that He can make demands upon us which are unfair, that He can abuse our beings in order to achieve His means, even as we abuse the very cells of our own body (Advertisements, p. 351)

Three linked strands run through this cluster of ideas: First, Mailer sees the universe as process, a cosmic dialectic with the final synthesis unwritten, second, there is an extraordinary emphasis on man's free will, his

ability to rough-hew not only his own destiny but to affect God's as well. The Moral Consequence of this," Mailer says in the same interview, "are not only staggering, but they're thrilling; because moral experience is intensified rather than diminished." Finally, there is a pronounced Pauline-Calvinistic sense of evil which is associated both with the imperfections of men and god and the actions of a powerful wily Devil. In almost every one of his discussions of cosmology, these three beliefs are mentioned. In his darker moments Mailer has also entertained the thought that "the ardors of His [God's] embattled voyage could have driven Him mad." Melville's Ahab considered the same possibility. For both writers the exact nature of the anima behind the pasteboard mask of reality is uncertain.

D.J.'s Statement in *Why Are We in Vietnam?* (1967) that 'if the center of things is insane, it is insane with force," and his hallucinatory vision of God as "some beast of a giant jaw and cavernous mouth with a full cave's breath and fangs, and secret call: come to me," is surely equivalent to Ahab's obsession with "that inscrutable thing" of "outrageous strength with

an inscrutable malice sinewing it" that Moby Dick either represents or is. Yet I do not believe either creature-image reflects the central belief of its creator. It has been claimed that D.J.'s vision is at the heart of Mailer's cosmology, but I believe that it can be established that a noble but imperfect God struggling with a principle of evil, with the outcome unknown, is Mailer's deepest belief. Here again, Melville is instructive. The White Whale energizes Ahab in the same way that the bestial deity D. J. sees in the electric Alaskan night generates the destructive erethism needed for him to declare in the last words of the book, "Vietnam, hot damn." "Evil, be thou my good," is the implicit, blasphemous prayer of Ahab and D. J.

The reason Melville and Mailer are willing to give their heroes license to try on the barbaric and court the demonic lies in their belief that the quintessential human activity is the quest. The fact that the actions of the moral nihilist may be negative is "irrelevant," Mailer says. The important thing is that 'they are concerned with the forefront of experience.' Movement must precede morality, and "the message in the labyrinth of the

genes," Mailer insists, is that "violence was locked with creativity, and adventure was the secret of love." The peril to life and soul of violence and nihilism is not only known to Mailer and Melville, but sought. The Attraction is not for evil itself but for its defining owner as a benchmark in the cosmic war. The measure of such "extreme situations" for mailer is their ability to burn "out the filament of old dull habit" (Pres. Papers, p. 198)

Stasis and silence are the worst sins. Stubb is a "Mechanical" and the morality of Mailer's Sam Slovođa has neither a positive nor a negative charge. "The essence of biology," Mailer says, "Seems to be challenge and response, risk and survival, war and the lessons of war" (Pres Papers, p. 167). And the most important lesson of this dialectic, though costly, is finally not too dear. It is the self-knowledge necessary for growth. Writing of Hemingway soon after his death, Mailer says, "If we are ill and yet want to go on, we must put up the ante. If we lose, it does not mean we wished to die." (pres papers, p. 105) So Melville's Ahab cries, "my topmost greatness lies in my topmost grief," and Mailer explains (in his preface to a collection

appropriately entitled *The Saint and the Psychopath*) that the beauty inherent in violence almost drove Kierkegaard mad "for he had the courage to see that his criminal impulses were also his most religious."

Melville asserted in *White-Jacket* that "I have a voice that helps to shape eternity; and my volitions stir the orbits of the furthest suns. In two senses, we are precisely what we worship. Ourselves are fate" His statement approximates Cherry's in *An American Dream* that "God is weaker because I didn't turn out well." Melville's line also parallels D.J.'s belief that "we are all after all agents of Satan and the Lord: and the possibility that Barney Kelly, like Fedallah, may be "a solicitor for the Devil). For Mailer and Melville human psychomacia both partakes of and parallels the struggle between the Lord and the Devil. This is the existential deck of cards Mailer says all his work is dealt from and the reason moral experience in this context is "staggering" and "thrilling." I do not believe Melville could accept without qualification Rojack's belief that "God was not love but courage. Love came only as a reward, but surely he would subscribe to

Mailer's espousal of "a life committed to the notion that the substratum of existence is the search, the end of meaningful but mysterious."

From all information it appears that Hawthorne didn't not feel Melville's urge to strike through the mask. He could not have accepted Mailer's belief that "creativity is always next to the verboten: and unlike Melville he consciously avoided some of the darker corners of human experience. Melville, who loved "a deep diver," would share Mailer's belief that investigation of themes like racism, cannibalism, incest and monomania could provide what Mailer calls "the inelectable ore of the authentic: as well as the exemplars of hagiology. I think Melville would agree with Miler that the saint and the psychopath "were united to one another, and different from the mass of men. They were closer to existence:.

Melville leaves Hawthorne at the door to the forbidden and plunges into the "blackness of darkness," Mailer too explores the abyss but the desperation of his attempt does not, as with Melville, preclude a return. Ishmael does not go to the pit and so is saved. After gaining a Lear-like

knowledge of himself and the universe Ahab goes under; Pierre dies in confusion; Bartleby does not speak. Life for them was an incurable sickness. But for Mailer "acute disease is cure:. There is even a "curious happiness from "a wound in that period when we do not know which flesh is severed forever and what is recuperable." Unlike Hemingway's "unreasonable wound: which brings chaos, the wound Mailer speaks of may bring change, and :change,:" he continues, "may give life. Committed to the necessity of quitting the lee shore for the endless sea, Melville had small hope that voyaging out could accomplish more than the romantic satisfaction of refusing to surrender to inevitable defeat. Ishmael alone among Melville's heroes is able to balance the lure of the masthead, the haven of the lee shore and the fascination of the fire. For the rest, for Ahab, Vere, Pierre, Bartleby and the narrator of the Confidence-Man, the answer is that there is no answer, just a knowledge of what Melville called the 'fusion indistinguishable' of good and evil.

Mailer attempts a cosmological synthesis more sweeping than Emerson's because it gives evil equal play, and he criticizes Shalom Aleichem, as Melville criticized Emerson, for "a determined inability to confront evil in intimate forms." He refuses, however, to accede to easy righteousness. In a 1972 letter he says that the war of God and the Devil "is no longer a simple combat and each are capable of subtlety in their methods. The difficulty in comprehending the authority of the senses is that it often becomes rarefied to a point which the flesh simply can't make. So in our most existential moments we can't know if we are saints or demons, or put another way, agents of whit or black magic. Sao the war may prove like many wars that it proves nothing." The choices are hard, but as Rojack says and Mailer believes, it is always "better to choose."

Choice for Mailer is the forward edge of the quest, existential because it is a foray of unknown strategic value in the war between God and the Devil, yet absolutely necessary because the alternative is entropy. Choice and movement are never purposeless because they provide definition.

Mailer believes it is crucial to allow All thoughts and feelings to come to the surface. "Growth," he says, "cannot be understood without going into the nature of waste." If society stifles an individual, smothers him in conformity, then he cannot act in any moral way. Stultified by the homogenization of technological society, man's first impulse should be to escape—escape first, assertion of self first, change first—then morality, then self discipline, then harmony, community, love. This is the basic argument of Mailer's 1957 essay "*The White Negro*," a brilliant delineation of the impoverishment of the romantic spirit in America. It also offers a prospectus for a new hero—the hipster, and urban adventurer seeking new energy in the wild west of American night life. The hipster, or White Negro, whatever his shortcomings, is at least in motion and so accumulating a body of experience to react to later.

It is not a world of trouble that Mailer sees—that would be welcome—but instead a stagnation of all possibility. A few years after WWII, he says, America took on "a collective odor which was reminiscent

of a potato left to mold in a plastic box. Silence, exile and cunning cannot undercut modern civilization's obsession with control; Mailer concludes woefully that "nihilism might be the only answer to totalitarianism. Melville could only sense that what Mailer calls "a shit storm" was coming. For Mailer, there can be little doubt which way civilization is heading. "That continuing revolution of reason which the renaissance had begun: is now cresting: a fearsome totalitarianism whose nature it is to "render populations apathetic" and act as "a deodorant to nature" is in control. The "Shit Storm," Mailer feels, is here. Only because matters are so grave can Mailer conceive of a concordance between man's creative and destructive impulses. Melville lived in an age of anxiety and like Arnold, wandered "...between two worlds, one dead. The other powerless to be born." The twentieth century, of course, has been called the age of anxiety, but Hitler, Stalin and the Rev. Jim Jones, among others, have given evil a face. Mailer, clinging desperately to his intuitions of transcendence, has imagined a sort of

Napoleonic God, a great flawed general, simultaneously noble and corrupt but endowed with a heroic conception of destiny, to meet that face.

These Manichaeian oppositions have led some of Mailer's critics to conclude that war is Mailer's primary metaphor for experience and his literal subject since *Naked and the Dead*. Richard Poirier's 1972 study of Mailer in the Viking Modern Masters series makes this assertion. But Poirier's view does not go deep enough. Mailer's Emersonian belief in a universe which is not "A Fact," but "a changing reality whose laws are remade at each instant by everything living, but most particularly man," a belief stated in "*The White Negro*," has not changed since that time. Poirier says Mailer is obsessed by war. This view, in my judgment, is too sweeping. Mailer is interested in RELATION, an idea larger than war and which subsumes it under its rubric.

Poirier point to Mailer's comment in a 1966 self-interview, "*The political Economy of Time*," that "Form in general...is the record of a war."

He holds that this statement is the key to Mailer's aesthetics and also the major thematic chord in his work. But in another self-interview, a piece which Mailer says is "indispensable to understanding The Political Economy of Time, Mailer qualifies considerably the bellicosity Poirier sees as the linchpin of his work. Poirier mentions this piece, which is called The Metaphysics of the Belly, but does not its attempt to extend the ambit of organicism to include "death, perversion, promiscuity, and the fear of hell," nor Mailer's assertion that these extreme states are necessary to balance others, because "life seems to come out of the meeting of opposites. Consequently, "Beauty, as the Greeks kept nagging, was harmony. Well, it has other qualities as well I hope, danger, ecstasy, promise, the transcendence of terror—all the emotions which give life to us in the west—but harmony, I fear, is what beauty is first. It means that separate parts function in a lively set of rhythms with one another. No organ is too fast or too slow vis-à-vis another organ. The pleasant relation inspires proportions in the outer forms which are healthy, harmonious, and beautiful. War for

Mailer is only one of a series of relationships which include "the block of marble worked by the sculptor, the audience and the play, a mood and its occasion, the good rider and his good horse, the blocking back and the line-backer, the skier on the snow, the style of sex, a sail into the wind."

War is not sought for its own sake but only when it offers focus.

Mailer was an early and severe critic of the Vietnam War not only because it bombed civilians and destroyed a complex peasant culture but because it "had no line of battle or discernible climax (an advanced notion which supposes that wars may be in part good because they are sometimes the only way to define critical conditions rather than blur them")

Because Mailer accepts the romantic notion that man is "roughly more good than evil," he can assume that if one follows what he calls the "rebellious imperatives of the self" a better world will result. So throughout his writings he hammers on the same exhortation: "Grow or else pay more for remaining the same." For Mailer the choice is no longer between good and evil but between stagnation and growth; man's problem is not his

inability to choose good but is inability to choose at all. Mailer's belief in an existential God, a belief which is both paradox and first premise, allows him to maintain his belief in the possibility of human progress without rejecting theism.

But Mailer cannot be sure which way the tide of battle in the cosmos or the nation is flowing. "The schizophrenia of the land: he says, has been "growing more Faustian and more Oriental each season with ABM (anti-ballistic missile) and million-footed folk-rock festivals at the poles, yes, all the incomprehensible contradictions of America might yet come to focus on the possibility that races were at war in America like forces from the cosmos." Mailer is unsure who is winning and why. Was the Lord or the Devil behind the rise of science in the Renaissance and the flight to the moon? If the Renaissance was the time when reason disrupted man's communion with nature, it was also the time of Shakespeare, Marlowe and Donne. So mailer defines his world with paradoxes and describes himself as a "Left Conservative," a man whose philosophy is a "private mixture of

Marxism, conservatism, nihilism, and large parts of existentialism." He is a former drug addict who feels drugs are the devil's tool yet is willing to prescribe them for stymied scientists, a non-smoker who once went through three packs a day, former heavy drinker who says one of the most defeating things he can think of is losing control of himself via alcoholism. He believes in work and has written more than twenty-five books, yet continues to get involved in a variety of extra-literary media activities. A firm believer in monogamy, he has been married six times and has nine children. The paradoxes are endless but behind them all is the fact that Mailer, like the American Romantics, sees reality as a mesh of relations.

Like Millville's Ishmael, who had "doubts of al things earthly and intuitions of some things heavenly," Mailer believes "we live out our lives wandering among mysteries," our only guide being "the instinctive logic of our inner voice tells us is true to the relations *between* mysteries." We cannot trust the individual fact, he continues, because it "is invariably a compression of nuances which alienate the reality." Not the fact, but "the

root from which the fact may have evolved" is what should preoccupy us.

And the "root" for Mailer, as it was for Emerson, Whitman and Melville, is a processive universe where human possibilities expand and contract with the movement of history.

Melville believed that man could shape his own destiny but was troubled by the problem of evil. To accept the benign determinism of Emerson's cosmos would mean rejecting the possibility of a cosmic principle of evil. Melville could not do this, but he does not seem to have accepted, like Mailer, the possibility that this principle could prevail. Melville's only consolation lay in the continuing search for the bare truth which might reveal the moral balance of the universe—if one existed. His only certainty was that man's destiny is provisional.

Mailer's cosmology is a bulwark against the void Melville stared into, a species of theological brinkmanship which affirms transcendental perception without lapsing into cosmic optimism. Like Melville, Mailer believes that man's future is unwritten; like Sartre he rejects as ignoble "the

notion of the all0powerful God who takes care of us." But Mailer does not believe that man is alone or history is irrelevant or unfathomable or that life ends in death. In his argument for the meaning of sex in *The Prisoner of Sex*, he says, "Yet try to decide there is design in the universe, that human beings are not absurd, not totally absurd, assume some Idea (or at least some clash of Idea versus ideas) is in operation—and then sex cannot comfortably prove absurd."

In a naturalistic novel, in Norris's *McTeague* or Dreiser's *Sister Carrie*, the characters reflect the surest view of the universe their creators can muster. But if one believes in a universe where the lines of battle between light and darkness are confused and the outcome unknown, if one believes in a flawed, purposeful (but terribly overextended) God, then the need is for a hero of similar proportions. Even as Mailer was writing about "that doubtful day when I sit down to write about my life," he had begun to do so. After attempting to separate his artistic and personal worlds in his early novels, Mailer realized that this course clashed with his cosmology.

And so, beginning with *Advertisements for Myself* in 1959, Mailer began to incorporate more and more of his personal beliefs and experience in his work. From 1968 to 1975 he published eight nonfiction narratives with himself as narrator-hero. Mailer's vision of an imperfect, striving God whose struggle to fulfill his destiny was intertwined with human history prompted him to conceive a new role for himself: the writer-hero, also imperfect and striving, who sought to cut through the bedeviled communications of the modern world "with the only broadsword God ever gave you, a glimpse of something like Almighty prose." For Mailer, man's ability to advance or hinder God's destiny is incontestable.

In 1856 Hawthorne noted in his journal how Melville would "reason of Providence and futurity, and of everything that lies beyond human ken," but finally could "neither believe, nor be comfortable in his unbelief; and he is too honest and courageous not to try to do one or the other." Norman Mailer has wandered through these same metaphysical deserts searching for the "definite belief: which Hawthorne said Melville could not find. But

Mailer's conviction of God's "Intent," his "fondness for order," coupled with is uncertainty about his fulfillment, has kept him from lapsing into the "annihilation" that Melville spoke of to Hawthorne, and led him to propose a ditheistic cosmology large enough to accommodate the obliquely opposed principles of human freedom and progress, divine providence and limitation, and cosmic evil.

Mike, we can talk
about the comments, questions. I'll
keep a copy. R

1
Robert
Klaus
on
1st
interview

MICHAEL LENNON: Scientists now believe that the expansion of the universe is accelerating. Does this circumstance fit in with your ideas? Is the ever-expanding and accelerating nature of the cosmos reflected in your concept of a god who can grow and develop?

NORMAN MAILER: Let me say I'm not opposed to the thought. I know very little about super-physics. It's not a topic I have a basic interest in. Their mathematical calculations seem to change all the time.

I start in another direction entirely. Having been a novelist all my life, I may know a little about human beings. You might say my theological notions come out of the question of who are we, what are we, how do we develop, why, indeed, are we in existence? And to what degree is there the presence of a Creator in what we do?

So cosmic speculations are of little interest to me. I have nothing to contribute there. I would hate to rely on the ever-changing state of advanced physics to form my ideas.

ML: It isn't just the expansion of the universe; it's the fact that the expansion is speeding up. *over light and known matter*
And that the latest research shows the "triumph" of
darkness (both matter and energy) by a factor of
NM: Yes, but it's not in my compass. *90% to 100%*

ML: All right. In one interview you gave in the past, you said that you believed that God created the universe. In other places, you've said that God and the Devil were lesser

Contradicting as it was the first Chapter of St John
"and the darkness grasped it not."

divinities in liege to larger powers who might be the ultimate creators. Who or what do you feel is the ultimate power in the universe and who created the universe?

NM: I feel the same way about the ultimate Creator as I feel about the expanding universe: it's out of my scope. Altogether out of my scope. But I don't see any inherent logical contradiction in saying that I believe God created the universe that we know, the world we live in. *Doubtless Dayton*

ML: To repeat: On the one hand, you said God created the universe. But in other places, you speak of God and the Devil as lesser deities in liege to the—

NM: I shouldn't have used the word "universe." God created the world, I believe, and the solar system, but these are matters of speculation is so open and so windy—that's not what draws me.

What does stimulate my thought is the war between God and the Devil. That makes sense to me that war between the gods.

ML: In "St. George and the Godfather," you say, "The world's more coherent if God exists, and twice coherent if he exists like us." Of course, you are right, there's no way to contest that, but I'm afraid this logic smacks of wish-fulfillment. God need not exist merely to satisfy your desire for order. Perhaps the world is incoherent, perhaps the cosmos is disordered. . .

NM: Look, I would answer that: Where does my desire for order come from? But not that we not only have a fundamental desire for order, we have an obvious tendency as well toward disorder—a true conflict between order and disorder. So I say, where does that derive from?

I don't know but it may well be that it's also "chance and necessity" (Jacques Monod) or part of complexity and stochastics. The point is, Mr. Mailer, order and disorder are what Hiloc3 esp. No "violence of creation" "inevitable violence of creation"

ML: OK. But in most religious systems, there's a relationship between cosmology and ethics, between the nature of the deity and humanity. The Puritans called it "God's Providence"--

NM: Wait a moment.

ML: No, I want to get to the relationship between the nature of the deity and codes for human living. In Judaism and Christianity, for example, God's nature is suggested in the rules for living provided to humans by God. What is the relationship in your system between the nature and shape of the ruling forces in our sphere and the ways in which humans should conduct themselves?

NM: Oh, Christ, Mike, I don't really like these questions. I don't think in these formulae. I want to get to is something more basic to my thought, which is that much of the world's present-day cosmology is based on works of Revelation. The Old and New Testament, the Koran, yet, for me, Revelation is a huge question mark. It's a question mark everywhere you look at it. For instance, Revelation, as such is not God's words but ours back then, words that were labeled back then, if you will, in committee by working theologians with separate agendas. After all, why would God bother to speak in that fashion? There's no need. God could have imparted such thoughts directly to us without Revelation. Revelation has always struck me as a near-ineradicable power trip for the humans with mixed motives who lead the crowd, as well as for their followers who quote from Scripture all the time, use it as their guide-rail and run into intolerable contradictions which cripple their power to reason. I will go so far as to say that to be a fundamentalist is to exist as a human being whose reasoning powers are paralyzed before every question to which they do not already have a warped answer.

god

I confess, therefore, I have very little interest in organized religion. When I do study its practices, it makes no sense to me. I've always felt that Revelation is a heavy impost upon our human condition. I see God, rather, as a Creator, as the greatest artist. I see human beings as His most developed artworks. I see animals also as His artworks. When I think of evolution, what stands out most is the fabulous study of possibilities that went on in God as an artist—I think of all the errors that were made as well as the successes. In marine life, for example, some fish have hideous eyes—they protrude from the head in tubes 10 inches long coming. Think of all those animals of the past with their peculiar ugliness, their misshapen bodies, worm life, frog life, vermin life, that myriad of insects—so many unsuccessful experiments. These are ways the Artist was trying—the great artist, the divine artist—was trying to express something incredible, and it was not, for certain, an easy process—how it went on forever! We'll get to the Devil in a bit but I would guess that evolution was continually interfered with by the Devil. I think there were false passages that God engaged in because the Devil deluded Him—or Her. Forgive me if I keep speaking of God as "Him," that's a habit that's come down to me from Revelation. Obviously, to speak of God as "Him" or "Her" is absurd, but to speak of Him as "Him/Her" or "It" is worse.

Creation is the war between god and the devil

In any event, it makes sense to me that this war between God and the Devil may even have been present in evolution. Whether God had a free hand or the Devil was bumping it all the while, what we can see in evolution are endless mistakes, species that were badly conceived. Sometimes a young artist has to make terrible errors before he or she can go further.

I can hear the obvious rejoinder: "Sure, there's Norman Mailer, an artist of medium rank who's got to give himself honor and nobility and importance by speaking of God as an artist." I'm perfectly aware that that accusation can be laid. All I can say here can be no more than a projection of my own measly means.

ML: Well, you have spoken of God as a novelist. . .

NM: No, I haven't. What I've said upon occasion is that God is a better novelist than the novelists—that's not the same thing. God is better without even having to write the novels. He sees them pay off before Him; He's had a part in it; the actors are, to a great degree, His or Her people.

The point I want to come back to is: I believe in God as the Artist, the Creator, because it makes the most sense to me. Whether I have a private agenda in this, or whether I am being an objective philosopher to the extent that one can contend with that particular oxymoron—objective philosopher!—all right, so be it. Whether guilty or innocent, this is the argument I advance: God is an artist. And like an artist, God has successes, God has failures.

ML: Evil, you've said more than once, is growing in power—especially in the last hundred years.

NM: Yes.

ML: Do you think there was ever a time in the past, a golden age, when good was in the ascendancy?

NM: I don't know. How would I know?

ML: Well, if you say things are getting worse. . .

NM: Let's say that certain things have gotten much better and other things have gotten much worse, so much so that our latter-day events would stagger the imagination of the 19th century. If, for example, the flush toilet is an improvement in existence, and you can advance arguments against it which I won't get into—but if it is an improvement, if the automobile is an improvement—again, huge arguments—if technological progress is an improvement, then look at the price that was paid. It's not too hard to argue that the gulags and the concentration camps and the atom bomb came out of technological improvement. For the average person in the average developed country, the average or even poor person, life in terms of comfort is somewhat better than it was in the middle of the 19th century, but by the measure of our human development as ethical, spiritual, responsible and creative human beings, it may all have gotten worse. *(I don't see this)*

I can't speak for other languages, but I do know the English language has been debased in the last half-century. Young, bright children no longer speak well; the literary artists of 50 and 100 years ago are, on balance, superior to the literary artists of today. The philosophers have virtually disappeared—at least, any philosophers who make a difference. *They are in hiding; they are afraid to enter the fray*

ML: I take it, in your view of history, the Enlightenment and the rise of science were not steps forward.

NM: Mixed steps forward. Forward and retrograde. It all depends on what God intended. I could give you a speculation—a rank speculation: Perhaps God intended that human beings would get to the point where they could communicate telepathically. To the degree that one wished to reach certain people in small or large numbers, one could transmit thoughts at them. One could create operas in one's mind if one were musically

talented, and beam them out to all who were willing to listen. All the means and modes we have of modern communication may be substitutes, ugly technological substitutes, for what was potentially there.

For, mind you, ask the average person, myself certainly included here, "How do we see the image on television, how does it work?" it's an absolute mystery when you get down to it. The best engineers in the world can't tell you how it happens, why waves of sound striking the auditory nerve produce specific pieces of hearing. No one, for instance, can tell you what light is—they're still arguing over whether it's a wave or a particle or both. I could go on and on with that. My fundamental argument is whether the Enlightenment was for good or for ill. To assume automatically the Enlightenment was good means you automatically have to say, yes, the Enlightenment created marvelous things and marvelous freedom for many, many people. It also created the worst abuses of ^{better" by "than" of "}marxism and fascism. It also created the subtle, insidious abuses ~~of~~ technology.

I've said before in other places, technology represents less pleasure and more power. It may be that we are supposed to arrive at our deepest achievements through pleasure and pain, rather than through static and interruption and mood disruption.

ML: What you said about marxism and fascism—I can see marxism as a fruit of the Enlightenment, but isn't fascism a reaction against it? The fact that it cites the blood, the blood-consciousness, all that?

NM: One of the cheats of Nazi-ism was their implicit claim that they were going back to the blood when in fact they were abusing the instinct. The extermination camps were an absolute violation of such a venture. They were cheating people of their deaths. They informed the camp inmates they were going to have a shower. In they all marched, took

Kubler-Ross says it was the Protestantism
of the Enlightenment that ~~fuelled~~ the "holocaust."
fuelled

off their clothes, happy to have a shower with all those lice on them, hoping the shower would be hot, went in, and were gassed. Their last reaction in life had to be, "you cheated me!" They die in a panic. That's not going back to the blood, to instinct, to preparing oneself to enter the next world. They were obliterated by an excess of reason.

The Cunning
of History

Reason stripped of the notion there's a Creator. Because the moment you have a society built on reason alone, then you have to ask what substitutes for the concept of a Creator, and the answer is individual power. What has characterized just about every social revolution is that sooner or later the leaders take it over, and turn cannibalistic until there's only one leader, an absolute dictator. Once you accept the notion that there's no god, that becomes the ultimate tendency of the Enlightenment.

ML: Are you saying that the Enlightenment was a time of victory for the Devil?

NM: No, it's more complicated than that. We have to ask: What is the relation of God, the Devil, and the human to one another. Because I think it is a relationship among three forces, separate yet intertwined.

Let me assume there's a Devil always present in human affairs, very much present. Why? Because the Devil is another god who wishes to preempt the god that exists. The Devil has other notions of what existence could be. I'd go so far as to assume that technology is the Devil's invention. Like God, the Devil wants to have power in the universe. God wants that power to satisfy His vision of what the universe could be.

ML: Do you ignore the presence of Christ?

NM: No. Christ may well be God's son, a physical and spiritual entity that God decided was necessary for humanity. Jesus may well have been real. If I wish to argue is against revealed dogma, that doesn't mean it all has to go. Jesus does make a kind of

This is the point of
Rubenstein's book.
"The Cunning of History"

sense that the rest doesn't. Jesus as a principle of love, compassion, forgiveness and mercy is something we can all comprehend. We feel it in ourselves. We feel it as the best part of ourselves, the gentlest, richest, most generous part. But Revelation in company with organized religion repels me because of the philosophical inconsistency of their God as the almighty, God the all-powerful. I think that's where the trouble starts. All the philosophical trouble begins with the idea that God is all-good and all-powerful. The twentieth century demonstrated that to us so dramatically. How can we not face up to the fact that if God is all-powerful, He cannot be all-good. Or She cannot be all-good. If God is all-good, then God is not all-powerful.

Now, to answer this, theologians for the last ten centuries have been tying themselves into philosophical knots.

ML: Much of your thinking seems to be premised on the event of the Holocaust. I wonder if there had never been Hitler, would your notion of a limited, embattled god have been conceived? Is Hitler the final thing that pushed you into that belief?

NM: Being Jewish, the fair answer to that is probably yes. Obviously, if you're Jewish, you take it personally. But there still would have been the gulags. And the failure of Bolshevism. The noblest social idea to come along, the most intense form of socialism, proved to be a monstrosity. That alone would be enough— Then came the atom bomb, the fact that 100,000 people could be wiped out at a stroke. And this in the early stages of nuclear development. So if you eliminate all three of those, Hitler, gulags, atom bombs, then maybe I couldn't have come to these ideas. But historically speaking, you can't perform such an excision. That's what history is. Those three horrors dominate the 20th century. Not to mention the trench warfare of the First World War.

ML: The whole problem of evil—Voltaire heard about the earthquakes in Lisbon in 1711 and that's when he stopped believing in God. For exactly that reason. So all throughout our history humans have questioned God whenever there was an earthquake, a disaster—of course, many of these were natural disasters. That was bad enough. But, of course why would God allow a natural disaster? You can't blame any of that on humans. That was Voltaire's point: at least we can blame the Holocaust on human evil or the Devil. In part, at least. We can't blame an earthquake in Lisbon in which 50,000 people were killed—we can't blame that on human beings.

NM: No.

ML: So that forced many philosophical thinkers of the Enlightenment into their—they said, "That's it. God can't possibly exist. This is ridiculous." But if you take a step back, you can say: Maybe we're looking at too small a scale. Yes, six million people were exterminated with untold suffering. The suffering is so great it's impossible for us to conceive of it. It's horrifying to an extreme degree to anyone who's ever looked at the photographs or read the accounts. But maybe, in the larger scheme of things, God was allowing this to happen to send a message to humanity on how far it had slipped, and he was even willing to sacrifice his Chosen People, or a great number of them, in order to send a message to humanity that it was time to embrace Christianity, embrace love, do whatever had to be done.

NM: Let me interrupt here--

ML: Let me finish—

NM: Wouldn't God be quite a dolt to keep doing that if it didn't work?

ML: Strong medicine, I'm saying. More and more—the earthquake in Lisbon doesn't do it—OK, we'll have trench warfare. And then we'll have gulags, the Holocaust, then the threat of the atomic bomb. And indeed, the atomic bomb was dropped but after all, we have not had a nuclear holocaust—we backed away. Maybe we've learned and we've backed away from the brink of a nuclear disaster and spared the world.

NM: I think we have. It's possible that even the Devil was appalled by the bombs.

ML: So maybe it worked.

NM: Let's go back to the earthquake. Let me give you my notion of God as the artist—Lord knows—especially if you're using my idea of God being limited in power—that is, God is the Almighty of this sphere, the semi-almighty of this sphere—it may be when the universe was formed, higher gods were forming it, and maybe in the course of establishing the laws of earthly existence—and whether God was present or not is obviously beyond my compass—but there may have been imperfections in that design that we can attribute to God the Artist. In other words, why are there volcanoes? Because God was not a perfect engineer. That makes as much sense to me as God punishing and punishing and punishing and punishing without good result. It's very hard to argue that these acts of nature do any more than put a temporary frisson of religiosity into people.

ML: Well, then, returning to your triangle of God, the Devil and the human being. You've talked about God but you haven't talked much about the Devil.

NM: No, not as yet. The notion I have of the Devil depends to a good degree on Milton. I think he fashioned a wonderful approximation to what the likelihood might be. In one way or another, there was a profound argument between God and very high angels—or

between God and gods, and the result was finally that one won—the God we speak of as our creator, God won, but it was a Pyrrhic victory. Because Lucifer, if you will, did very well indeed. He retained a great deal of power. [Thereafter, the war was on. And this war has gone on ever since, gone on in us.]

Mike, This is exactly what the pagans believed, built their society on, contrapuntal furies! — Mars, Venus, Diana

Whatever the form this takes, my understanding is that God and the Devil are intertwined in all our actions. Even as I'm speaking, I could have the best of motives and the worst of motives working at the same time. As I've said many times over the years, when we work with great energy, it's because our best motive and our worst motive, or to put it another way, God and the Devil, are equally engaged in the outcome, and so they're collaborating with us for a period. There can be collaboration between opposites, as well as war. This collaboration can consist of certain agreements—"The rules of war will be. . ." And of course, the rules can be broken. The Devil can betray God. Once in a while, God breaks the rules—with a miracle. But my argument is that when we act with great energy, it's because God and the Devil both have an interest in the outcome. Whereas when we work with little energy it's because they're not only odds, but are dampening each other's impact upon us.

ML: What if God happens to be dominating us? Wouldn't that be better? Couldn't we argue that it would be better to have God motivating us more than the Devil? Many heroes in history have been so motivated by the good that they have gone on to achieve great things. Like Constantine—"in this sign, conquer (in hoc signo, vinces!)" and goes on to—

Ponte Milvio — where I lived in 63-64!

NM: You can't argue that way. Claim, if you wish, that Constantine was a fabulous

person who helped to create Christianity—indeed, he did. You could also say he may, in Rome — indeed — built St John Lateran, began St Peter's, built Church of Apostles in Constantinople and, most importantly, insisted on the exact words of the Creed in Nicea in 325 "per quoniam omnia facta sunt"

No Constantine, no Church
late antiquity; Christianity
just a cult!

have helped to destroy something more fertile than Christianity which was the richness of pagan belief. Our latter-day troubles might have started on the instant that Constantine decided to become a Christian.

I'm not going to get into a discussion where you can moor your philosophical bark on any given rock in the historic stream.

ML: Let me put it this way: if schizophrenia is on the rise—I don't know that it is—but if it is on the rise in human affairs—

NM: I'd be surprised if it weren't.

ML: All right, would that be an indication that the collaboration between God and the Devil was not working well?

NM: Let's not emphasize a "collaboration" between God and the Devil. I've spoken of it as "the accepted rules of the game." Take an average contest in professional football. Two teams who fight each other on the field with skill and bestiality, each side laboring to win. Nonetheless, there is a whole set of laws that prevail. After they tackle a guy, they don't kick him in the head. I'm saying that to keep it flowing, God and the Devil have certain understandings with one another. What they are, I couldn't begin to try to say. We don't come very close to the nature of mysteries but sometimes we can obtain a sense of their relations. The only clue I have is when there's great energy going—then I expect They are in a temporary collaboration. I would assert that we do have God and the Devil within us in varying degrees. Perhaps one can be—just guessing—as elevated as 70% good, 30% evil. On the reverse, the most evil, 70% evil and 30% good. Maybe once in a great while there's a saint—90/10.

point of Martin's book—

Martin was my teacher in Rome in '63.
A polymath and Wunder Kind

Malcolm Martin—The Decline & Fall of Roman Church

— we are mired in time

Augustine

But generally speaking, we are mired in good and evil. Mired because we spend most of our time in trade-offs, in the exhaustion of efforts because one part of us wants to do something and the other part is opposed.

Confessions

Very often our good fights an offensive battle against our evil—that does go on. We know that. The Christian churches are built on that: fight the evil in your soul.

ML: St Michael the Archangel.

NM: Yes. But my argument is that it has become a three-way situation. It isn't that we're passive onlookers while God and the devil are at war within us and we have nothing to offer. We are the third force and don't always know which side we're on in any given moment, or are, sometimes, independent of both for that moment.

If you'll accept my notion that technology may be the most advanced, extreme, brilliant and dazzling artistic creation of the Devil—for technology, of course, does incredible things—then you get a real sense of why some people would be more leagued with the Devil than devoted to God. Half the human universe must be by now on the side of technology. Maybe more than half.

ML: Let me push your idea a little further. You are saying that when you have the most energy, when you're moving forward, it's because your good and your bad motives are in synch—wouldn't that argue, then, that when everyone felt like that more and more, and we had this great sense of energy, that we're moving forward, accomplishing positive results: happiness results—

NM: War also results. It's not simple. What I want to get rid of, if nothing else, is the fundamental notion that Revelation will simplify our existence. I say the human being has to take several steps forward into living with the notion that there are no answers,

Greek word *ekstasi*—ecstasy—means both profound joy and profound sadness; cannot determine, just as it does in life

But wouldn't you say, Mr. Mader, it's not so much opposition which, after all, was a logic, but rather today an almost militant indifference about the choice between good and evil, an indifference decided by the extent to which technology and its will have destroyed our

capacity for perspective, distance, remove. We are not so much opposed to doing good as we are indifferent to life that is next technologically enhanced, consumer enhanced.

there are only questions, profound questions, and that that is ennobling. It is ennobling to face existence with the recognition that you're not going to have answers, merely hypotheses that you can test for validity by the ongoing inner experiences of one's life.

ML: The Manicheans see God and the Devil as brothers who fight until the end of time but at the end, good will defeat evil. Is that where you depart from the Manicheans?

NM: Absolutely. We don't know the end—we could end with the failure of the good. Because if the good is guaranteed to win at the end, then all we're in is a wrestling match. "Where are we, what city? Atlantic City? Or is it Pittsburgh? Oh, Pittsburgh. Then I'm selected to win tonight." If goodness is assured ultimate victory over evil, then all of us are in a comedy, a very ugly comedy considering how we suffer in the contest.

Go back to football—no football team ever assumes it is written they will win a big game. A victory brings the joy that it was not predetermined in advance—it was achieved. I'm saying existence consists of a continuing set of achievements and defeats, achievements and defeats,

ML: Forever and ever?

NM: No. But certainly up to the point where humankind enters into some definitive metamorphosis of existence, arriving perhaps at the notion that God is not the most powerful deity in the universe—but can succeed, nonetheless, in promulgating His vision into other worlds. It may be that our vision can join eventually with God's vision.

Perhaps mission is to travel out across the stars—not necessarily in space ships, but by our spirits ready to seek to make a better universe. But, of course, we can certainly fail.

Who knows what other forces are out there in the galaxies, not to speak of those black holes in space?

ML: Wonderful. OK, but you started by saying all that was too large for us.

NM: It is, but I've strayed from the points I planned to tell about.

ML: Let me take up then the "four last things" of Christian eschatology—death, judgment, heaven, hell. You have commented, at least obliquely, on all but one, heaven. Why have you given heaven such short shrift?

NM: Because I don't believe in it.

ML: Without a vision of heaven, your belief system is unlikely to draw many adherents.

NM: I'm not trying to found a religion. I think if these ideas of mine have any value, a great deal of time will go by before there are adherents. First of all, our child-like notion of heaven has to be relinquished.

ML: But not hell?

NM: I don't believe in absolute hell any more than I believe in heaven, certainly not in hell as a place of eternal punishment. It strikes me as prodigiously wasteful. I remember a lovely religious lady named Anne Freemantle, a fine writer, once said, "I think God looks for a very tidy universe." I thought about that for a long time

ML: You set *The Deer Park: a Play*, in hell. Hell is something you refer to all the time. It's a constant reference. Heaven is absent. But you talk about judgment and death, of course.

NM: It was perfectly legitimate, I felt, to put my characters in hell because hell's a point of reference for everyone. Everyone believes in hell, and much more more readily than they do in heaven. Heaven is harder to conceive. What we all know is that the most perfect moments in our lives don't last for long. Those extraordinary moments we feel are more perishable than the most delicate flowers. Whereas we can be in hell for

Very good
 months, then years, we can live in towering depressions. Hell, therefore, is much more available to human beings as a set of imaginative propositions. It was easy for me to situate the play of The Deer Park in hell. It gave me a springboard for the drama.

Yet, I still don't believe in hell as eternal punishment. I've always felt Dante is the most overrated great writer of all, because he's so Johnny One-Note. ^{YES "G" minor!} Hell has dimensions.

Some parts of it are worse than others. We can approach that when about reincarnation. But my notion remains that the only heaven and hell we ever receive—the only judgment that comes to us—is by way of reincarnation. To wit, we're given a better possibility for ourselves the next time we're born, or a worse shot.

In other words, I'm not interested in absolute moral judgments, eternal heaven, eternal hell. No, quite the contrary. Just think of what it means to be a good guy and a bad guy. What, after all, is the measure of difference between them? The good guy may be 65% good and 35% bad—that's a very good guy. The average decent fellow might be 54 good, 46% bad—and the average mean spirit is the reverse. So for that—say, I'm 60% bad and 40% good—for that, must I suffer eternal punishment?

OK, you as a Catholic may come back to me and say there are such places as purgatory and limbo, but they are temporary conditions before one goes to final judgment.

The argument I would advance is that heaven and hell make no sense if the majority of humans have such a mixture of good and evil within us. There's no reason to receive a reward if you're 57/43—why sit around forever in an elevated version of Club Med?

That's almost impossible to contemplate. You remember the fun Shaw had with his expectation of heaven as a prodigiously boring place where Don Juan nonetheless wished to reside because at least you could think there. That was the best Shaw could come up

with as a concept for heaven—at least you can think well and carefully in heaven. But my notion is that your partial reward or partial punishment, which I do believe exists—is meted out in your reincarnation. How else account for the ongoing feeling of conscience that we do. Conscience is there for good cause; conscience is vital—if, for nothing else, it's there because it gives us a clue to what is likely to be our next future. Will we be reborn in a situation that offers more opportunities? Or, for punishment, will there be fewer? Will our next life be easier or more painful?

Now, this notion is simple, but people who are fixed entirely on the other notion of eternal hell and eternal heaven can't get near to it. They just can't comprehend what I'm talking about. Yet, for those who are wondering if there is a viable scheme to the afterlife, these assumptions can become meaningful. Why do I strive to become a better person? Can it be because I wish to have a somewhat better life the next time out? If I am going to be reborn, I want to be able to do more with my next incarnation than this last one.

I have a joke to tell at this point: I die and go up before the Monitoring Angel. He says, "Oh, Mr. Mailer, we're so glad to see you. We've been waiting. Let me tell you I consider it an agreeable moment to serve as your Monitor. Now, tell us—we ask everyone this—what would be your idea of the slot in which you will be reincarnated? Because you've been passed for that. Which is very nice—not everyone passes on to reincarnation. So, tell me, what would you like to be?"

I say, "Well, you know, everything considered, I think I'd like to be a black athlete in my next life. I won't argue with where you position me at birth—it can be under poor, ugly circumstances, I'm willing to take that on—but I would like to be a black athlete."

The Monitor's face clouds up. "Oh, Mr. Mailer," he says, "everyone these days wants to be a black athlete. We're over-subscribed dreadfully there. So, let me see where you have been put. . ." He looks it up. He says, "I'm afraid we've put you down for cockroach. But—there is good news—you'll be the fastest cockroach on the block." All right—we're going to be reincarnated. Whether we know what our reincarnation will be, I doubt. I expect it will be full of surprises, some most unhappy.

Wow!
ML: Whenever you've spoken of reincarnation, you've done so in an ironic manner. You talk about directives in the Bureau of Karmic Reassignment. But I don't recall your ever talking about the likelihood of the reassignments. In your mind, how does reincarnation work? Who controls the process?

NM: God.

ML: Let me talk in these inascertainable concepts. Does it tie in to God's need for humans to be soldiers in His future cosmic war? Is it an operation run altogether by God? Are all souls recycled? Are new ones created?

NM: Let's see if we can work through these one by one. First, I would assume that God has ultimate hegemony. I am sure there are any number of monitoring angels. It's a bureaucracy, if you will, We don't have to be that precise about it. Where did our human bureaucracy come from? I feel most of our social forms derive from heavenly forms, if you will. In other words, bureaucracies could be human representations of the notion of how it might work—and not work—in the heavens. We can't stand bureaucracy because of the boredom, repetition and slowness. But it may be that there are elements in heaven that work more efficiently. Heavenly bureaucracies may effect their work better than our earthly ones. Still, I see that part of it as comparable to bureaucracy.

ML: You said not all souls are recycled.

NM: I believe the soul is a gift, a great gift. Of course, you can abuse any gift to the point where it does not survive. Any number of people may end up by saying, "All I want is a little peace. Let me sleep forever." They may be given just that.

ML: So, such a termination is not necessarily a function of evil. . .

yes NM: No, not of evil—but it is giving up. If the complications of life and the exhaustion of contending with all the little gods and devils in yourself burn you out, there can come a point where the soul loses its desire to exist. You see, reincarnation is a gamble. You could do worse the next time. Fear of an even more painful existence may convince you to throw in your hand. And then the opposite may be a physical rather than a spiritual suicide. I think people do commit physical suicide because they feel they're in danger if they don't—that their soul will expire before their body. Gary Gilmore was a perfect example. Why did he so desire to be executed? Because he expected his soul would expire in prison and he was a great believer in the value of his own ongoing existence.

ML: So when a soul expires, it doesn't go to heaven, doesn't go to hell, it just ceases to exist.

NM: Yes. It's buried. It's in a true cemetery.

ML: Are new souls being created?

NM: I don't talk much to people who believe in reincarnation because I don't like their jargon. But, yes, people who believe in reincarnation do talk about new souls or "young souls"—and, yes, I would expect God creates new souls. That doesn't mean the new presence is an angel who comes to visit us on earth—to the contrary. God may say, "I've been studying the Devil and his terrible propensities. Let us see if we can conceive of a

soul who will be able to war with the Devil more effectively, a new soul who will have many of the qualities of the Devil but can transmute them, transform them, elevated our sense of spirit in the dirtiest, ugliest, foulest places. We can call on Dostoyevsky at this point. God may have decided that an iota of goodness in an evil soul can be immensely important.

ML: You hardly speak of the casualties in this war between God and the Devil.

NM: While the soul is a being obviously separate from the body, I would suppose that the soul also has its period of existence. One soul might expire after a single earthly existence, another could be reincarnated any number of times, but doubtless, there's a limit to it, yes, souls do expire, I must suppose.

ML: Wear and tear, so to speak?

NM: Wear and tear, so to speak. Indeed. Just as God may finally expire, or the Devil. There are forces out there completely beyond us who wouldn't mind seeing the total collapse of both. It may be a force consisting of the drive to nothingness. Nothingness may be a huge power out in the great cosmic universe and it may desire the extinction of the universe.

ML: You've always said you're on the side of being.

NM: Yes, but it's like saying, "I'm a Yale man," or "I'm loyal to Harvard man." The built-in pitfall of these conversations is that you are always on the verge of sounding absurd. The reason I presume to talk this way is I am so weary of the philosophical paradoxes and evasions that good Christians tie them selves up in, those mutually exclusive conundrums, where they simply don't have an answer they can believe in down to the core. The set of beliefs I offer here makes sense at least to me. Be it said: Having

Universe is the vibrating voice
of God— Simone Weil 22

Ylo & S
a view of the universe that makes sense to yourself is Jung's notion. One of his profound conclusions was that nobody could be cured of their neurosis until they found their own vision of God. That is a fabulous idea. I believed it before I could articulate it so I was naturally excited when I came across that thought in Jung.

ML: Many people who believe in reincarnation believe they have retained some sense of their previous life, you've always said that you don't remember.

NM: My feeling is there's a very good reason why not—there's a valve there to shut off any recollections of a previous existence. Think what your life would be if you knew about your three other lives? My memory is already failing for the one life I'm aware of.

How could I handle the confusion of several other lives? I do think, however, that there are deep instincts in us about previous incarnations. Sometimes we have reactions to events that are inexplicable. Something inside says, "Don't take another step in this direction." Or "I will pursue this course even if it makes no sense to me whatsoever."

Some people are maniacs on motorcycles—what do they get from it? Something profound. Partly from this life—they're curing hostilities, aggressions and rages they can only solve on a motorcycle that is going fast on a wet road. But maybe it derives from a previous life when they were terrified of any commitment to danger and endeavor.

ML: So many people who believe in reincarnation have self-aggrandizing memories of the past. "Oh, I was in Cleopatra's court."

NM: I can't stand that. Can't stand it.

ML: It kind of put me off reincarnation.

To souls speak to
each other outside of
bodily context?
Is there an overvoice
like E's over soul

NM: Yes, that particular vanity is atrocious. Devil-driven, probably. It's unpleasant in the same way people who are devout Christians believe they're going to heaven because they're steadfast in their belief. It's still self-aggrandizement. *And arrogant*

ML: At the end of Ancient Evenings, which I've been re-reading over the last few days, Meni the Second, the young Meni, says, "Purity and goodness are less to Osiris than strength." Which is a restatement of what Cherry says in An American Dream: "God is weaker because I didn't turn out well." Add to that Rojack's belief that "God was not love but courage; love came as a reward." You return to this idea many times in your books. Especially in Harlot's Ghost. I can see the force of this idea, but couldn't it be argued that love can create strength just as courage generates love?

NM: Yes, it can be argued. It is still a question, however. Does love have as powerful and vital effect as courage? There are any number of men and women who are full of love but are timid and cowardly and hate themselves for being cowardly—it poisons the amount of love in them, even if, essentially, they are loving creatures.

ML: In Christian belief, love can move mountains. But for you, love seems to be more of a passive quality, not active like courage—love comes as a "reward"—so it isn't seen as an active principle. It's the emolument you get for being courageous.

NM: Let me tell you how I got to that point.

It struck me that everyone I knew, including myself, was always looking for love. "Ah, if I could find love, I could solve my problems." Some years ago, however, I found myself saying to my children, "Don't go searching for love. Love is not a solution but a reward." So long as you go searching for love directly, you will fail. Because love is a grace and you don't pursue grace.

Neil's book "Waiting for God," makes the same point, but she would argue that to lead a life of Christian love is to be courageous in the extreme

Now, mind you, I'm not a macho maniac on courage. Many, many times I've said that an old lady who crosses a busy street in terror, feeling she hardly has a 50/50 chance of making it safely across, is exhibiting courage that might be more intense than a professional soldier attacking a machine gun nest if through all his young manhood he's been ready to die in such an action. Odds are the soldier is braver than the average old lady, but we can't put an inflexible hierarchy on the scale of courage.

Still, my own experience tells me that to the degree one is brave, one finds more love than when one's cowardly. *C'est vrais!*

ML: But I'm not talking about romantic love, rather about what Christianity calls "charity."

NM: Charity comes when you're brave. How many cowards are full of charity?

Cowardice is a poison, *and a prison*

ML: It's a question of precedence. You always put courage as the more active, the more powerful—

NM: I often find when I'm feeling weak that I'm also very nice, and when I'm weak I feel the weakness in others and am sympathetic to it. But it's not nourishing back and forth.

Whereas when I'm feeling strong and feel compassion or charity—on those rare occasions—there's real goodness in it. It's of real use to the other person.

ML: Well, to get down to basic ethics: when someone does something that's an act of real generosity done at a cost to themselves, it's because they love the other person. I don't mean in a romantic way—it could be devoid of sex.

NM: I'm not putting that down but I'm not elevating it. Because as a novelist I know better. Forgive me for putting it this way, but most often when you have an act of great

generosity, there's a tangled skein behind it of good and bad motives. Don't forget that I believe in this tripartite base to human nature: God and the Devil to either side of us, ourselves in the center. Contemplate the number of compromises, relations, treaties, surprises and rebellions—people are perfectly capable of rebelling against both God and the Devil, shutting them both out of one's existence as far as possible. That's one attitude: Damn their eyes, I'm doing what I want to do! There is the human ego—the notion that neither God nor the Devil know what they want now of me as well as I know. So I do call it a tripartite relationship, and by that I certainly don't mean that the humans are subservient in it. What terrifies me at times is that humans may become dominant over the others. I just don't trust us to go traveling across the universe on our own.

ML: You mean there may have been some individuals in history who were so powerful at a certain moment in time, they equalled God and the Devil? Constantine, say, or Charlemagne—

NM: Constantine, again!

ML: Churchill, Napoleon—

NM: Napoleon, yeah. I think certain humans can free themselves to the point where both God and the Devil are both working for them for a brief period. But, again, please take us back to speculations I feel closer to.

ML: You've eliminated heaven and hell from the Four Last Things.

NM: As absolutes. But hell can be very real—take some proud society lady who is unpleasant to her servants—all caught up in not much more than her money and her jewels—we all know people like that—she's willing to sell herself to the Devil but the Devil also rejects her too because at bottom she's a silly ass and the Devil doesn't need

her. So there she is, ready for judgment, and God's judgment is: "You'll be a scrubwoman in your next existence. And if you complain once, you'll be a scrubwoman in the existence after that, provided you still have any soul left."

Most conservatives believe that the poor man has as good a chance or better of getting to heaven as the rich man because the temptations among the rich are so awful that they easily can go to hell. And that's what enables conservatives to function. They can put up with inequity in this life because they feel there's a better existence waiting for those who are patient and good in horrible circumstances. *This and "holy poverty," which we can talk about*

Well, I believe there's an element of truth in that, just as there's an element of truth in the implicit liberal faith that every soul, every human, is terribly important and must be protected in this life. These are not only warring notions, but may be warring notions within God. Because where is the artist who does not have such profound disputes within? The Creation comes out of these warring notions in the Creator.

This is similar to what Ellul says It isn't that God is only fighting the Devil. He's also debating within Himself or Herself what the next proper course might be. It is the play of this complexity that I wish to suggest is the appropriate foundation for theology rather than the manic insistence that God's words are in this Book or that. No, I do not see the laws of existence as etched in stone with no deviation from them. So, no, I don't believe in absolute heaven or absolute hell. Such concepts are only ways to confuse ourselves profoundly. That's because they don't add up. In terms of our experience, they make no sense. Our experience is that everything in life is more or less shaded. On certain days, certain things are better. Certain of our acts give us more pleasure than on others.

Sometimes evil acts—what we see as evil acts if we believe in Revelation—give us pleasure that we find ungodly, devilish. Yet acts that we think are evil may have been inspired by God who decides, "This poor soul is going to expire unless there's a breakout. This poor soul has to do something unpleasant before this soul can be pleasant again." In this sense, God's compassion can be present in an evil act.

Never forget Engels' immortal three words: "Quantity changes quality." Petty evil is one thing. Massive evil is another. I'd never use an argument like this one to arrive at a justification of Hitler or Stalin.

ML: Considering your belief in various states of grace and the idea of dying in a state of grace, it seems to me that if there's any pathway to formal religion open in your mind, it's to Catholicism.

NM: I probably do feel more connection with elements of Catholicism than to any of the other formal religions. But that's as far as it goes. I was talking once with a Catholic theologian who said, "well, so much of what you say seems almost Catholic."

I said, "Yes, but I could never be a Catholic."

He asked, "Why? Would it be the transubstantiation in the Mass?"

I said, "No. I could believe that. Why can't God be present in a wafer? That would not bother me. Why can't wine become the blood of Christ? I wouldn't believe it in a hurry but that wouldn't keep me from becoming a Catholic."

So we went through various elements and finally he asked again, "Why, then, can't you be a Catholic?"

"Because," I said, "I don't believe in the omnipotence of God."

And he said, "In that case, I can understand why you're not a Catholic."

ML: All right. Let's return the one more time to reincarnation. I can feel that you have more to say on that.

NM: Yes. One thing we've not gotten to is any supposition the atom bomb and the concentration camps and the gulags were mighty efforts by the Devil to foul up reincarnation. To mess up the judgments within reincarnation. I hope I've suggested the delicate dispositons of God, the care with which the question is asked: "What shall I do with this soul?" That is at the core of reincarnation—delicate, responsible, artful judgment. If the process is fouled up, is overloaded, it can break down. God, I repeat, is not all-powerful.

ML: So mass slaughter the bureaucracy?

NM: Contemplate the mess in eternity when so many human creatures were being slaughtered en masse.

ML: Not if you can go back to an omnipotent god. Most people believe God can handle anything and everything

NM: No, God's energies are also limited, I would say. We may live in a universe that is expanding but there's not always endless energy available. No. No. *Physicists agree in "Entropy"*

ML: Ae you saying that the Devil does have a purchase on the process of reincarnation?

NM: Through marring it, mainly. Or overloading it.

ML: It was Herman Melville who said—in a line I could never forget—when he was, if I recall, writing Moby Dick—he said, "Lord, when shall we stop growing?" In your theological belief, there's a paradox, to me at least, in that on the one hand, growth is something you're always seeking and it is the summum bonum—

NM: Not all growth is good.

ML: But good growth is good, positive growth, growth of some kind is better than stasis.

NM: Good growth is good; bad growth is bad. The growth of suburban shopping malls has been prodigious in America—does that mean it's good? Does that mean the old family store being removed by the corporate chain store was inferior humanly? Not necessarily. *It gets worse: how about Wal-Mart Banking?*

ML: Let me ask you about evolution. You accept evolution. You know, the traditional Catholic belief in evolution—the Catholics were quick to embrace evolution even as many Protestants—at least fundamentalist Protestants—were not. The Catholics were among the earliest to embrace the notion of evolution and they didn't have any trouble with it. They said: People coming from monkeys—no trouble at all, that's how the body was created. And at a certain point God put the soul in. Is that--?

NM: I happen to believe that dogs have souls.

ML: Well. . .

NM: Mind you, in reincarnation you may not come back as a human. You could come back as a dog, and, just as parenthesis, that makes a great deal of sense to me because so many dogs, I find, are more human than humans.

ML: Stretch evolution back—people from monkeys or dogs is no trouble at all. That's just 3 million years. But going back—50, 60, 100 million years—when the creatures were coming out of the slime, do you see that at a certain point God puts—

NM: I don't think it's answerable.

ML: Well, what doesn't have a soul?

NM: It makes more sense for me to believe that God was in the slime from the beginning and God was less in those days. God has grown with us. God has grown with evolution.

Well

ML: Well, God created the world—

NM: God may have been developing along with evolution. Why must a god be independent of time?

ML: Well, if God created the world—at that point, He wasn't slime.

NM: Wait: we creates our children. That doesn't mean one is able to create children on

the day one is born. I'm not talking about an omnipotent, all-powerful God, but one who grows with us.

ML: I'm assuming that in the course of (human history) God at some point began the process of creating souls.

NM: These souls also developed. The soul of an amoeba would primitive, but still a soul that gave the amoeba some intimation of direction, some sense that it must do its best under limited circumstances. God, obviously, was superior to the amoeba from the beginning, but God was also developing as the Creation went from the amoeba to the paramecium to the multi-celled creature.

ML: Here's where I have a problem with reincarnation—when did God create such a process?

NM: That's beyond me. I would assume at a point after God had given souls to a great many creatures of the slime and of the higher animals and people that God decided, "This as wasteful. I, as an artist, can do better. Certain of my creations could have been a lot better but they had to live in the worst circumstances." God at that point was a liberal. God said, "Let's give them another shot..."

ML: But deprive them of all memories of the past?

Augustine answered this very convincingly in

Book XI of

The Confessions

— why not even before humans

NM: Who knows? Was it worked out in discussion with the angels? Or in argument with the Devil. Did the Devil say, "No, they must remember every last thing they've ever done," and God said "No. That's messy. I want a tidy universe." *God doesn't play with dice*

NM: It comes down to something basic. God's notion is: Let's make the Creation better and better. The Devil's attitude is: let's wreck the Creation. I have, says the Devil, something else in mind that will supplant and replace the Creation.

ML: What would the Devil want? Total destruction? Nihilism?

NM: Let's say for the sake of argument the Devil would want to fashion a universe on His or Her terms as opposed to God's terms.

ML: Have we any idea what those terms would be?

NM: Well, given my taste for rank speculation: it could be an immensely technological universe where the need for existence—individual existence—and soul would be much less. That would be more to the Devil's taste: Individual units that function in relation to other more or less individual units. That seems to be the prevailing tendency in the 20th and early 21st century—more and more interchangeable units, ready to serve a corporate machine. At the other end of it, you have the maniacal intensity of the most extreme Muslims whose only feeling is there's something so wrong with this that it all has to be destroyed, and don't ask questions. Once again we are at a point in history between the rock and the hard place.

God's make Creation better is a distinctly Western? Whig, progressive "idea" that has occurred and abandoned No worst transgressions of technology.

God would never be handmaiden to this

Whig, progressive

Encyclopedia of Augustine

EVIL

EVIL

cordance of Gospel passages, which Jerome appended to his own translation of the Gospels.

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ANDREW CARRIKER

Evil Augustine's account of the problem of evil came in the end to embrace almost every area of his writing, as he perceived more and more of the rami-

fications of the subject. His interest began in his youth, in the course of his long journey through a series of religious systems in search of one which could satisfy him with answers to the questions which persistently presented themselves to him, amongst which those concerning evil were particularly prominent. His mother was a Christian, but she was an uneducated woman with a simple faith, whereas Augustine's education placed a high premium upon elegance in the use of Latin. So when he looked at the Christian Scriptures, he found it hard not to despise the way they were written. In particular he thought the brutality of the accounts of events in Genesis unworthy of admiration, and so he looked elsewhere for a religious faith which could put evil in its place. He was drawn to philosophy, but he found it difficult to grasp the very idea of an abstraction, or indeed to get beyond the impression that the spiritual was nothing more than an extremely fine-textured matter. Both these early disappointments prepared him to be receptive when he encountered the Manichees. This Gnostic dualist sect, the immediate creation of a leader called Mani, held that matter is evil. That explanation met the difficulties Augustine had encountered in his earlier reading of Scripture. The Manichee explanation that the Old Testament tells the story of the rule in the world of the power of evil helped him over what he had read in Genesis. The Manichees' sharp separation of matter and spirit helped him make sense of his early problem with philosophy (cf. *conf.* 5.10.18; 4.3.4; and *en. Ps.* 140.9-10). Astrologers and Manichees are "connected," both favoring an understanding of sin which places the fault "elsewhere," and this was perhaps another pertinent reason why Augustine was comfortable with the Manichees: he did not have to deal with his own faults.

The central paradox of the problem of evil can be briefly stated. If God is perfect goodness and if he is omnipotent, evil cannot exist. But it is manifestly a reality of some sort, and a formidably powerful one. So, if we are to concede its existence, one of the two other "poles" must shift. Either we must say that God is not wholly good, and that he permits or is even the author of evil. Or we must say that God is not omnipotent, and although he is wholly good and would prevent evil if he could, he is powerless to stop it. These were the terms in which the dilemma presented itself in Augustine's day. But there was a rider, familiar to the philosophical culture of the time. An ascetic tradition which pervaded early Christianity linked matter with evil and spirit with good. In late Platonism, for example, we find Por-

phyry writing a treatise on abstinence from animal food in which he explicitly connects the eating of meat with a process of becoming more and more weighed down with evil matter and, therefore, finding it increasingly difficult to think clearly about higher things, which he takes without question to be spiritual and intellectual.

The Manichee account of the problem of evil took the three "poles" of divine goodness, divine omnipotence, and the presence of evil apart by separating the goodness and the omnipotence of God. It fully accepted the reality of evil and made it a power in the universe in its own right, one of two first principles, eternally at war with the power of good. The evil power could be identified with matter, and the good, with spirit. Thus bodies were to be regarded as evil and souls as good. In human beings, compounded of body and soul, the eternal war in the universe was waged in microcosm. That went a long way toward explaining the observable ills of the human condition and Augustine's own consciousness of internal warfare. It also made it possible to understand human souls as sparks of the good spirit trapped in evil material bodies. Their salvation would thus naturally consist in freeing themselves of those bodies by denying themselves physical pleasures and foods which built up the bodily part, and aspiring always toward the spiritual and intellectual. Thus the Manichee system rationalized asceticism.

The Manichee sect — like others of its kind — held that certain of its community were elect. These "perfect ones" had special powers to transmute matter into spirit. They surrounded themselves with followers whose service helped the "cause of the good" in the universe. Augustine became such a follower and continued as a Manichee for nine years while in his twenties.

He began, however, to feel some intellectual dissatisfaction with the Manichee explanation and to look forward with impatience to the coming of the Manichee leader Faustus to North Africa, so he could have his questions answered. When Faustus arrived, Augustine was able to see at once that here was a man less educated and certainly less intelligent than he, and he rapidly became disillusioned with the Manichee sect. But its ideas lingered with him. The Christian Augustine was never quite able to free himself of certain Manichean legacies in his own account of the problem of evil: a sense of the dichotomy between, and indeed eternal incompatibility of, body and soul; of the recognition that there is eternal warfare in human beings; of a mistrust of mate-

rial things, although in the profundity of his faith he found Christian ways of addressing these dilemmas.

When he had broken free of the Manichees, Augustine was forced to turn elsewhere for an explanation of the problem of evil. It was during this period of renewed search that he became restless in every area of his life. He left North Africa, where he had been teaching rhetoric at Carthage, for Italy, where he hoped for a more prestigious post. He settled in due course in Milan. There he went to hear the preaching of Ambrose, the bishop, intending to judge it merely from the point of view of rhetoric. He found himself transfixed. Ambrose was preaching on the book of Genesis, drawing upon the comments of the Cappadocian Fathers, who had been for their part borrowing from Neoplatonic accounts of exactly the set of problems about matter and spirit, good and evil, with which Augustine had been wrestling. The intellectual snob in Augustine was impressed; he himself always found Greek a struggle, and here was Greek learning elegantly and cogently displayed; his mind was fed as it had not been by other explanations.

He was frustrated in his attempts to talk things over with Ambrose in person, because there was always a queue to see him. In this hungry and disturbed state he was also experiencing other stresses. His mother, who had joined him in Italy, was anxious to see him made a provincial governor, and to that end arranged a marriage for him with a very young girl. In earnest of his commitment he was obliged to send away the mistress with whom he had lived faithfully for a decade, the mother of his son Adeodatus. He was greatly distressed by this, and the consequent disruption of his emotional life left him especially receptive to conversion, as it has done to others. He heard the child in the garden in Milan singing "take and read," picked up the text of Romans, and became a Christian. This took place in the context of this critical juncture in his search for a solution to the problem of evil.

The result was a radical reorientation not only of his life and beliefs but also of his thinking about the problem of evil. Since he must now accept that God is wholly good and all-powerful, he had to conclude that evil does not exist, for its existence would be incompatible with the existence of such a God. That left him with the new difficulty of showing how something which does not exist can be such a powerful influence in the world. He came to believe that it did so by limiting the freedom of the will. A will infected by evil can no longer choose the good, and so it is deeply inhibited.

It is here that he made his most original contributions to the theology of evil. As a Christian, he came to see sin as the act of the evil will, and thus itself a product of evil. So sin and evil become aspects of a single problem. To believe that evil was the result of a wrong act of will by a rational creature fit the case of Satan as well as that of humankind. It gave Augustine a cause for evil which did not lie in a God wholly good and therefore incapable of evil.

He had observed in himself tendencies to muddled thinking which he now put down to the effect of sin. The lapsed angels too, he came to believe, had lost their clarity and truth, and, as far as it is possible for even a rational creature to understand, so had lost that which it is the supreme bliss to know, God himself.

He also came to argue that his former difficulty in getting past the idea that spirit is just very refined matter was itself a symptom of his sinful condition. In other words, evil in the sinner encourages "bodily imaginings" — a Manichean legacy. There was also some echo of the Hermetic tradition in all this, for pseudo-Hermes Trismegistus had described a hierarchy of being in which humanity stands between beast and God. By allowing himself to be bogged down in bodily pleasures a person grows more like a beast. By seeking to emancipate himself from them he grows more like a god, or, in Augustine's terms, he returns toward a likeness to the God in whose image he was made.

A further aspect of the consequences of evil is the tendency for the distortion of intellectual perception, taking the form of a twisting out of shape, so that the sinner could no longer see things as they are. The world becomes full of lies, of deceiving appearances. Augustine tries to grapple with potential problems in this area in his two treatises on lying, *De mendacio* and *Contra mendacium*. For example, a situation may arise in which the only way to save someone's life is to tell him a lie. Would such a lie be justified? Augustine's answer was more generous in the first of these treatises than in the second, for he came to take an increasingly hard line on lying when he encountered Christians prepared to sacrifice honesty in order to win souls. Lying speaks of things as other than they are, and so it is at odds with truth, reality, and the good.

The interferences of sin and evil with intellectual understanding come logically first, because no thinker impeded by them can see his way to a solution of the problem of evil. They were also among the first aspects Augustine addressed after his conversion, during the period he spent at Cassiciacum

with his mother, his son, and a group of friends, teaching himself and his companions a Christian philosophy through a "Socratic dialogue." But at this time one more aspect of the problem forced itself upon him. He was disturbed one night by the stopping and starting of noises in the water pipes serving the house. These proved, when investigated in the morning, to have been caused by fallen leaves. The leaves blocked the pipes under the pressure of the water, and then were pushed aside by its flow until a fresh blockage formed, and so the sound of the water changed. This made Augustine reflect on order in the universe. This seemed to be a chance occurrence, and yet it was governed by recognizably orderly forces and factors. He and his informal philosophical group explored ways in which the seemingly disorderly events in the universe can be deemed to fall under providence. They must do so if God is indeed all-powerful and therefore also omniscient. But in order to do so those which seem evil must somehow be transformed into good, or he cannot countenance them. So he eliminates "chance" as a form of evil and seeks to bring all events ultimately under divine control and to regard them all as ultimately for good if God permits them.

Augustine formulated the doctrine of original sin in the way in which it was substantively transmitted to the West for a thousand years. His argument was that the sin of Adam and Eve affected their very human nature in such a way that it must be transmitted to their children. He was never able to resolve the debate between those who take the traducianist view that the soul itself is handed on in the begetting of children, and those who take the creationist view that each child's soul is freshly created for it, and therefore have to lodge the transmission of original sin in the bodily part of the individual.

Augustine first tackled the subject of sin and evil in an extended way in his *De libero arbitrio*, which he began in Rome while he and his companions were waiting for a ship to take them back to Africa. At this stage he was still very close to the period in which he had been working on the Cassiciacum dialogues, and his interests lay chiefly in the philosophical questions. He says in his *Retractationes* (1.9.4) that he had not mentioned the subject of grace there because he had not yet understood its centrality.

That became plain to him later when he encountered the Pelagians. These followers of a fashionable society preacher took the view that giving up sin was simply a matter of will. It required effort on the part of the Christian, but it could be done. Pelagius ar-

gued that human beings were made good by a good God, so there can be no inherent fault in their nature. Augustine's objection to this was firstly that it encouraged Christians to be too self-reliant and hid from them their absolute dependence upon God for their salvation. It also ran counter to common experience that anyone should in fact be able to become virtuous simply by his or her own efforts. So he found it pastorally unhelpful, indeed disastrous, to allow this school of thought to flourish. It had a number of implications, not least that it diminished the role of the sacraments in people's lives, since a consistent Pelagian would see no need for baptism to wash away his sins if he could do it for himself. (Nevertheless, Pelagians often brought their children for baptism, just to be sure.)

So Augustine wrote a good deal against the Pelagians, insisting that the sin of Adam had broken human wills so that they were no longer able of their own accord to will anything but evil. They depend now upon the assistance of grace even to begin to form the intention of good, let alone actually do it. Moreover, a good act thus generated cannot be to the credit of the individual doing it, since it is not his act but God's in him.

Pelagius agreed with Augustine that evil is nothing; that was not the problem. Indeed, it seemed to him to strengthen his case, because it was possible to argue that something which does not exist cannot have so radically damaged human nature (*nat. et gr.* 91.12).

In *De natura et gratia* Augustine explores two distinct free gifts of God, that which he bestowed in creating human nature and that which he continues to give in acts of grace which assist the sinner to avoid or resist evil. He believed that grace acts to counter the damage sin has done to human nature, by cooperating with the good which remains in his created nature, so as to make a person completely good again (*nat. et gr.* 20.21).

If we are to hold that to be the case, certain things follow. The first is that behind grace we must glimpse divine foreknowledge and predestination. God is omnipotent, and that means he is omniscient. To him all times are present. He knows what will happen. If he knows what will happen it must happen, and therefore no act of creaturely free choice can frustrate his purposes. The free (in the sense of unmerited and generous) gift of grace by which he enables us to do good can thus be seen as an imperative we cannot resist.

But freedom of choice is also a divine gift, and Augustine is quite sure that a creature with free will

is a higher being than one without it. Therefore the original intention for both human being and angel must have been that each rational creature would in fact freely do what he must, and in that would lie his bliss, his comfort in heaven, and his realization of his likeness to his creator.

In *De libero arbitrio* Augustine argues that God's foreknowledge is not a compelling force, because it takes the will of the rational creature into the plan (3.3.8). Later in life he moved gradually toward the view that divine grace chooses those it will rescue from what would otherwise befall them as a result of Adam's sin. It therefore must in some way direct the outcome.

Augustine, like his contemporaries, never held a doctrine of double predestination. He always, extreme predestinationist though he became, took the view that God predestines only the elect to salvation; he does not predestine the lost to hell. They put themselves there and so fully deserve their destiny that it will be a virtuous act in the elect to give thanks to God in eternity when they gaze down on those who are suffering below.

What the sinner does when he sins amounts to a turning away from the good. It is thus again a negation of the good. Since all that exists is good, this amounts to a movement in the direction of nonexistence. There is thus no positive cause of the will's bending toward evil, because that turning is actually a defection, a negation. It is apparent that God cannot be the author of that nothingness because everything of which he is the author is something (*lib. arb.* 3.1.1).

Augustine did not believe it was ever possible to be wholly good in this life, even with the aid of grace, because the sinfulness of the human condition ran so deep. Christ alone had been a good and perfectly righteous man. The basis of Augustine's mature doctrine of evil, then, is that evil is "nothing." But since to be nothing is to depart from the God who is supreme being, that means that evil takes away into its negativity all good, all joy, all clarity, all reconciliation with God, all hope of heaven for the sinner who is infected with it.

→ *Confessiones*; Goodness; Mani, Manicheism; Original Sin; Sin

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