

[edited copy
5-30-07
1 of 2]

[Edited by N. Markin
and J. M. Lemon
in May 2007 for
removal of Eugene
Kennedy with few
other changes]

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5/30/07

Mailer Introduction

In any amateur approach to weighty subjects, the perils are obvious. They hardly need to be cited. Yet, there is one advantage—you do not need to be loyal to the expertise you have studiously, even vigorously acquired to look for innovations and you do not have to confront immediately the displeasure of one's learned colleagues at being forced to come face to face with a radically new concept.

Of course, amateurs miss often. I offer the interviews that follow as an example of working with such intellectual tools. I am obviously ignorant of most of the intellections required of a competent scholar. My colleague in these interviews, Michael Lennon, 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 matters is how truly untutored I am in these subjects. I offer nothing but my own ideas—which is the classic error of the amateur.

How then can I defend this venture? The answer may be legitimate. I have spent the last fifty years trying to contemplate 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 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 unrecoverable nuances of human motivation and morality. It took a good number of years to recognize that I did believe in God—that is, believed there was a divine presence in existence and on occasion, even contemplated the philosophical need to approach the enigma of such a Being. Whenever I tried, however, to advance my notions by readings in theology, I was repelled. The works were studies, for the most part, of the unstated but dictatorial injunction to have faith. They were under-nourished in their sense of inquiry. They were also full of ideologically dictated command.

To repeat, I was a novelist. The best of us spend our lives exploring what might be human reality and morality. In consequence, 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 manage against all the odds

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of an existence that was not entirely controlled by our Creator. Note the possessive: Our Creator. God, as I could visualize such a being, 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 nothing to my intuitions, I continued to grapple with my speculations until Michael Lennon proposed these interviews. Of their shortcomings I am aware and, doubtless, also, unaware, but my 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 the reader to these dialogues. I hope (and expect) they will be rewarded with a few new ideas.

Lennon Introduction

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

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

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

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

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

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

J. Michael Lennon

INTERVIEW I

MICHAEL LENNON: Scientists now believe that the universe is expanding. Is this accelerating nature of the cosmos reflected in your concept of a god who can grow and develop?

NORMAN MAILER: I start from another direction. Having been a novelist all my working life, I may know a little about human beings. I should. They have been my study. You might say my theological notions come out of such questions as who are we? What are we? How do we develop? Why, indeed, are we in existence? And is there the presence of a Creator in what we do?

So the larger cosmic speculations are of less interest to me. In truth, I would hate to rely on the ever-changing state of advanced physics for my ideas.

ML: In places, you've said that God and the Devil are lesser 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? Who created the universe?

NM: I feel the same way about the ultimate Creator as I feel about the expanding universe: all that is too large for my speculations. But I don't see any inherent logical contradiction in saying that I do believe our God created the world we live in, and is in constant conflict with the Devil. That stimulates my thought.

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." 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: Where does my desire for order come from? Not only do we humans 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, it may be worth the attempt to search into such questions.

ML: That may require hearing your thoughts on the relationship between the nature of the deity and codes for human living.

NM: Oh, Christ, Mike, I don't think in these formulae. I want to get to something more basic to my thought, which is that much of the world's present-day cosmology is based on such works of revelation as the Old and New Testament, or the Koran, yet, for me, Revelation is itself the question mark. Revelation, after all, is not God's words but ours, words debated back then, if you will, in committee, and assembled by working theologians with varying agendas. After all, why would God bother to speak in such a fashion? There's no need. God could have imparted such thoughts directly to us. Revelation has always struck me as power-trip for high priests who were looking to create a product that would enable them to lead their flock more securely, more emphatically. Their modern-day practitioners quote constantly from Scripture on TV, use it as their guide-rail and run into intolerable contradictions that are guaranteed to cripple their power to reason. I will go so far as to say that to be a Fundamentalist is to exist as a human whose reasoning powers have been squashed into inanition by any question for which they do not already have an answer.

I confess, then, that I feel no attachment, whatsoever, to organized religion. I see God, rather, as a Creator, as the greatest artist. I see human beings as His most developed artworks. I also see animals as His artworks. When I think of evolution, what stands out most is the drama that went on in

God as an artist. Successes were also marred by failures. I think of all the errors He made as well as of the successes. In marine life, for example, some fish have hideous eyes—they protrude from the head in tubes many inches long. 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 were also modes the Artist was trying—this great artist, this divine artist—trying to express something incredible and it was not, for certain, an easy process. Indeed, it went on forever! I would guess that evolution was mucked with by the Devil. I think there were false trips 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 "Her" is off-putting, but to speak of "Him/Her" or "It" is worse.

In any event, it makes sense to me that this strife between God and the Devil has been a factor in evolution. Whether God had a free hand or the Devil was meddling in it from the commencement, either way some species were badly conceived. Sometimes a young artist has to make large errors before he or she can go further.

I can hear the obvious rejoinder: "There's Norman Mailer, an artist of dubious high rank looking to give himself honor, nobility, and importance by speaking of God as an artist." I'm perfectly aware that that accusation is there to be brought in. All I say here may indeed be no more than a projection of my own egotistical preferences.

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

NM: No, I haven't. What I have said upon occasion is that God is a better novelist than the novelists—that's not the same thing.

Whether my motive is pure or impure, I do believe in God as the Artist, the Creator. That makes the most sense to me. Whether I have a private agenda, or whether I am being an objective philosopher (to the extent one can propose the existence of what may be an oxymoron—objective philosopher!)—so be it. Whether guilty or innocent, this will be 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: Let's say that in my lifetime, certain things have gotten better and other things have grown worse, so much so that 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, the concentration camps, the atom bomb came out of technological improvement. For the average person in the average developed country, life, if seen in terms of comfort, is 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 be worse.

I can't speak for other languages, but I do know the English language has hardly been improved 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, those philosophers who make a difference.

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 a man or woman wished to reach others in small or large numbers, he or she could transmit thoughts to 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, "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 with that. My ongoing question is whether the Enlightenment was for good or for ill. To assume automatically that the Enlightenment was good means you automatically have to say, yes, it created marvelous freedom for many people. It also created the worst abuses of communism

and fascism—so much worse than the Divine Right of Kings. It also helped to foster 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 interruption, static, mood disruption, and traffic jams.

ML: I can see communism as an unhappy 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 human instinct. The extermination camps were an absolute violation of any notion of blood. The Nazis were cheating people of their deaths. They informed the camp inmates they were going to have a shower. Into the chamber they all marched, took off their clothes, happy to have a shower what with all that lice inhabiting them, hoping the shower would be hot. In they went, and were gassed. Their last reaction in life had to be, "you cheated me!" They died in rage and panic. That's not going back to the blood, to instinct, to preparing oneself to enter the next world. They were obliterated by their own excess of reason. They were ready to assume that even their vile

guards were capable of sanitary concerns for them, the imprisoned. How wrong they were!

Reason, ultimately, looks to strip us of the notion there is a Creator. The moment you have a society built on reason alone, then individual power begins to substitute for the concept of a Creator. What has characterized just about every social revolution is that sooner or later revolutionary leaders go to war with each other, and turn cannibalistic. Only one leader is left, an absolute dictator. Once you accept the notion that there is no god, then the ultimate direction for the Left, the Right, or the corporate Center is totalitarianism.

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

NM: I think that first we have to ask whether the relation of God, the Devil, and the human to one another is not a warring relationship among three forces who are 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 and wishes to preempt the god who 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 whereas God wants that power to satisfy His vision of what the universe could be.

ML: Do you ignore the presence of Christ?

NM: Christ may well be God's son, a physical and spiritual entity whom God decided was necessary for humanity. Jesus may well have been real. If I wish to argue against revealed dogma, that doesn't mean all of it seems invalid to me. Jesus does make a kind of sense. 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 theologians in company with their organized religions repel me because of the philosophical inconsistency of their God before whom they prostrate themselves, God the Almighty, God the All-Powerful. I think that's where the philosophical trouble begins: the idea that God is All-Good and All-Powerful. The history of the twentieth century demonstrated the contradiction in those terms, and most 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.

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

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. 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. 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 1755 and said the destruction proved there was no God.

Throughout our history humans have questioned God whenever there was 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 100,000 people were killed—we can't blame that on human beings.

NM: No.

ML: So that forced many philosophical thinkers of the Enlightenment into declaring, "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, in the concentration camps, six million people were exterminated with untold suffering. The suffering was so great it's impossible for us to conceive of it. To anyone who's ever looked at the photographs or read the accounts it's horrifying to an extreme degree. But maybe, in the larger scheme of things, God was allowing this to happen to send a message to humanity on how far we have 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 love, compassion, justice, whatever had to be done. 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. Nuclear warfare could destroy all of his technology.

ML: So maybe it worked.

NM: Let's go back to the earthquake in Lisbon. Let me give you my notion of God as the artist—that is, a God limited in power. For example, why are there volcanoes? I would answer: Because God is not a perfect engineer. That makes as much sense to me as God punishing us and punishing us with dubious compensatory result. It's very hard to argue that these acts of nature engender more than a passing shiver of religiosity in most people.

INTERVIEW II

ML: Are you ready to talk about the Devil?

NM: My notion 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 some very high angels—or between God and gods, and the result was finally that one god won—the God we speak of as our Creator. God won, but it was a Pyrrhic victory. Because Lucifer, if you will, also became well installed. And this war has gone on ever since, gone on in us.

Whatever the form this takes, my understanding is that God and the Devil are often present in our actions. 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 for a period, working within us. 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 also breaks the rules—with a miracle. But my argument is that when we act with great energy, it is because God and the Devil have the same interest in the outcome. (Their differences will be settled later.) Whereas when we work with little energy it's because They are not only at odds, but are countermanding 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 and have gone on to achieve great things. Like Constantine—"in this sign, conquer—in hoc signo, vinces!" and goes on to—

NM: Claim, if you wish, that Constantine was a mighty king who helped Christianity to triumph—indeed, he did. You could also say he may 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.

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 this suggested collaboration between God and the Devil is not working well?

NM: Let's not emphasize "collaboration." I've spoken of it as "the accepted rules of the game." Take an average contest in professional football. Two teams fight each other on the field with skill and bestiality, each side laboring to win. Nonetheless, a whole set of laws also prevails. After they tackle a guy, they don't kick him in the head. I'm saying that in order to keep it flowing, God and the Devil have certain understandings with one another. What they are, I couldn't begin to say. We don't often come close to the nature of divine mysteries but sometimes we can obtain some sense of which relations are involved. The only clue I have is that when there is great energy available to us—then I do expect They are in a temporary collaboration

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

Very often within us, good fights an offensive battle against evil. 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 contest between three protagonists. It isn't that we are passive onlookers while God and the devil wage a war within us. We are the third force and don't always know which side we are on in any given moment, or whether on another occasion, we are independent of both.

If you'll accept my notion that technology may be the most advanced, extreme and brilliant 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 by now be on the side of technology.

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 is 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. I would also say that it is ennobling to face existence with the recognition that you are not going to have clear answers. Rather, you can arrive at hypotheses that you can test most imperfectly for their validity by the ongoing experiences of your life.

ML: The Manicheans did 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 we are engaged in a wrestling match, a fixed one. If goodness is assured an ultimate victory over evil, we are in a comedy, and I must say it is an ugly farce considering how we suffer in the course of 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.

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 and other gods. It may be that our vision can join eventually with God's vision. Perhaps our 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? Dare I mention black holes in space? But enough! I don't want to stray too far from the speculations already presented.

ML: Let me take up 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 any adherents.

First of all, however, I believe that 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.

ML: You set the play you made out of your novel, *The Deer Park* in hell. Hell is something you refer to all the time. It's a constant reference. But Heaven is absent.

NM: It was perfectly legitimate, I felt, to put my characters in hell because hell is a point of reference for everyone. Everyone believes in hell, and much more readily than we 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. Extraordinary moments are perishable. Whereas we can be in hell for months, even 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 a foundation to the drama.

Yet, I still don't believe in hell as eternal punishment. Rather, hell has dimensions. Some parts of it are critically worse than others. We can approach that when we talk about reincarnation.

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, as a reward we can be given a better possibility in our next life. Or, we can be born into a worse one if that is what we deserve.

In other words, I'm not interested in absolute moral judgments, eternal heaven, eternal hell. To the contrary. Just think of what it means to be a good man or a bad one. What, after all, is the measure of difference? 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?

The argument I would advance is that heaven and hell make no sense if the majority of humans are a complex mixture of good and evil. 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 George Bernard 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 all seem to have? 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 good chances? Will our next life be easier or more painful?

Now, this notion is simple, but people who are fixed entirely on notions of eternal hell and eternal heaven can't come near to it. They cannot 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 in my next incarnation than with 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. Now, tell us—we ask everyone this—what would be your idea of a proper reincarnation for yourself? What would you like to be in your next life?"

I say, "Well, you know, everything considered, I think I'd like to be a black athlete. 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. Right now, we're dreadfully oversubscribed. So, let me see where you have been put. . . ." He looks it up. He says, "I'm afraid we've got you down for cockroach. But—here is the good news—you'll be the fastest cockroach on the block!"

All right—we are going to be reincarnated. Whether we know what our reincarnation will be, I doubt. I expect it will be full of surprises, some most unforeseen. Some, given our vanity, are likely to seem outrageously warped.

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 try to engage these unverifiable concepts. Does this 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 me work through your questions 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 precise about it. Where did our human bureaucracy come from? I feel many of our social forms derive from celestial forms. 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 also elements in heaven that do not work with high efficiency even when there are angels at the switchboard rather than humans.

ML: You did remark that not all souls are recycled.

NM: I believe the soul is a gift from God. Of course, you can abuse any living gift. Any number of people may end 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. . .

NM: Not necessarily 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. Or, God could so decide for you. On the other hand, I think there are humans who choose to commit physical suicide because they feel that if they don't their soul will die 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 soul.

ML: You are saying that a soul doesn't necessarily go to heaven, or to hell—it just ceases to exist.

NM: 'Yes. It's gone. 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 the jargon. But, yes, people who believe in reincarnation do speak of new souls or "young souls"—and, yes, I would expect God creates new spiritual lives. God may say, "I've been reconsidering the terrible propensities of the Devil. Let us see if we can conceive of a soul who will be able to war with the Devil a little more effectively, a new soul who will have many of the qualities of the Devil but can transmute them, transform them, elevate our sense of spirit even 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 presumably a separate being from the body, I would suppose that the soul also has its period of existence. A particular soul might expire after a single earthly existence, another could be reincarnated a number of times, but doubtless, there's a limit. Yes, souls do expire, I must suppose. Just as God may finally expire, or the Devil, indeed. There are forces out there who wouldn't mind seeing the collapse of one, the other, or both. We may be speaking of a force that consists of the drive to nothingness. Nothingness may be a huge power out in the great cosmic

universe. It may desire the extinction of the universe. To repeat: We have yet to explain black holes in space. What in the nature of things accounts for that exceptional mega-concentration of gravitational forces that pulls all nearby matter into it?

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

NM: Yes, but it's like saying, "I'm a Yale man," or "Loyal to Harvard."

The built-in pitfall of these conversations is how do you keep from sounding sententious at one end and hollow at the other? Theological remarks tend to be pious and/or presumptuous. Nevertheless, I take this route because I am weary of the philosophical paradoxes and evasions that good Christians tie themselves up in, those mutually exclusive conundrums. "God's ways are mysterious" can be a cop-out. Resolutely, they evade any reply that can explore down to the root. The set of beliefs offered here, makes sense at least to me. And I would add: Having a view of the universe that makes sense to oneself is, I think, Jung's finest prescription for mental health. One of his conclusions was that nobody could be cured of their neurosis until they found their own vision of God. That may be a profound, even a fabulous idea. I believed it before I could articulate it so I was naturally excited when I came across that set of remarks in his work.

ML: Many people who believe in reincarnation would say 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—I believe there's a psychic wall within us that shuts off recollections of any previous existence. Think what your life would be if you knew about three or four previous spent and mis-spent lives. My memory is already failing for the one life I'm aware of. How could I handle the confusion of other existences that were also mine? I do think, however, that we retain deep instincts about previous incarnations. Sometimes we have reactions to events which 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 not ordinary. 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. Perhaps the soul is now turning over the soil of previous arid endeavors..

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 bear that.

ML: It kind of put me off reincarnation.

NM: Yes, that particular vanity is atrocious. It's unpleasant in the same manner that people who are devout Christians believe they're going to heaven because they're steadfast in their belief. Either way, it is self-aggrandizement.

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 an effect as courage? There are any number of men and women who are full of love but are nonetheless timid and cowardly and hate themselves for being cowardly—it poisons the 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, it would 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. Now, mind you, I'm not a macho maniac on courage. More than once 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 that such a soldier is braver even on balance than the average old lady, but we can't put a hierarchy concerning courage.

Still, my own experience tells me that to the degree one is brave, one finds more love than when one is cowardly.

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.

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. It can be just another form of emptiness traveling back and forth. Whereas when I'm feeling strong and also feel compassion or charity—on those rare occasions—there's real goodness present. 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 or sexual way.

NM: I'm not putting that down but I'm not ready to elevate 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 motive. Not to ignore the possible presence of God and the Devil. Contemplate the compromises, relations, treaties, surprises and

rebellions within any large personal act. People are also perfectly capable of rebelling against both God and the Devil, shutting them both out of one's existence as far as possible. There is the human ego—the notion that neither God nor the Devil know what they now want 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 equaled God and the Devil? Churchill, Napoleon—

NM: Napoleon, yeah. I think certain humans can free themselves to the point where both God and the Devil are working for them for a brief period. But, please, take us back again 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. She is all caught up in money and her jewels—we all know people like that—she's willing to sell herself to the Devil but even the Devil rejects her because at bottom she's a silly ass. He 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 clean latrines—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 can easily go to hell. And that's what enables conservatives to function. They can put up with inequity for others in this life because they feel there's a better existence waiting for those poor who are patient and good in horrible circumstances.

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 may have come out of these warring notions in the Creator.

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. I wish to suggest that it is in experiencing the play of this complexity that future theology could find its nourishment rather than the churchly insistence that God's final intentions are all in the Book. No, I do not see the laws of existence as etched in stone—with no deviation permitted. No absolute heaven or

absolute hell. Such concepts are devilish ways to confuse ourselves thoroughly. Because they don't add up. In terms of our experience, they don't make much 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 wretch is going to expire unless there's a breakout. This poor soul has to do something unpleasant before it can feel any life again." In this sense, God's compassion can also be present in an ugly or even an evil act.

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

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 to elements of Catholicism than 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 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 hurdles and obstacles 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 one more time to reincarnation. I feel that you have more to say on that.

NM: Yes. One matter we've not gotten into is my supposition that the atom bomb, the concentration camps and the gulags were mighty efforts by the Devil to foul up reincarnation, to choke off the subtlety of the divine judgment within reincarnation. I hope I've suggested the delicate dispositions 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, deliberate judgment. If the process is overloaded, it can break down.

ML: So mass slaughter fouls up the divine bureaucracy?

NM: Contemplate the mess in eternity when so many human creatures were being slaughtered at once and 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. Everything I say is based on such a premise. We may live in a universe that is expanding but there is not always endless energy available. No. No.

ML: Are 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 it mean that because the old family store gave way to the corporate chain, that the family store was inferior? Not necessarily. Not humanly.

ML: Let me ask you about evolution. You accept evolution. You know, the traditional Catholic belief here—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, I will say in parenthesis, that makes a great deal of sense to me. Because so many dogs, I find, are closer to the human than humans.

ML: Stretch evolution back—people from monkeys or dogs is no trouble at all. That's just three 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.

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 create 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 be primitive, but still a soul that gave the amoeba some intimation of direction,

some sense that it must do its best under its own limited circumstances. God, doubtless, was superior to the amoeba from the beginning, but God was also developing even as the Creation went from the amoeba to the paramecium to the multi-celled creature.

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

NM: Perhaps after God had endowed a great many higher animals and people with souls, He or She then decided, "I, as an artist, can improve on this. Certain of my creations would have turned out a lot better if they had not lived their lives under most grievous circumstances." So, God said, "Let us give them another chance to exercise their free will. Maybe they will be wiser." It comes down to something basic. God's notion: Let's make the Creation better. The Devil's: Let's maim the Creation. I have, says the Devil, something in mind that will supplant and replace it.

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

NM: For the sake of argument, let's say the Devil would want to fashion a universe on His or Her terms.

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

NM: Well, given my taste for speculation, it could be an immensely technological universe where the need for existence—individual

existence—and the concomitant need for soul would be less. That would be more to the Devil's taste: Individual units that function in relation to other more or less individual units. More spiritually mechanized. 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 approach that it all has to be destroyed, and don't ask questions. The Koran has all the answers. Once again we are at a point in history between the rock and the hard place.

INTERVIEW III

MICHAEL LENNON: I want to ask a question about purgatory. Do you feel some sympathy for that idea?

NORMAN MAILER: Some—and a fair portion of uneasiness. I will say that I expect there may be some sizable difficulties present after death, a universal hell, perhaps, of waiting that we may all have to go through before we are born again—those of us who will be born again. I will add that there's an automatic assumption in most people who are religious that God is not only all-powerful but instantaneous in His action. There's an Irish saying: "When God made time, He made a lot of it." So God could be instantaneous—but why would He want to be? Nevertheless, this expectation of quick reception and quick designation for one's afterlife is at odds with our own experience—which is that everything takes longer than

we think it will. That is the accrued wisdom of most men and women after many decades of life. In the economy of human experience, there are always time-consuming episodes you didn't anticipate. To assume that once you pass into another realm of existence things will be faster and more responsive—that is no small assumption. It's as ungrounded as to expect that there are no destinations in the hereafter other than purgatory, limbo, or hell. Another, after all, might be God's need to judge whether a particular soul should be reborn, or might as well expire. So purgatory might sit there as a set of possibilities with many a different but still unhappy holding tanks. God may look at three-quarters of us and say, "I don't want to make up my mind just yet," and drop us into slow purgatory, so to speak.

Now, what the form of this purgatory might be—whether it bears resemblance to a Palestinian refugee camp—I have no idea.

One of the beliefs I hold is that the hereafter is less different than we assume. We may have the same frustrations and difficulties in the after-life, overcrowding, for example, even, conceivably, waste. After the Holocaust, we were forced to recognize there was something absolutely murderous in our species—obviously, it was not just reserved for the Germans, there was something vastly destructive in our nature. We received this knowledge over and over again, in Russia, in China, in Africa,

in some of our own actions, indeed, in Vietnam. The point I want to make is that the Holocaust may have exacted a great price from God, even greater than from us. At the core of karma is the notion that it is composed of wise judgment. What if that is not always true? In the godly assessment of each life, in the reading of the soul, so to speak, that takes place after one dies, can it be that God sometimes says, "I'm too weary to think about this now?" After all, if God is an artist, is it always necessary to make instantaneous judgments? Under certain conditions of overcrowding, literal overcrowding in eternity of the sort caused by the Holocaust or Hiroshima, purgatory can become a vast way-station.

Let me try to expatiate on that. Given the number of people exterminated in a day during the Holocaust, the number of souls arriving in tumult, is it possible they became too great in number for God to measure with calm and justice? It may be that karma has been in a species of uproar ever since the Holocaust, the atom bomb, and the gulags.

The moment you postulate that God is striving to promulgate His vision across the stars, you are also postulating that the nature of the Beyond—to use another word than the Hereafter—is existential. Not fixed, but changing with cosmic circumstances.

ML: Well, you have certainly touched on my next question. You see God as an artist. I think all too often your visions of the Hereafter or the Beyond are built on your own experience of this life. Couldn't God just as well be an engineer?

NM: Absolutely.

ML: Or a general?

NM: Yes.

ML: A public administrator? Or a diplomat?

NM: Yes, yes.

ML: Those are all human occupations.

NM: How can God not be all those things? God is certainly an engineer. An engineer would see it all in terms of future construction. How do you organize the Hereafter? How do you arrive at the best levels of spiritual sanitation? Yes! Heavenly comfort stations for psychic waste are not necessarily to be taken for granted. When I speak of God as an artist, I don't pretend to mean that God might be a novelist, as if that is all God is up to. Finally, the word "artist" has hegemony over other professions because whatever else, it is creative. God is a creator. A Creator. I don't like the word "mega," it's been used too often, but God is, all right, at the least, a mega-artist. All the faculties of engineering, war, social building, art,

music, sport, painting, science, philosophy, medicine, herbology, are His or Hers, and at a level more highly developed than we can begin to conceive. But God is still an artist. A great engineer is an artist. So is a great general like Clausewitz or Robert E. Lee. So are the best in all human categories. We point to that in our own speech. We do speak of artists at war. That is the sense in which I want to use the word. I don't want to diminish this projection of what God might be. Let's think of the size of the Creation. Even if God is not all-powerful, we have only to contemplate the vast extent of flora and fauna, the painterly touches—to offer one example—revealed in the chromatic scales of a butterfly's wing.

ML: Well, the thing that did appeal to me about your notion of God as an artist, and indeed, as a novelist, is that novelists have to conceive of the destinies and the forked paths that people take through their lives, and so create the second phase, the third phase—in a sense, that's very much like God presiding over reincarnation—the second, third, fourth phase. God as an artist is portraying his or her conception of the metamorphoses in each character's destiny.

NM: Well, we are parts of God's vision certainly. I believe that, yes, lively but seriously skewed parts of God's vision. That, I would add quickly, is because the Devil is also present. I don't presume to say exactly what part

he plays in cosmic affairs, or local earthly matters—but in any event, we are not pure representations of God. We are tainted, warped, even treacherous in relation to the divine projects offered us. We are torn between God and the Devil and our own vanity can be counter to both of them. Across the centuries, human vanity has become a factor, a prodigious factor. The human ego, which has always been fearful of God's power, and the Devil's—that same human ego can still separate itself into a simulacrum of omnipotent confidence. There's nothing more irritating to most of us than the feeling that we are not completely under our own power, that other forces are pushing us, external forces which are stronger than we are. "Oh, God, here comes that awful compulsion starting up again." Whatever it is. Some impulse we consider unworthy of ourselves or too risky for our adventurous capacities, or opposed too magnetically to our spiritual inclinations.

ML: In *Advertisements for Myself*, you take sides. You say that humankind is roughly more good than evil.

NM: No. That was my assumption about the faith some of us have in democracy, our belief that it will work because there's more good than bad in us as a human multitude. That still remains to be proven.

ML: Still, if we are roughly more good than evil, wouldn't that signal the ultimate victory of good?

NM: There is no guarantee. This is an existential question—which is to say, a not-yet-determined answer. To say existential means you are in the midst of an activity to which you do not yet have a final result. Rather, you are living in the midst of an intense question. I think existentialism can only be understood in that manner.

ML: It becomes more and more clear to me all the time why courage must be the cardinal virtue in your cosmic scheme. If the forces of good are brave, strong, and daring, then there's a chance that evil will be defeated. Would the pacifism of a Gandhi or a Martin Luther King play into the Devil's hands, then? Would he applaud its use?

NM: Everything plays into the Devil's hands. We live in an immensely complicated mesh of cause and effect. I can make an argument for Gandhi and against him—that's no problem. One can also take either side for some great general: pro-Napoleon, let's say, or anti-Napoleon. Gandhi, finally, was a man of significant courage. He did something no one else had ever done before. He was a genius. So in that sense, he was searching for the answer to the same question I'm searching for, but at a much higher and much more dangerous level: are we more good than bad?

In India, the answer that came back to him before he died was that we may be more bad than good. The immense riots as he came to power—those events had to be a spiritual disaster for him. So I certainly don't sneer at Gandhi nor would I wish to systematize him by declaring, "Oh, he brought on so much that was bad because he advocated passivity." After all, his kind of passivity demanded huge courage. And discipline. Heroic passivity. One of the things we might do well to begin to try to understand as humans will be our future need to reconstruct the essential energy contained in oxymorons. Certain oxymorons are absurdities, so many indeed that we feel free to dismiss all of them by saying, "It's an oxymoron." But there are a few which are vital and valuable. One of them is "heroic passivity." There, one's experience must serve as the arbiter. There can be heroic passivity, or quasi- heroic passivity. The latter can be a disaster. And we've all seen that. Stubborn, frantic passivity—certain pacifists we'd like to throw down the stairs.

ML: What came first in your scheme of things? Belief in courage as the cardinal virtue? Or, does your vision of the divided universe require courage to be the cardinal virtue?

NM: I would rather go back to God's experience as He or She was creating the flora and fauna of existence, all those incredible biological experiments

that went on over millions of years. Plus, most crucially, the percipience gathered from the failures. Think of the excitement of God when the dinosaur came into being, the immense excitement that He had something pretty big and pretty formidable. Then it proved too big—badly designed. The record of bad design in evolution could stuff the shelves of many a library. Yet what became obvious was that animals who had courage, or those plants which had a kind of odd integrity, if you will, in terms of their environment, seemed to do better for the most part than those who didn't. Of course, there are animals—we can see this directly—there are animals who had too much courage. This notion of balance underwriting courage is what God began to search for.

ML: Let me shift a little bit over to the dark side, to the Devil. If things are indeed getting worse, if Satan, as you seem to fear, could be winning—why would the Devil wish to destroy the world, rather than run the world as an ultimate tyrant? Wouldn't he wish to rule humans, convert them to his evil slaves and minions, rather than destroy them?

NM: Let's start with the Devil's point of view—the word evil is not even present for him.

ML: Evil is his good as in Paradise Lost?

NM: He might see it that way. It's such a blatant speculation, let's have a little fun with it. My guess is that the Devil sees God as incompetent. After all, the Devil is a fallen angel, that I assume. Why? Because certain geniuses have come along who had intimations of what our origins might be. Milton was certainly one. I think Milton is as good a rule of thumb for approaching this matter of God and the Devil as anything I've come across. Homage to Milton. So, I propose that the Devil's belief is that He or She could end up with a better world, a better form of existence, a more sophisticated, more intelligent, well-run notion of things. Now, what are the Devil's means? Well, our fear is that he could destroy the whole world in order to start over again. There, I'm out on the end of my mental belay—does the Devil have the same creative powers that God does to create animals, plants, humans, a system? Or is the Devil a parasite, essentially, upon God? That's a question I wouldn't presume to answer.

That's why I have more trouble dealing with the notion of the Devil than with God. It's relatively more direct to deal with the notion of God as the Creator.

ML: But if you see the Devil as capable of defeating God, he must have equal powers.

NM: Well, even at the highest level, there is such a matter as mindless destruction. When you can't win, you destroy the game. The spoiled kid who picks up the marbles comes in all forms. But such a kid hardly has to be the best of player. If the Devil feels that He or She cannot gain those powers that are needed to form a new universe, the rage generated may be so intense that the next move is to destroy the works. Talk about "rank speculation," let's suppose the Devil is treacherous and has sold his birthright to some other god in the cosmos, and will do His or Her best to turn over a paralyzed, inane, stupid, mainly-destroyed world to someone who can build it up. The Devil could be a lieutenant, rather than a major-domo. In that case, the game starts all over again.

These notions of what the Devil might be are not nearly so comfortable as assuming that God is an imperfect creator. That makes sense to me. But the Devil could be this, that, anything—I don't know. One guess: Technology is an arm of the Devil, which I think is probably true. Still, technology could be a third force, ready to destroy both God and the Devil—man's assertion against God and the Devil.

The questions are wide open. No way to propose answers yet, but perhaps the question will become somewhat more focused as the new century goes on. As of now, for example, I would assume technology is

indeed the Devil's force. Why? I feel it viscerally. That's the best I can offer. I think of all the things I've detested for all these years, starting with plastic. It seems to me plastic is a perfect weapon in the Devil's armory. For it desensitizes human beings. Living in and with plastic, we are subtly sickened. And the Devil looks to destroy God's hope in us. Whether this effort looks to attain a world that can be taken over, or whether the Devil, to the contrary, aims to acquire a ruined world, or works toward a world transferable to some other god—are, I repeat, questions that obviously remain far beyond our reach right now.

ML: So you're not sure whether the Devil is ambitious or nihilistic?

NM: Why must you see that as contradictory? As a novelist, I would say some characters in Dostoyevsky are both nihilistic and immensely ambitious. The two go together. Frustrated ambition can turn quickly to nihilism. A rotten fruit can grow poisonous.

ML: You seem to be in agreement with some of the other religions of the world on the role of saints.

NM: Saints?

ML: Do you see them as intermediaries, or do they play a larger role, a prophetic role? Do they actually see themselves as instruments of God,

paralleling demons on the other side? I wonder if you could say something about saints and monsters.

NM: Hagiography is not my strong point. I would guess, given my general hypotheses, that very few of the saints were wholly bona-fide. By that I mean, vastly more good than bad. I would think some of them had incredible powers. I believe many saints were perfectly capable of small miracles—that doesn't bother me a bit. I would take that for granted. There are such things as psychic powers and they can be raised to a very high degree in certain humans.

But the idea that saints are as good as the hagiographers have made them out to be does give great pause because, finally, the Catholic Church may be the most complex and powerful and manipulative and intricate power system in history. But from what we have learned about history, we also know that most powerful people rewrite history to their own specifications. Many a saint may have been built up into much more than that saint deserved—the Church needed him or her at the moment. Nonetheless, I also subscribe to the notion that some people do represent the best and most magical elements in God. That is not a concept I would scorn. I believe there were, and are, saints. I would just approach them more critically than might a devout Catholic.

ML: I guess I agree with you. In each period, the Church has to create saints of a certain stripe. But one thing that struck me about your scheme is your declaration that most of us don't know most of the time whether our actions are ultimately for good or for ill or, indeed, which side we're helping, which hindering. But saints struck me as those who might have greater premonitions, greater knowledge of what was to come and what certain human actions could do to advance the cause of good. And, I can see a similar faction on the side of the Devil—those who asked, "What can I do to bring down, hurt, or destroy some strength of the Lord?" In that sense, human demons would also be more aware of their mission.

NM: Yes, saints are imbued with the fundamental belief that what they're doing is absolutely right—when it may not be. There's many a saint who might prove to be a devil on closer examination. And many a devil may have been working perversely to undermine the Devil.

ML: I want to challenge your idea about things getting worse—with a couple of brief statistics. I chose these carefully. In 1900, the average American lived to be 46 years old. Six percent of Americans graduated from high school. Only 14 percent of homes had a bath tub. Six percent had a telephone—the flush toilet was a rarity in 1900. And so on. Perhaps, as you have said, the level of language was higher among the intelligentsia.

But the vast majority had hardly any books in their homes. Today, a thousand books, I believe, are published every day, world wide.

So technology with all its drawbacks has changed everything in our lives. I take it you would argue these are just local effects, short-term gains and that in the long run, despite any of these specific advances, technology is yet going to overwhelm us, even destroy us.

NM: All the modern assumptions about progress are present in what you just defended. But progressivism has yet to prove itself. Of course, all those things you cited have made life easier. I don't want to be a bore about this, but nuclear warfare also came along. And we live in a more diffuse state of general anxiety than people did in 1900. People were locked up then in all sorts of terrors, intimations, obsessions and paralyzing anxieties, but it was all sort of local, and particular. Now, you have general anxiety. Of a very large and pervasive sort.

The argument: Did we really improve anything spiritually? For instance, were people better off when they had to squat over a hole in the ground and so could smell their own product? Maybe they were a little closer to themselves than they are now. It's analogous to my argument about contraception. That always gets me into trouble. It's interesting that women did not seem to conceive as often or as easily in the Middle Ages.

And, in that time, many of the babies died in their first year. But the ones who survived may have been hardier than the mass of us now. If we proceed further, we have to get into all the complex arguments over whether modern medicine is a blessing or a vitiator of human potentiality. Because today, it is not only the strongest who survive. Nobody will go near this argument because it's so Hitlerian. It may be that Hitler was not only the Devil's greatest achievement, but also destroyed any possibility of thinking along the lines he laid out. People shrink the moment you say courage is important. They think, "Believe in that and you'll end up a Nazi." Hitler did more than anyone to spoil the possibility of exploring our time—the world was left with no more than conservatism and progressivism. The more interesting human philosophies, like existentialism, were cut off.

To this day, people don't like existentialism, they hate the notion that their philosophical feet cannot always be placed on a familiar floor. Well, keep living in the familiar contexts, and it can prove stultifying. Liberals can be most stultifying. That dreadful remark—"It's a human life you're talking about"—as if all human lives are equal, as if no human life should ever be extinguished—this is a staple of political correctness, the fierce, unruly, and manic child of progressivism. So, when you present these things, I would prefer to come back with a gentle, broad answer, to say, yes,

life is certainly more comfortable than it used to be, and there are more opportunities for most than there ever were, although, of course, they may be used in more mediocre fashion than similar opportunities a hundred years ago. But lives may also be more drenched in anxiety of a sort we can't locate, an anxiety that lives in us in such a way that we don't even have nightmares any longer—what we have are various stretches of poor sleep and uneasiness. I think we're weaker and more confused. I think we wander all over the place. We're also louder and more loudish.

You can ask yourself: Is this society better when it has every creature comfort that's been developed up to now, and has a president like George W. Bush, as, say, opposed to Abraham Lincoln 140 years ago? Perhaps. Or perhaps we have less progress than we supposed.

ML: Do you agree that many, if not most humans, have an inherent, or an imprinted, or intuitive belief in God as all-powerful. They can't think of God in any other way. Lots of people will say, "My intuitions are as good as Norman Mailer's, and I can't imagine a God who isn't all-powerful."

NM: Their intuitions may be more powerful than mine. Let me, however, go through my beliefs—sketchily. When I was a child, I believed in an all-powerful God. Of course. Most children do. Then there was a period when I was a fierce atheist. For many years! By now, philosophically speaking,

atheism is more incomprehensible to me than the notion that there's a Creator. And to this day, if I were arguing with an atheist, I would suggest: "The burden of proof is on you. You have much more to explain about how we're here if you insist that there's nothing behind our existence."

But I would certainly never argue that fundamentalists don't have intense feelings. They're immensely intense. Too intense. I think this intensity reflects how terrifying the whole thing is to them. The horror for all too many would come down to this: If it all ends badly, we humans are also responsible. You see, the message of the all-powerful God is, finally: "You're not responsible. Just keep your nose clean, observe ritual, and you'll be taken care of after you die." I think fundamentalism is a reflection of the deepest fears people have about dying. They feel that if they follow all the rules, they won't go to something worse. They take to fundamentalism because it restricts the extent of their responsibility.

I remember in my play, The Deer Park, at the end, its hero, who is dying, says, "Where I go, I do not know. It may be for worse." And that is the secret terror that supports fundamentalism. Police systems are built on it. The policeman's phrase, "Keep your nose clean," is one more aspect of fundamentalism. And the true believers' dependence on Revelation is also immense but for just that reason. I would go so far as to argue that

fundamentalism is one of the Devil's strongest tools: the Devil adores fundamentalism because it keeps people from thinking. So long as people are incapable of pursuing a thought to where it leads they can't begin to carry out God's notions. The irony is that by subscribing (they think) to God's will, they become insensitized to the sensitivities of divine will. They wall themselves out. They cannot work with God's will even if they long to.

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

NM: I'm less familiar with them, so I feel less negative. But I still feel suspicious. If I were a serious theologian, I would devote my years right now to studying the Koran and reading up on Buddhism, but I don't, because there are other things I wish to do with the remaining years. Still, my suspicion is great that I would find the Koran as difficult to live with as the Old and New Testaments.

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

ML: I think you're really a Gnostic.

NM: That has no meaning for me either. But let's *get* into it, at least in passing. I've been called a Manichean, a Gnostic. I am certainly not a Manichean because I don't believe there's necessarily a happy ending built into the end-game.

ML: It's the Zoroastrians who really believe that. The Manicheans believe good will win but it won't be a total victory. They believe that evil will have stolen some of the light.

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

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

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

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

NM: I can believe that. Absolutely. Once again, I will say, I'm a novelist. We tend to think that way, it's a natural way of thought. Nothing is one hundred percent. The point of writing novels is to show what the costs are in human activities. If I may quote myself again, at the end of The Deer

Park, Eitel is told by a former wife, "Charlie, you have real dignity now," and he thinks it's a nice compliment. "Because what was dignity, real dignity, but a knowledge of the cost, the frightful cost, of every human desire?" I've always liked that line because for me, it's the essence of the novel, the frightful cost of human desire.

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

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

NM: I know her work slightly. Dwight Macdonald used to write about her with adoration in the years right after World War II.

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

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

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

ML: Before that, God existed alone in His endless powers. Then suddenly He created something—He gave something away. Weil believed that humans had a role to play because of this power-sharing, as did the Devil who profited immensely by God's creative act. She's saying that God lost by doing this.

NM: God lost and God gained. God acquired knowledge by creating us that God could not have had without creating us. So it's not just that God lost. That gets us into reverential notions of God again. Ideally, what I'd like to keep is huge respect for the fact that we were created by something or someone marvelous, who is not wholly unlike ourselves. Therefore, we can identify with that God, identify with God's drama as well as our own and thereby feel larger. Not, "Oh, God, oh, God, don't punish me, please!" Or, "God, dear God, please help me!" The reason I've never found Islam the least bit attractive, is, you know, the prayer ritual. Kneel down, present your buttocks to the sky, and recognize that you are totally weak before the wrath of God. Well, we're totally weak before anything and everything that is vastly larger than ourselves. If this is what religion consists of, our recognition of being totally weak, and God taking care of us, provided we never, ever cross any one of a thousand carefully laid-out lines—then I think existence is knotted up. And, of course the unspoken root of the

nightmare in so much of Islam is precisely their present deep-seated fear. "What if we're wrong?" they must be thinking. "We've been doing it this way for 1500 years—and now, where are we?" It's like someone who's been married for 50 years saying, "Have I been with the wrong woman all this while?" Conceive of the hate people could have for a church or a marriage if they left it after that many years.

ML: Let me shift our subject. What are the reasons—as far as you can surmise—that a soul is chosen for reincarnation? Does God or His aides choose to extinguish some hideous souls, or must the souls acquiesce, give up and, in effect, commit eternal suicide, give up and go out of existence?

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

ML: Gary Gilmore.

NM: His soul was not too weary. On the contrary, he didn't want his soul to die. He was the exact opposite. He wanted his body to die so his soul wouldn't be extinguished. He felt if he didn't seek the death penalty but stayed in jail for his remaining 20 or 30 years, that his soul would expire from the sheer misery of living in jail, the emptiness of it, the ongoing, endless, emptiness of living in prison if you'd already used up, as he had, all

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

Generally speaking, however, most souls are probably not willing to die that easily. On the other hand, the soul may not have the vigor to pass through endless reincarnations. If a cat has nine lives—what does a human soul possess? Three lives? It's boundlessly speculative. Cosmically so. But then, you are asking: How does God choose? How do God and His aides choose?

ML: Can God execute a soul?

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

Absolutely.

But God hates to give up on an interesting artistic possibility in a human. So, let's say He might take very bad people and have them

reincarnated. Why? Is it to fill out the picture, to have a certain darkness, shadows for a certain corner? That is one of the clerical responses to explain why God tolerates evil. Of course I would argue with that. I would say God sees wonderful potentialities in awful people. One of the reasons they were so awful was because they had large potentialities that became frustrated early (or late) and so turned into their opposite. Concerning this particular soul, therefore, God wants to try again. Or, to the contrary, take the case of someone who is perfectly bland and pleasant, good and decent, yet God is not vitally interested. That soul has done about what it's going to do and is no longer interesting to the Lord's higher purpose. God might then decide: We can only reincarnate him or her in something much lower. We have to see if it responds to the stimulation of a more demanding life. Or God may decide—not worth repeating. Just as an artist can be ruthless, so can God be to humans with mediocre lives. So, reincarnation is, I think, the nexus of judgment.

For example, if someone has an adventurous soul, but physically they were weakened by early childhood illnesses, they might be endowed with more strength next time out. God could send them to stronger parents. But that could also produce larger demands. To justify God's new intention, you might have to become a skilled heavyweight. Think of what you'd have to

endure to get there. Does this soul, interesting at present, have such capacity or not? God is experimenting. God is looking to find out. God, like a parent, learns from what the children accomplish and from where they fail. Why not assume that with all else we are also part of an enormous spiritual laboratory.

ML: I'm still having trouble understanding how evolution and reincarnation—which are both part of your scheme, mesh. Did they begin simultaneously? Evolution with its attempts to make species stronger, better, more durable, fits your scheme well. And reincarnation is often seen as an upward ladder, although souls can often go down as well as up. The idea of reincarnation, after all, is improvement, moral progress. Are both reincarnation and evolution completely controlled by God? Are their purposes intertwined?

NM: I've been saying all along—God does not control our destiny.

ML: No, I understand, but. . .

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

Economically speaking, it may not be economic for a divinity to look to direct every one of us. God may just not be master of such resources.

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

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

We can't think of God in terms of age, but we can certainly see ourselves in that manner. There are periods where we may get more from God, when we're young, for example. When we're old, we may be obliged to give back more. Not necessarily to God, but to the way we influence other people, the way we amplify His or Her vision or worsen it, indeed there are some things God can only learn from contemplating our direct experience. So God may be with us a good deal of the time. With certain people, I think God and the Devil are there most often. Certain kinds of highly dynamic people, certain kinds—just to take a flier on this—certain kinds of entertainers. They may be full of God and the Devil every moment they are on stage because there's such charisma in them, and such lightning changeability. It's so difficult to know if you're dealing then with someone who's good, evil, or just exceptional.

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

NM: What would it be? We're talking about the macro-economic and the micro-economic. Reincarnation is micro. My point is, that to the degree

that careful attention is given to one particular reincarnation, finally, it's not perfect. There are times when God is better at it than at other times.

It may be that after the double blow of the Holocaust and the atom bomb, reincarnation was mucked up badly. There was just too much to do. One example would be the ugliness of cities that were flattened by the war. The way they were rebuilt may have been necessary but it certainly was dreadful. By-the-numbers architecture. It may be that people are finally much less interesting today than they were 100 and 200 years ago when they didn't have flush toilets.

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

INTERVIEW IV

Authority of the Senses

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

NORMAN MAILER: My basic premise proposes that there's a different mixture of God and the Devil in every one of us. Some of that variety

creates the shape of our character. You'll hear one person say about another, "He's a good guy, he's stand-up, but he sure can be a son of a bitch." In ourselves and others, we find this constant interplay of good and bad.

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

ML: What's the role of the senses?

NM: I would say the senses were given to us by God. If I'm ready to go in for speculations such as these, I would even go so far as to say that mind may have been the contribution of the Devil. Or, at least, more so than God. How can I justify such a remark? Animals seem to function extraordinarily well on their instinct and their senses. To a large degree they have community—ants, bees, all the way up to primates. There is an extraordinary amount of communication we can witness in animals and they are undeniably superior to us in one manner. They don't go around

slaughtering each other in huge numbers. If, by every other mode of moral judgment, we see ourselves as superior, still we know that animals left to themselves are not going to destroy the universe. But we could. So, it may be a true question: Did the Devil invent mind? Or is this still God's domain? Or, more likely, does the search for dominance there become the field of battle.

There is no question in my mind that the Devil did enter mind. And not being the first Creator, did His best to invade the senses as well. To corrupt the senses. But the question is more complex than any of us can resolve. The key may be to assume that the senses are neither wholly God-given nor Devil-ridden.

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

NM: St. Thomas Aquinas said that, and Hemingway, in his way: "If it feels good, it is good." I've never read Aquinas in depth but I was taken with the notion that the most formal of the Catholic philosophers had presented this rule of thumb. What I think it means—leave Aquinas out of it—is that we must trust the authority of the senses because that is the closest contact we have to the Creator. However, it is a most treacherous undertaking. As anyone who's ever enjoyed a drink knows, the authority of the senses on a

boozy spree is exceptional. You feel so much, see so much—and that's even more true on marijuana. You trust the authority of the senses until, perhaps, they become so intense that God and the Devil seem to be there working with you full time. We've all had the experience of an extraordinary trip on drink, and/or pot, but what I know is that the end result ends as often in disaster as happiness. I won't pretend that every time you get drunk beyond measure, nothing good will happen. It occurred to me at a certain point in my life that I had never, up to that moment, gone to bed with a woman for the first time without being drunk. Since some of the most important experiences of my life occurred that way, I can hardly wish to argue that drink serves the Devil alone.

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

ML: You have me thinking of Blake's line: "the road of excess leads to the palace of wisdom."

NM: It's implicit in what I just said, but I think I'd be happier if the line had gone: "the road of excess can lead at times, to wisdom." I'm not in favor of excess because I've ruined too much of myself in just that way. Blake did have an apocalyptic mind which he served manfully. Full-time. It's one of

the reasons his remarks inspire the highest flights of fancy. But on the other hand, he is seen by our modern spirit as signally impractical.

ML: The other thing you said that gave me pause was how the Devil invades mind. On more than one occasion you have suggested that scientific thinking undercuts metaphoric, intuitive thinking, and I wonder if that is what you see as the invasion of mind by the Devil. Scientific method, logic, linear thinking, is opposed to the leaps of intuition in metaphor.

NM: Often. It seems to me our minds work on two disparate systems. One is based on the senses. Metaphor, for example, is almost impossible without being somewhat attuned to nature, to its often subtle shifts of mood. That depends so much on one's senses. But then there is another faculty of mind that can be as cold as the polar cap. Indeed, it is a readiness to repel the senses, distrust them, even calumniate them as powers of distortion. This readiness to free oneself from the senses may be exercised most by the Devil.

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

own senses brought their creative intimations to the atom bomb. On the contrary. It was an abstraction away from the senses, a pure flight of mind that came to the conclusion that it was possible to make the bomb, and then, that it had to be done. Not only to defeat Japan, but for the furtherance of science itself.

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

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

ML: Thomas's Gospel is, of course, not in the Bible, but is a suppressed apocrypha, discussed most recently by Elaine Pagels. In her book, Thomas's Gospel states that as human beings, we all have the obligation to "bring forth what is within." And if we do, it will save us. If you keep in what is in, repress it, whatever it is—it will destroy you.

NM: I used to believe that entirely. I now think it to be generally true, but risky. Because what does it mean to bring forth what is within? I work on the notion that there's godliness within us and diabolism as well. So to bring forth what is within you, it is necessary, very often, to send out the worst elements of yourself. Because if they stay within, they can poison you. That is much more complex than saying, "Get it out! Act it out. Be

free, man! Liberate yourself." Because very often what comes out is so bad that it injures others, sometimes dreadfully. You could say that every crime of violence is a way of getting the ugliness in oneself out, acting it out, doing it. You could even advance the argument that there are people who will contain what is ugly within them—and that's their honor. It's a complex matter—often there are people who will sacrifice themselves in order not to injure others. For example, if you act out something dreadful in yourself, if, for example, the need to get falling-in-the-gutter-drunk thereby intensifies the miseries of everyone in your family, it is doing nothing good for others. Or excessive gambling. Or beating children. Or entering sexual relations with them. To the degree that certain ugly emotions are acted out, others are injured terribly by your freedom to do so. I could argue that it is often a Devil's urge you are expressing.

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

ML: How do you answer that?

NM: Well, I can give you one story: It's fascinated me for years. At a certain time in my life I was feeling rocky. My third wife had decided she didn't want to go on with our marriage at a time when I had been hoping, "Maybe this time I can start to build a life." She was a very interesting

woman but easily as difficult as myself. So when she broke it up, I didn't know where I was. And I remember one night wandering around Brooklyn through some semi-slums—not the hard slums but some of the tougher neighborhoods a mile or two out from my house in Brooklyn—not even knowing what I was looking for, but going out, drinking in a bar, sizing up the bar, going to another bar—looking—this is ironic but in those days, you actually would go to a bar and look for a woman. I think you still can, but it's been so long now since I did it that I can no longer speak with authority. Anyway, I found no woman. I went into an all-night diner—because I realized I was hungry, not only drunk but hungry—and ordered a donut and coffee, finished it. Then a voice spoke to me. I think it's one of the very few times I felt God was speaking to me. Now, of course, one can be dead wrong. I go back to Kierkegaard—just when you think you're being saintly, you're being evil; when you think you're being evil, you might be fulfilling or abetting God's will at that point. In any event, this voice spoke to me, and said, "Leave without paying."

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

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

Now, I've thought about this often because it's a perfect example of how difficult it is for us to know at a given moment whether we're near to God or to Satan. Which is why fundamentalists can drive you up the wall—their sense of certainty is the most misleading element in their lives. It demands, intellectually speaking, spiritually speaking, that one must remain at a fixed level of mediocrity. It's a great irony. Because many of them who are good Christians, or Orthodox Jews, are compassionate. I don't know much about Islam but I'm sure the same is true there—you can have fine people, wonderful people, fundamentalists full of compassion but they attach that tenderness—which as far as I'm concerned is godly, is, if you will, Christly—I can say in passing if God was ever going to mingle in our

affairs, Christ is more than a metaphor. Compassion is probably the finest emotion we humans can have. When tears come to our eyes for the sorrow of someone else, that may be as close as we get to reaching the best element in ourselves. But, there again, it's difficult to know how pure any moment of compassion is. And when it is manufactured by constant adjurations being applied to the daily habits of fundamentalists, comparison becomes the opposite of itself, turns compassion, and can grow into an instrument for power.

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

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

NM: I accept your point. I do search for an ethic I can believe in. And that is where I go back to trusting the authority of my senses. They can also be—what's the word I'm looking for?—translated. To the degree that the

Devil may affect our senses, they can become a perfect place for him to get to us. That would be the Devil's aim exactly—to enter our senses, make us feel we are having a godly emotion when in fact, we are being inspired by the Devil.

Nonetheless, my religious idea is that I won't offer any bones as gifts to construct an ethic. The worst to be said about fundamentalism is that it reduces people to the reflexes of a good dog. If a good dog is upset, give it a bone.

ML: Fundamentalism is comfortable.

NM: It's comfortable, but it is limiting. I keep going back to Kierkegaard, who, for my money, was probably the most profound Christian. He not only searched into the complexity of our relations to divinity but to diabolism as well. He knew that we must take nothing for granted in the moral firmament., We cannot kneel forever before the neon sign that purports to be God's mystery. "Don't ask, just obey!"

We can, of course, for the sake of this argument pay another visit to the subject of fundamentalism. After all, a good many fundamentalists do function with vigor. Their lives have been simplified. They don't worry over questions that are debilitating. They function very well—at their medium level. No great writer ever came out of fundamentalism. Nor any

great scientist. To my knowledge, very few talented actors came out of fundamentalism—or stayed with it for long. Never a genius of any kind, not since Augustine and Aquinas.

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

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

So, the fundamentalists, beneath everything else, feel the same fears that existential thinkers suffer—that the whole thing can come to an end. Fundamentalists look to alleviate that fear by way of what I would call their desperate belief that it's "God's will," and at the end they will be transported to Heaven. Well, once again, this supposes that God is all good and all powerful, and will carry the righteous right up there. Of course, that offers nothing to the idiocies of human history, particularly that the more we develop as humans, the worse we are able to treat one another. Why?

Because we now have the power to destroy each other at higher, more unfeeling levels. This can be epitomized again and again by the concentration camps. Telling poor wretches that they're going to have a shower to get rid of lice—and instead they die with a curse in their hearts. That's more hideous, in a certain sense, than dropping a bomb on 100,000 people—on people you know nothing about. And yet you have fundamentalists carrying on about abortion, speaking of it as thwarting God's will. What does it have to do with God's will if you kill a thousand people in one minute with gas? Or destroy hundreds of thousands in an instant of atomic man-made lightning from the sky? What does that do to God's will?

We might assume that God, like us, is doing the best that can be done under the circumstances. God is our Creator. God put us here. We are God's artistic vision, we are God's children if you will, and it's not a good parent who looks always to control the child. The mark of a good parent is they can take joy in the moment when a developing child begins to outstrip the parent. God is immensely powerful but is not all-powerful. God is powerful enough to give us lightning and thunder and extraordinary sunsets, incredible moments where we appreciate God's sense of beauty. But if God is all-powerful, then how can you begin to explain the monstrosities of

modern history? There are theological arguments by great theologians that these horrors are to test us. But this reduces our concept of God to a stage director who says, "Let the actors follow the script. No not give them access to the playwright."

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

NM: Yes. I believe that.

ML: Doesn't that suggest we are more good than evil?

NM: Potentially more good. When a good man and a good woman have a child, there's every reason to believe that child will be a good person. But it's not guaranteed. Good parents can have evil children.

ML: If we're created in God's image and we're potentially good, but then choose evil, perhaps we were evil all along.

NM: Look—not evil all along. If, at creation, the Devil was present and entered us as well, then what we speak of as original sin can be seen as God's obligatory collaboration with the Devil. We were born good and evil.

ML: Fifty-fifty?

NM: Who would presume to say? The point is, whether it's 50-50, 60-40, 70-30, the odds change in each of us because there's an intense war that

goes on forever, not only between God and the Devil but—I've said this before—God and the Devil as they war within us. We make our own bargains with Them. God and the Devil do not have the resources to be in complete control of us all the time. It isn't as if we walk through a normal day and there's God on one shoulder and the Devil on the other—not at all. They come to us when we attract their attention because it affects Their interest as well as ours. What I use as the notion behind these notions is that divine energy is analogous to human energy—it is not inexhaustible. God and the Devil are each obliged to manage their own economies of energy, which is to say that they will give more attention to certain elements of human behavior than to others. Very often they withdraw from certain people. Too much is being given, too little is coming back.

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

Jean Malaquais once made a splendid remark—at least for me—during the course of a lecture. He was a brilliant lecturer and in the middle of a verbal flight—this was at the New School—some kid said bitterly:

"You never give us answers. You only pose questions." And Jean stopped in the full flight of his rhetoric and replied, "There are no answers. There are only questions."

The point is that the purpose of life may be to find higher and better questions. Why? Because what I believe—this is wholly speculative but important to me—is that we are here as God's work, here to influence His future as well as ours. We are God's expression, and not all artworks are successful. But we are here because God has a vision of existence that is at odds with other visions of existence in the universe. There we get into the real question of cosmic existence. There may be a major-domo at the core—maybe not. There may be gods—the heavens may be analogous to pagan times. These gods are fighting for dominance over one another.

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

our lives. If I am doing a crossword puzzle, there is no high motive necessarily involved. Instead, the activity might be to some most modest degree on the side of evil—I'm consuming time that could be spent in better ways. Or, to the contrary, I might be preparing my system to get ready for something worthwhile. It's not a large question: I do the crossword puzzle and I don't think about it as good or evil. And I don't think of myself as good or evil so much as probably leaning slightly in the right direction or the wrong one when it comes down to how I am exercising my time.

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

So what I'm offering to people as an ethic is to have the honor to live with confusion. Live in the depths of confusion with the knowledge back of that, the certainty back of that, or the belief, the hope, the faith, whatever you wish to call it, that there is a purpose to it all, that it is not absurd, that we are all engaged in a vast cosmic war and God needs us. That doesn't mean we can help God by setting up a set of principles to live by. We can't. Why not? Because the principles vary. The cruelest obstacle to creating one's own ethic is that no principle is incorruptible. Indeed, to cleave to a principle is to corrupt oneself. To shift from one principle to another can, however, be promiscuous. Life is not simple. Ethics are almost incomprehensible, but they exist. There is a substratum of moderate, quiet, good feeling—generally, if I'm doing things in such a way that the sum of all my actions at the moment seems to be feasible and responsible and decent, that certainly gives me a better feeling than if I am uneasy, dissatisfied with myself and not liking myself.

Now, obviously, there is room for error. We all know about vanity. There are people who, when they like themselves, are dangerous. When they think they are extraordinary and fabulous, they can be awful.

ML: So it isn't so much that you have no ethical system, but one that cannot be abstracted, nor carved on tablets for people to carry around and consult

whenever they have to make a decision. Life is always more complicated than any rule that can be laid down.

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

In the same way, sometimes, for short periods in our lives, I think there's an analogous sense of perfection to all sorts of basic emotions—in love, in nurture, in caring for people, in grieving, in mourning—it's very hard to mourn, mourn openly and honestly. Mourning is an element in people's lives that can be duplicitous, even ugly. Take a wife who's been married to a man for forty years—and in her mourning, what if she detects a secret spot of glee? "That selfish bastard is finally gone." So mourning can be shocking for people because they discover sides of themselves they never knew existed. Or the reverse. Sometimes people die whom you thought you didn't care that much about, and you discover you have lost something

or someone valuable to you. So there is the constant element of discovering yourself—not in the time-consuming way people do in psychoanalysis where every little act has to be analyzed and re-analyzed until the air in the room is stale. Rather, just like making love, it's a matter of being sensitive to the moment, reflecting the moment as best you can. And that is not an easy matter. You want a few general ethical principles from me? Remarks I'd even offer to a stranger? Well, then, if possible, I would say to the stranger, "Give up smoking." Because that tends to block a good deal of sensitivity in yourself. It serves the will. I used to smoke two packs a day—why? Because it served my will, particularly when it came to writing. Took me a year to learn how to begin writing again once I did give it up. Perhaps I became a better writer. My point is, anything that will enable you to get closer to yourself, good or bad—in other words, being close to oneself can be much more unpleasant than being at a distance from oneself. That is why most people do choose, indeed, to be a bit removed from themselves. And so often—here's the dirty little secret—that's why they smoke.

ML: But you know, I remember something else you said about getting close to yourself. It's stuck with me. I don't even remember where you said it—

you might have brought it up in conversation, but you declared: "If you dig deep enough into yourself, you're going to come out your asshole."

NM: [laughs]

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

NM: Well, of course you have to be careful about certain doors. Anyone who flings everything ajar at once would be blown away. A mighty change could rage through all the rooms in your psyche. One of the most jealously self-protective elements in human nature may be to protect oneself from one's own dark and barricaded corners.

So I don't think it's a real problem that we're going to open, by mistake, all the doors at once—we don't. We can't. What I meant by the closer you get to yourself, the closer you are to coming out of your own asshole has to do with something I'd like to attach to this discussion concerning the nature of defecation, shit, and waste. It may be worth getting into. As a small premise, think of people who are terribly prudish about evacuation. They don't want to think about it, don't talk about it, it's beneath them, they hope it is terribly far away from them. I'd say ethically speaking, that's not a comfortable way to be. Far better that when you're

sitting on the throne—parenthetically, it's interesting that we have that metaphor, "the throne," precisely for the toilet—when you're sitting on the throne, you do well to be regal about it and enjoy the sniffs of your own waste. Smell your own shit, and decide for yourself if you're a little more healthy or a little more unhealthy than you thought you were the last time you sat down. That's part of being close to yourself. You take this notion that what comes out of you may be unpleasant but it is certainly real. It can be the nearest we come to a fact. It's like hearing your own voice unexpectedly—so often it's too shrill, too arrogant, too peremptory, too spoiled, or harsh. To the degree we can hear our own voice, we improve our relation with other people. Because if we find our own voice unpleasant, at times, then if the other person starts shrieking at us, we don't have to think, "How unstable is the other." Not if we can recognize that our own voice was ugly enough to incite the response.

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

ML: This being attuned and listening and paying attention to the self—as you were speaking, I kept thinking, "This is positively Jamesian." James would sense the tiniest shifts in perception. Now he probably wasn't interested in smelling shit very much—not at all.

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

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

NM: No, no.

ML: What is their use then?

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

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

adultery in order to avoid doing worse things like screaming too much at the kids.

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

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

NM: Not qualify. I want us to cease looking upon them slavishly. Once one becomes a peon to any part of one's mind, one is then open to the dark side of the moon, which is mass destruction.

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

NM: I've read Emerson but only in passing, and that for a simple reason. One, I think he's a great writer, and two, I did feel close enough to him to think, "If I study him, I could end up trying to write wonderful pieces about Emerson." My arrogance, my vanity, if you will, is that I am out on my own explorations. I've had that rare experience, probably analogous to