

Emerson's, of being successful enough at an early age not to worry about making a living the way other people do. In return for that blessing, the least I could do was spend my time thinking. I have had such an advantage, and it's an enormous one and I'm aware of it. I'm happy I'm aware of it because it keeps me modest rather than vain. There were years when I was much too vain and I have paid for that. Vanity is corrosive.

There are a few generalities you can count on—vanity is immensely dangerous. But nothing is absolute. Vanity may be terribly important for people who don't have enough of it. Even as it's injurious to people who have too much. But then the notion of moderation that comes to us from the Greeks can also be stultifying. If you apply it to dangerous activities, however, it becomes interesting. What is moderation for a top-notch race car driver? What's moderation to a libertine? Well, you don't have to pursue every last fuck that's open to you. What's the mark of moderation in a womanizer, a groper? He doesn't have to feel every woman's ass he's inclined to explore. He looks to be discriminating. The road back to balance is discrimination when action is high.

ML: A phrase comes to mind—I'm sure you won't like it—that, crudely speaking applies to a lot of what you've been saying, and that's "situation ethics."

NM: You mean: do the right thing in the circumstances. It's Black. First, what does "do the right thing" mean? Blacks are talking about situations Whites have rarely considered in their full complexity. You're a drug dealer and you're cutting your stuff and there's a guy who, on the one hand is a fool—you can take him completely and give him the next thing to plain talcum powder. On the other hand, you can see he really needs it, needs a drug at that moment. So "do the right thing"—don't cut his stuff to a ridiculous level. Lose a little of the profit.

At every level of human existence, no matter how evil certain activities may seem to others, there is a caution present along with the ugly impulse. (Except, of course, for those rare occasions when the unholy impulse takes over entirely.) But short of such moments, I would say that even very unpleasant people will hold back on certain occasions because we all do have this sense of "do the right thing."

My basic argument is that ethics is not a system of rules. As you said, not something you can etch in stone. Ethics is a sensitivity to the moment and the sense, "This is probably better to do than that." It could even come down to calculation: you're bilking someone in a deal. But if you're going to bilk him, better not to do it in too ugly a manner, or you'll increase his

desire to take advantage of others. So what's your ethos at that moment?

It's to reduce ugliness in the world system. By a little.

ML: In one of our earlier conversations, you spoke of a time in the distant future when, after "some definitive metamorphosis of existence, human vision would join God's vision—perhaps—and travel across the heavens."

NM: When did I say that?

ML: In one of our earlier conversations.

NM: Was that toward the end of Ancient Evenings or in Of a Fire on the Moon?

ML: Elements of that were there. You were looking around the corner, so to speak, you were anticipating, rare for you, how things might possibly turn out. "A definitive metamorphosis of existence," was part of the phrase, as I recall. Human nature would shift into a completely different level; human vision would become married with God's and, I assume, would then split off from the demonic. At that point something would happen—we would "travel across the heavens. . ."

NM: Well, that's apocalyptic. I do not see any way we're going to separate drastically or quickly from the Devil as well as from God.

ML: So you would not see. . .

NM: At present, I am more concerned that we do not destroy ourselves.

ML: What would be the necessary conditions for this metamorphosis of existence to happen? What would human beings have to become?

NM: Some of it may be obvious: more and then even more self-awareness. More freedom from fundamentalism. More readiness for humans to accept the heroic demand that they stop leaning on God, stop relying on God, and start realizing that God's needs could be greater than ours, God's woes more profound than our own. God's sense of failure so deep as to mock our sense of failure. God, I believe, is, at present, far from fulfilling His own vision. He is mired in our corporate promotions all over the globe, our superhighways, our plastic, our threats of nuclear warfare, our heartless, arrogant, ethnic wars, our terrorism, our spread of pollution all over God's environment. How can God's sorrow not be immeasurably greater than ours?

Before we can approach any thoughts of apocalypse, we have to become human enough, brave enough, to recognize that we cannot rely on God. Rely too much on God, and we are comparable to a tremendously selfish child who drives a parent into exhaustion, deadens the parent through endless demands. "Save me! God, please, can I have that beautiful dress I want for the high school prom? Thank you, God, deliver it to me, God." Pause. "If you don't, God, I'll be angry at you," is the underlying

element in the so many of the prayers. Or, the abject beseechment—"God have pity on me, I'm a poor worm."

I think we become a hint more heroic if we recognize that we do have to stand on our own. So, I can feel a certain respect for atheists. I have huge disagreements with them—the first might be their absolute refusal to consider the notion of karma for even a moment. Or any kind of hereafter—their determined intensity that there will be nothing after life. This creates its own sort of trouble. It fortifies the liberal notions that we have to take care of people we know nothing about and enter strange countries and provide them with democracy. Whether they desire it or not.

I have a tremendous distrust of what people think is the good. At any given moment, 90% of that is fashion. The war in Iraq is a perfect example of fashion—the bright idea that we are there to inject democracy into any country that needs it. That was a political fashion; it had no real basis in political reality. Of course, it can be done, you can always inject some warped form of democracy into a country if you have enough troops and are ready to ignore the cost.

ML: I want to come back one more time to love and courage. Here I'm going to use Henry James—his idea of the greatest human act, one that required both love and courage is an act of renunciation—at the heart of all

his novels is an act of renunciation, and usually it's a quiet act, not even an act you take credit for.

NM: It's suspicious in James. Because James's life is a study in renunciation. I distrust authors, especially very good authors, when they lay out a full program for their characters that is covertly supporting their own work. James had too little passion to get near to people he didn't understand. He worked out an immensely elaborate and beautiful art but it's full of renunciation. And we pay the price. If he had been greater as a writer, Americans would be that much better off. James is not much of a guide to the modern world. A marvelous guide when you're younger to understanding some of the subtly disproportionate things that go on in high society. He's a great guide to a very limited mountain pass that few people will ever have to traverse. But renunciation did him in. If James had had a few passionate love affairs and had been able to write about them—

ML: He saw them as antithetical. It's the life/art division. James believed that you can have a life OR you can have the art and I'm going to have the art.

NM: Look, I agree, and that does not surprise me, particularly now that I'm old. Recently, I've been saying if you want to be a serious novelist, a large element of it is monastic. It's a dull life in the daily sense.

ML: That's very Jamesian.

NM: You don't have a lot of fun. You have to give up the idea of fun.

ML: Renunciation serves art. That was his dictum.

NM: In that sense, I do agree. But there is renunciation as a working sacrifice, a temporary renunciation, and there's visceral renunciation which can amputate a novelist's taproot.

ML: He should have broken off the reservation once in a while? Gone off on a toot?

NM: Yes. Once you've had a wild time or two, you can often support your imagination for a long time. In the harshest sense, you can say the trouble with Henry James is he never fucked another human.

ML: I have one last question which I think you've already answered. Your position on Jesus seems to be very similar to the position of the Muslims: they revere him as a teacher, a prophet, a guide—they do not recognize him as anything special beyond one in a long line—

NM: No. I wouldn't say I have that point of view. It's possible to me that Jesus is the son of God. If God wants to inspire humankind, which is after all His Creation, why couldn't He, why wouldn't He send a part of Himself to humankind? I can accept the miracle—miracles don't bother me. What irks me is the bric-a-brac put up to surround the miracle.

ML: So the incarnation—the Word made Flesh is something—

NM: The Word made Flesh gives me trouble. The Gospel of John makes me uneasy. I think John, more than Matthew, Mark or Luke, created some of the unhappier aspects of the church. The notion of the Word made flesh can be reversed—there's the danger. The Flesh can be turned into the Word, can become injunctions, direct communication, usually from above straight down. What is totalitarianism but the word being implanted in the Flesh?

ML: But John said you have to believe revelation, it's all there, there's no other way. Whereas Thomas said you have to look inside yourself. John said "forget what's inside yourself, look to the gospels." So you'd have a natural animosity to John.

NM: I do—and The flesh was transmogrified into the word. Most of us by now live with the word, not the flesh. We are, indeed, transmogrified creatures.

ML: But don't you find the Gospel of John superior in its writing?

NM: The writing is better, yes. Which is why people love John and why of the four, he's the most important. But he is tethered to the word that he helped to create—those loud-voiced lying Bible-thumping exhortationists on TV who are also ready to sweep up your souse dollars, dear fellow Jesus

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INTERVIEW V

Saints and Technologists

MIKE LENNON: I would like to take up again the question of saints. I think you need to say more. In most religions, saints do play a tremendous role. They intercede for lesser humans, they give witness to God's greatness, they are models for humanity by their ability to withstand suffering. Indeed, some of their suffering is self-imposed. Do you see saints in the same way as in the traditional religions?

NORMAN MAILER: You reach me on a weak point. I don't know that I have a good deal to say. It does make sense to me that there are certain people whom God would feel close to. I suppose the subtext to such a remark is that God may not feel equally near to each one of us. In truth, I would doubt that He does. After all, the Devil is always doing his best to obfuscate the divine venture. So, it's not easy to reach us. Very few of us ever get a message directly from God or the Devil. (Of course, hysterics receive several a day.) Most of us are obliged to live with a subtle smudge upon our senses. Spiritually speaking, we inhabit a complex and contradictory environment. Theologically speaking, spiritually speaking, we may not be as near to ultimates as perhaps we were centuries ago.

Now there are people who succeed, one way or another, of divesting themselves of most of the Devil. It's hard for me to believe, however, that a saint can exist with nothing of the Satanic still residing in him or her. I can assume that saints are relatively pure, but the notion that they are absolutely so—well, given my temperament, it begs too many questions. It makes everything too easy. Because if a saint is perfect, why the hell do they fail so often? Does the Devil overtake them? Or—let me advance an essentially medieval argument—is the saint so good that the Devil has to

use extraordinary and exhausting efforts to create a defeat, and so the saint serves God's purpose by wearing the Devil out.

ML: But all saints are not defeated.

NM: Give me an example of some triumphant saints.

ML: Saint Peter.

NM: Saint Peter! He deserted Christ three times.

ML: But then he redeemed himself and started Christianity.

NM: Yes, and Christianity may still be laboring under the fact that it was Peter who commenced it. You've got a three-time treacherous associate there. . .

ML: There are other saints. . .

NM: I won't say that people can't repent, that they can't restore their spirit back to something finer, but nonetheless renegades do have to remain under suspicion.

ML: That, in a way, brings me to my next question. Your god and your devil are limited, and I assume—

NM: Not limited but finite. Certainly not infinite.

ML: I assume that human perfection is truly impossible for you, as you just said. If there were a human being who was all-good, she or he would be

better than God. And if we found an absolutely perfect human being, your theology would be hard-pressed to account for that person.

NM: I don't think I'm in any danger of having my theology, such as it is, overthrown by that premise. Of course, there will never be a perfect human being. It's not in the range of our thinking. After all, I am going so far as to say there's no such thing as a perfect divinity. The nature of the universe is provisional, existential, not finally determined. That is at the core of everything I present here. God's future is as open as our own.

ML: Let me return to saints. I can admit that Saint Peter was not perfect.

But think of St. Francis of Assisi. . .

NM: Yes, he's perfect in a beautiful way that took care of a great many animals, and thereby brought us a little more into sympathy with creatures who often feel more life than ourselves, but I don't know that he improved human nature particularly, not even by his fine example. I'm asking, rather, about the kind of saints who are trying to change human nature, and almost always end up as martyrs. Indeed, the way they become saints is that they were martyrs first.

ML: One way that we know a saint is a saint, at least in Christianity, is that they were martyred. St. Stephen was martyred, St. Sebastian was martyred.

But you mentioned animals. To shift for a moment: how far down does the chain of being—or, if you will—the war between God and the Devil manifest itself?

NM: I have no idea.

ML: You said that dogs have souls.

NM: Yes.

ML: Then I assume both sides have enlisted them. What about the other animals? Are you ready to say that some are on God's side? Are the eagles and the doves? The vultures and the snakes?

NM: For me to speak on these matters is equal to philosophical free-fall. I would rather rely on the sort of instinctive verdicts that humans come up with after centuries of dealing with certain problems. For instance, my belief in God and Devil comes to a good extent from the fact that the majority of people, through all of recorded time, have believed in both evil spirits and good ones and, finally, in a god and a devil accompanied by angels and demons. If the majority have such beliefs, one does well to keep some respect for such notions. Error is our human signature, but not a constant incapacity to perceive anything beyond ourselves.

ML: Do you relate any of your ideas to modern concepts of disease?

NM: Well, I hardly subscribe to the modern notion that all disease is evil, and is to be eradicated at all cost, so that we can all live for centuries and populate the globe with ten trillion people. Life and death, I will repeat, do have an intimate relation to each other. Just as we cannot conceive of an existence where there is only daylight and never night, so I don't care to think of life void of death and rebirth. Since I believe that some of us do come back again, I will say that I haven't the remotest clue whom we may become in our next existence. It's possible, it's perfectly possible, that some or all of us have to descend to the bacteriological level and return from there. My guess, however, is that it is not so elaborate a chain of reincarnation. That would propose a most complex universe in the after-life. I would rather assume there's a purpose to everything, including the biological agents that infect us and often kill us. It may be there are agents of death with which God experiments as fully as God experiments with the development of human and animal life.

ML: You've talked a lot about the moment of death and the state of mind one is in at the moment of death—this follows, I think from what you just said. Peace of mind, I think, is important to many religions—peace of mind at death, none more so than Catholicism. The Church actually has a

sacrament called Extreme Unction, now called "Anointing of the Sick." It was created by the Church to give hope to people who were near death.

NM: How would you say that the Church arrived at such confidence in its power?

ML: Well, over millennia, the Church created seven sacraments. And the last one is Extreme Unction. I can't tell you which Father of the Church came up with the theology of it, but there is a sense of the Church reaching out to the individual at the moment of death and applying all of its powers to giving that person peace of mind as they pass over.

NM: Or, at least, giving them a belief in peace of mind. . .

ML: From the Church's point of view, Extreme Unction works—and I've seen people receive it—and you know, it does give them tremendous peace of mind.

NM: I can believe it's effective. Certainly for devout Catholics, it would be. Let me tell you a small story about a dear friend of mine, Eddie Bonetti, who was dying of cancer. I spoke to him a day before he went. He was a marvelous fellow and you'll see from the conversation what his positive qualities were.

We were talking on the phone and he knew death was close. At a given moment, I said to him, "Eddie, are you scared?" He said, "Yeah, Norman, I am."

I said, "Eddie, it seems to me you have less reason to be afraid than anyone I know. Because you're the loyalest guy I've ever met. You never turned your back on a friend, no matter how much it cost you. I really can't believe that something bad is waiting for you."

He said, "You really believe that, Norman?"

I said, "I think so, I really do."

And the woman he was living with at the time told me he did die later that day with a smile. Which gave me heart because I loved the guy and so am tempted, naturally, to hope that my words had a little to do with his peace.

So, yes, I can believe that Extreme Unction can be wonderful for some. I will say I expect it's a human creation rather than a divine fact. There were no miracles announcing it, no revelation from God. This was a human attempt, if you will, to understand how God's mind works.

So, all right, yes, I can believe Extreme Unction is there for a devout Catholic. It might not work for someone like myself. If someone came in

and said, "You are going to die in peace," I'd probably say, "Let me go. If you don't mind, I'll fine-tune my own end—you don't need to do it for me."

Certain theologians would say, "Well, this is vanity. This is precisely why you're not going to have a good end." And my feeling is, "Hey, pal, it's open. None of us know. It doesn't matter how much tradition is behind it. Tradition suggests there may well be something powerful behind it, but can it fit every human case?"

ML: Why is the state of mind at death so very important to you?

NM: Because I think it's our point of departure, our angle of flight, if you will.

ML: So what? Everybody has a bad day. You could happen to have a bad day on the day you die.

NM: No, no—whenever you have a bad day, there's a lot of reason for the downer. I can give you 20 causes for such an hour. Some are serious, some are passing. But, no, I won't let you hide behind the notion that a bad day is no more than a slot on the roulette wheel.

ML: But there are also days when we have false euphoria. We can feel good for no accountable reason and then the next day, say, "Why did I feel so good? I still have all these problems!"

NM: Whenever we have an emotion we can't account for, good or bad, I expect that the root is karmic. That may be the only visitation we receive from previous lives. By the laws of the game, which may well be basic and necessary, we can't know who we were and where we were in previous lives. Nonetheless, intense and unaccountable emotions can come from one's karmic past.

But I'm not answering your question. I think at the moment we die, we are the sum of all the good and bad we've done, all the courage and cowardice we've exercised. And so, for example, if we die with a desire to be reborn, I think it means a great deal to God. If you will, it's like reaching into a litter to select a pup, and there's one who catches our eye because he wants us. He is the one we choose to take home. Using that crude analogy, I would say that it's important to be ready. After all, that is the one situation we can't simulate, can't preempt. We can pretend to a huge number of emotions in our lives, we may well spend three-quarters of our lives being what we are not. I would go so far as to say that one of the reasons people get married is so that they can stop acting for a period every day, an hour when they don't have to present a face to the world. People who live alone are always obliged to put on that other face when they leave their room.

So, I would say when one is close to death, at least if one knows one's going to die, there can be a desire for another life, or a yearning toward peace or—and this is the worst condition—a wish to pass away altogether. The largest urge of the soul becomes, "I don't want to feel pain, so I will accept nothingness."

And really, suppose you're on high, wondering which humans you'll refashion. Suppose there's a man that God is most interested in, but at the last moment that agent is pleading for stupor. God says, "Do I really want to go through this again? Have this person become one more large disappointment?"

You see, at the risk of being repetitive, I do believe our final judgment in this life is given by the form of our rebirth. The only divine judgment we receive is our placement in the next life. Often, God's decision may be, "No. No need to be reborn. Off the board." True death. End of existence. If you have no desire to live again, that could be determinative. ML: I want to explore this more. A nurse told me this recently, a hospice nurse, who cared for the dying, three times a week she went through this, and she had great experience—told me that at the end, often, because people were taking drugs, they'd be on morphine to cut the pain, and their personality, as she put it, "dissolves." That they were alive, they were

functioning, but their soul was already gone. And so, for them, the death was before they died—the body was still breathing, the automatic systems were working but—but indeed, the people I have seen die, they revert to powerful impulses, powerful atavistic impulses. The desire to keep oneself clean—they get on the toilet when they're dying. The desire to remember one's mother or grandmother. Or when someone touches you, the desire to reach out, or, to the reverse, afraid you're going to be violated when you're lying on your bed. And I've seen that, the few deaths I've seen.

So people don't ordinarily die in moments of clarity like Eddie Bonetti. A lot of time when they die, they don't know who they are.

NM: I can't answer that. You can die spiritually an hour, a day, a month or five years before your death. I think the more your soul can remain intact up to the extinction of your body, the finer candidate you are for reincarnation. But that's just my notion.

ML: So risky. . . You mean someone who really wants to be reborn but goes into a coma loses their shot?

NM: Look, the soul can fight the body right down to the very end. The soul can say, "all right, I don't feel anything in my legs any more. Nothing in my fingers. I can't find my thoughts, but I know what I want. That way is more life. I want to be reborn." Or, to the contrary, the soul can feel it

isn't worth it. "Let the body have its day. I've abused this body all my life, it's now demanding a cruel payment and—let me tell the truth to myself—I'm bankrupt..."

But I do think that the soul—taking this intelligence from your lady at the hospice—if the soul leaves a week or two before the body, I think, speaking in terms of the transmigration of souls, it could make for a few complexities in the travel schedule. You know, I have this feeling—so many talk about death as a vision: There's this wonderful white light, and relatives come out to meet you. I'm a touch dubious about that. For some people, yes. They were close to their relatives and their relatives do come out.

But there's an awful lot of spirit travel involved. The logistics of the hereafter interest me because God's energies, as I see it, are immense but, to repeat, not infinite. So there are all sorts of procedures to be followed after you die. Economic procedures, if you will, involving the energies available to the Hereafter. It may be much more complex and less adaptable than we assume. The more flaming, fiery, flamboyant sects, the ones that promise everything in the Hereafter, bring out my cynicism (which, after all, is my good shield against wishful thinking). Often, I expect, in the immediate hours or days after our death there can be pauses, long waits. You may

hang around in a vast hall—somewhat like the first day in the Army, when nobody knew what to do with you and you were not yet assigned to some sort of temporary training platoon. We can talk about limbo a little later if you wish. Limbo may be an absolutely realistic station for most people when they die. That is, they hang around for quite a while.

ML: Limbo can be for years.

NM: Well, I don't know. I think it could also be a matter of divine bureaucratic—dare I say it?—mismanagement. Because bureaucratic mismanagement on earth—I don't know that we necessarily have to assume all this changes in the Hereafter. I don't think angels are perfect any more than I believe demons are totally evil. I think the rarest condition in existence is absolute purity of any variety.

If God is a Creator, then God cannot be absolutely pure because creation consists in part of improving upon one's errors, and offering less purchase to one's vices.

ML: What about people—we've all heard about people who die after living lives of greed and misery, rotten people, detestable in every way, but at the last minute, the last few weeks, they call in the priest, they get a seraphic smile on their face, they have money, perhaps, they're surrounded by servants, and they go off into the hereafter feeling very good about

themselves. Deluded, perhaps, about their ultimate worth, but nonetheless, smiling, saying their prayers. They haven't gone to a church or done anything decent—

NM: Well, you're creating an improbable person. . .

ML: There are people like that who die happy after living a miserable life.

NM: Who says they died happy? They could be acting right until the end.

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

NM: No. No. I said people who are serious about their death don't act.

They may be acting for others, but not before eternity.

I'll give you an explanation why a truly rotten person can die happy, which is they were so rotten in their previous existence, the life before this one, that this life, bad as it was, proved to be a spiritual improvement over the previous one. They die happy because they feel, everything considered, considering how bad were their beginnings, and how absolutely loathsome the initial impulses they were born with, that they have, under the circumstances, gotten better than they were before. We all know people who were total pricks their entire lives who mellow a little bit at the end. That's another human quality.

ML: But you said all the good and evil in one's life is summed up in death.

I'm thinking of those who are miserable people for the first 95% of their

lives and then they're sweet old people at the end—doesn't seem very just that they should have a happy death. You'd think somehow they should have a miserable death. Where's the fairness in things?

NM: I think you're speaking too hypothetically. This person you're talking about—as a novelist I find him impossible to draw for a book. People who are rotten all their lives rarely end up sweet at the end. If they do—there is such a thing as truly evil and ugly impulses wearing out, burning out. Just as good people can sour, ugly people may sometimes die in a more benign state. They've used up the ugliness in themselves. They've been rotten, but maybe they feel a bit of contrition at the end. Catholicism is based on that.

ML: Absolutely.

NM: Between the stirrup and the ground. I've always found it excessively sentimental and too easy: be evil all your life and as you're falling from the horse, before your head is knocked off your body—

ML: Say a perfect Act of Contrition!

NM: Yes! I've always found that extreme. And a little convenient. The Catholic Church is not only a study in immense human wisdom, but of applied skill at maneuvering our thoughts around the most non-navigable corners.

ML: It's thought of almost everything. It has an answer for almost everything, every issue.

You spoke a little bit about limbo but I don't recall that you said much about purgatory—as an idea, as a place, as a metaphor. Of course, it's a wonderful metaphor, we all use it. What is your idea of purgatory as a metaphor?

NM: Well, as a metaphor—tell me, purgatory is a temporary station?

ML: It may last for a millennia, but it's temporary.

NM: I confess I don't know these concepts past a few superficial notions.

Does limbo have any relation to purgatory?

ML: No. Limbo is the place for those people on whom God can't make a judgment. They died before they were baptized.

NM: Absolutely meaningless. Silly.

ML: I agree. The Church doesn't even talk about limbo any more. They've almost dropped it as a concept. But purgatory. . .

NM: Now purgatory. . .yes.

ML: Purgatory is not endless. There is an end to your suffering. The amount of time you're there and what kind of suffering you have, according to the Catholic Church, depends on what your crimes were.

NM: I see purgatory in different terms. In place of the notion that if you suffer long enough you'll purge yourself, I would suggest that being reborn takes care of purgatory. For some people, life is purgatory. All but endless suffering. And for a few people, life is heaven—they're happy much of the time. For most people, life can be an intermittent hell. I don't think we need other structures. I think our debts are paid by way of our reincarnations. That makes more sense to me than supporting those immensely wasteful estates called Heaven and Hell where nobody does anything, where nothing's brought back into the divine economy, and people just mark time.

I see God as Faustian, as aiming to go further. God is not satisfied with His or Her Creation, God wants the Creation to become better. Therefore, wasteful procedures are anathema to God. And so, I do see heaven, purgatory and hell as wasteful institutions. Who can speak interestingly of heaven, after all? Shaw made the best single attempt and decided heaven was boring. And there is always the uneasy little feeling that people have that it could be like Club Med, a gated little tropical island. Whereas on earth, in life, we do experience heaven. We experience it two, three, or four times in a long life, maybe for a minute, no more, but we know what heaven is. There's a kind of luminousness to the joy. Most of us,

unfortunately, come closest to heaven through drugs. But, all right—we know what it is.

We certainly know what hell is. Hell can be as simple as having a bad case of gout. Or a screamer of a drug trip. Or a nerve gone crazy in a tooth.

ML: There's conscience. . .

NM: Yes, indeed. There's also dread. When we feel dread, we may not be that far from purgatory. Something important could be taking place in our soul but we don't know what. We are full of fear at taking the next step which we now believe is demanded of us. Most men encounter dread in terms of their personal courage. If they're afraid—if they're afraid of playing football, putting on the pads and going out to play can be purgatory. Boxing can be purgatory. Skiing, if the trail is steep and narrow, and the moguls are formidable, can certainly reduce you. Bungee-jumping can be purgatory—brief but intense. Men and women are beginning to search for such living ventures into purgatory. It used to be that women's purgatory was related to the terrors of childbirth. After all, in the Middle Ages, there was one chance in ten a woman would die in childbirth. That was a true terror. One had to face ultimates to have a child.

ML: How limbo and purgatory came about, if I'm remembering correctly, was that Christianity began with notions of heaven and hell borrowed from previous religions that contained both. Then the structure of the church became more complex and people asked questions. What if you've been bad but not so bad that you should be condemned to eternal hellfire—you've only been *sort* of bad. The Church said, "You're right, we have a place for those people where they have modest suffering." Then people said, "what about people outside the Church? We've been told they're condemned but what if they haven't done anything evil? They died at three years old—a wonderful little child but never baptized. . . ." The Church said, "we have a place for them too." So the Church was trying to create—I'm sure they would have created another place if they'd had to. But ultimately, the Church began to see the folly of limbo—what a ridiculous idea for people to live in a big empty space forever and feel no positive pain but no positive joy although the Baltimore Catechism decided to offer these innocents "perfect natural happiness." No beatific vision would be available, but no unseemly suffering either. Just limbo.

We talked about saints but I never got to my question about demons. I remember you told me some time ago you had an encounter with a demon. Or a succubus or—whatever you want to call it, right here in a room you

rented for a week one winter on Commercial Street in Provincetown.

Would it be worthwhile to say anything about that experience?

NM: I won't get into it, Mike, because it takes too long to tell and there's no real point. I can certainly speak of succubi and incubi in the abstract sense. I think they would be useful instruments of the Devil. I only felt such a presence once in my life and it seemed to come out of nowhere, which is why I don't rush to talk about it because I don't understand why it was there. But I really felt as if there were some intangible creature fastened to my chest. I do have a story that may be worth telling about a poetess named Mina Loy. Something like seventy or seventy-five years ago, she was staying in a small hotel on the Left Bank in Paris and one night in her room, she felt this hideous oppression, this monstrous, intangible creature, which seemed nonetheless most alive and had fastened itself to her chest. She lived in horror through the night and felt abominably wretched in the morning. To recover a bit, she went downstairs to take a coffee on the terrace of the little hotel she was staying at, just across the street from the Seine. Alastair Crowley, the famous and notorious magician, was there, a table or two away, and was talking about a man he detested who was also staying at the hotel. And Crowley said, "You know, last night I sent an incubus to invade him, yet when I saw him this morning, he looked

perfectly all right. I don't understand it." Mina Loy's comment was, "Let no one say Alastair Crowley is without powers. It is just that they are misdirected."

ML: Let me shift to wealth and poverty. In the last interview we did, you never addressed this. Are wealth and poverty predetermined by what God gives you when you're born? And how much would you say comes from the accidents of the economic jungle?

NM: The poor often believe they are going to be rewarded in the next life. The wealthy also believe—a good many of them at any rate—that they too are going to be rewarded. The Egyptians, for example, believed you had no chance whatsoever in the Hereafter unless you were truly wealthy. You had to be buried in such a way that all preparations had been made by your family to enable you to travel safely through the underworld long enough to reach their heaven, the Elysian fields. For that you needed varieties of protection. Priests had to pray for you, amulets were sewn onto your burial garments, you were in need of prayers recited by your relatives, and, most of all, you needed a tomb to protect you from evil spirits whenever you needed rest—you would go out and explore the underworld, and then come back to your tomb where your spirit would enter again into your embalmed mummy—and that rested, of course, in your highly decorated and protective

casket. After some rest, you would again go out into the underworld for another reconnaissance. Finally, you might make it through. Sometimes you didn't. Rich Egyptians used to have a prayer: "Oh, Amon, do not let me die a second time in the Land of the Dead." The Egyptians believed that the second death was final. The first was provisional, but if you were able to find a way through the underworld into the Elysian fields, you could live forever. So, for them, wealth was crucial. A poor man without the protection of priests, amulets, and a tomb had no chance at all. Which may be why we still have that long-lived phenomenon of an early civilization, to wit, most people live at a subsistence level, but there is fabulous wealth at the top and the rich certainly know how to protect it.

I think that belief does carry over. People who are abstemious might look with horror on rich people who have gold plates under the serving dishes for dinner. But the rich obviously believe that the afterworld is structured to enable people who are rich to have more of a purchase on eternity. Not all rich people. Some rich people feel guilty. Late in life, they pursue philanthropy—they're terrified of the Hereafter. They know what they did to get that wealth and they are in terror.

Then some of the poor—some who are bitter and furious—feel they were absolutely denied any chance at future existence. They are very angry

at God. You also have the poor who believe that it's right and fair. I've lived a clean life, a good life, I've raised my children, done my best, I've never despaired and I'm going to go to a good place.

We have these separate outlooks, and we have an ongoing question for those who believe in a continuance after death. At a guess—my guess—I would think there's constant negotiation between God and the Devil over who travels where. I'm assuming that not only is God not all-powerful but neither is the Devil. The two remain in deep contest with one another. The Devil, therefore, would not wish to be excluded completely from the possibility of rebirth. The Devil might desire to have some of his rich people taken care of. Of course, there are rich people who are close to saintly, who manage to live with their wealth in such a way that it hasn't corrupted them. I think that's rare—but it does occur, we've all known a few. They are lovely people sometimes. Not all rich people are awful, but a great many rich people are certainly in no shape to pass through the eye of the needle. Nonetheless, you can find a lively energy in some of the rich. Some of them made their money, after all, through their huge energy or by way of their audacity. Not all people who gain power arrive through foul means alone.

So, I expect God to be perfectly willing to discriminate. Certain of the rich, yes, absolutely, let's send them out to be born again. They're interesting.

ML: Are you saying that God will endow some to be born again into great wealth? Or into poverty?

NM: Yes. Why not? It's a species of testing. People who were born in rich and favorable circumstances in one life and grew spoiled and had lives that proved disappointing to His anticipations, might be reborn as poor people. Others who were poor but never turned bitter or felt that they were deprived might be rewarded—a dubious reward is wealth for that is always full of tests. But then some of the poor had a touch of aristocracy innate in them. And there are rich people who have the modesty of poor people. One function of reincarnation may be to give God further insights into us. I go back to the fundamental premise: God does not understand us completely any more than we understand our children. We can know them well in terms of their habits, some of their virtues and some of their faults, but we certainly don't understand them altogether. So God wants to know more about His Creation, whereas the Devil is attempting to muck up precisely that clarity.

ML: I don't have any disputes on the individual level, but when I think of that phrase of Adam Smith's, "the wealth of nations," there are some peoples, some nations, who have lived in terrible, terrible misery. Take one nation I know a little about, the Irish. For 500, 600 years they lived under British wealth and power and now it seems just that the Irish are richer than the English. They're now the wealthiest nation in the European Union.

NM: I'll give you another example. For a thousand years and more, the Jews lived in the ghetto. In most religions they weren't allowed to hunt or fish or farm, they were allowed to be money-lenders or inn-keepers or own shops in their own communities. So what did they do? They gave everything they had to their schools. I would say that the results got into the gene stream—those ghetto Jews put their emphasis on learning and intelligence because their own books, particularly the Talmud, happened to be all that was open to them.

ML: But if you look at all the plusses and minuses of all the nations—great wealth in some and great poverty in others—how does that mesh in with the individual decisions that God and the Devil express by way of reincarnation? It seems God may have to give up a whole country or a whole nation or whole race of people for long periods.

NM: I don't want to get carried away with understanding God's motives.

I'm looking to find a few general principles. . .

ML: You're looking at individuals. I'm asking you to look at it from a national point of view.

NM: That means first, you have to believe in races. I do, to a certain extent. It's completely incorrect these days to talk about such matters, but I think no, the specific mixture of climate and language over many centuries does produce one kind of person as opposed to another. That may now be part of God's interest in us as individuals. "Will this particular man or woman turn out better or worse than I think he or she will?" God's also interested in races—how will they turn out?

ML: In nations.

NM: Yes. As nations. But that is far more complicated.

ML: God must be thinking a lot about China, with one billion people. . .

NM: God learns. I keep coming back to my fundamental mnemonic—God learns. This is why I'm so opposed to those religions which assume that God is in command of everything.

ML: Last time we spoke, you said that God was developing evolution as He went along.

NM: Yes. God learns.

ML: Then in those early periods of time, when land had just been created, you indicated that God was in the slime of early creation, yes, in there evolving with everything else. Yet you also said with great assurance that God is the creator of the world and the solar system. I have trouble reconciling God in the slime and God as the creator—

NM: Suppose God is the lord of the solar system but at the same time, had to learn how to develop the system from the slime on up.

ML: Yes, but when did God put the souls into creation?

NM: The key to the notion is that it's all been a huge experiment, an ongoing, developing experiment with countless results, good and bad, but most of them were good enough so that evolution continued despite its failures. God learns. And so God invests Himself or Herself in all sorts of creatures en route. Not only animals but flora as well.

Once again, I don't subscribe to the iron declarations of the Old Testament and the New Testament. Both were written by committee. The Old Testament was put together over a long period by a series of very talented committees, much more talented than the latter-day Bible-builders who composed the New Testament. On the other hand, the people who wrote the New Testament were good enough scholars to be familiar with the best remarks that had been made up to that point in the Old Testament and

by many a sage, prophet, and mystic. So, they used that as well. They were also attached to a concept that may or may not be true. Which is that Jesus was the son of God. They were serious men, but they were also a committee. So, as literary works, the Old Testament has some faults, and the New Testament a good many. But to accept them as the absolute map of our spiritual universe is comparable to using the kind of charts Christopher Columbus had to look at before he set out for the West. For instance, even our present idea of the beginning as presented in the first three sentences of Genesis is a false concept.

In fact, one summer I studied Classical Hebrew on my own, and the first sentence of Genesis—have we discussed that?

ML: No.

NM: Well, as you know: "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth." Or so it goes in English. Actually, the first word of the Old Testament—in the original—is most singular. It's only existence is as the first word of the Old Testament, "barashith." The second word is "bora." There are many interpretations of "barashith" but I came up with "out of the pits. . ." or "out of the depths. . ." "Bora" is "being" or "creating" So the first two words might say, "out of the pits came being." The next words are not "the heavens and the earth," but "the firmament above" and "the

firmament below," as if to declare that there are two species of existence out there from the commencement. And then the next sentence? "The breath of God moved upon the waters. . ."

ML: "The breath of God upon the waters. . ."

NM: It's not "breath of God" at all. The word used here for breath is "ruach." In Classical Hebrew there are three varieties of breath to signify God's presence. There's "ruach," "nefesh," and "neshamah." "Neshamah," if I recall correctly, is the gentle breath. And "nefesh" is a normal wind. "Ruach" is the fierce breath, the angry breath, God's rage. So the line really says, "and the rage of God roared over the waters." So to go back, the first two sentences can well be translated as, "Out of the pits came being, and God created the firmament above and the firmament below. And God's fierce breath roared over the waters."

ML: Much different.

NM: Yes, I'm suspicious of committees. Even the great one who gave us the King James Bible.

ML: We've spoken a bit about technology. I'd like to go back to that.

Most of humanity sees technology as a way to free us from drudgery, and give us leisure time to read and think and travel, so forth. Why shouldn't it

be seen on balance—on balance—I understand all the bad things about it—
but why shouldn't technology be seen as largely salutary?

NM: I have four words to describe technology which I've used several times now: more power, less pleasure. I think there's no getting around it: we can't pretend more pleasure comes to us from technology. It tends to crimp our senses and reduce us to people who are able to live in a closed environment. My notion—it's a sentimental notion, doubtless, is that God would have preferred us to be able to do the things we now achieve through technology by means of our spirit alone. In other words, instead of having television, we could reach into our dreamlife and enjoy organized and marvelous dramas that we could create for ourselves or send by telepathy to our friends. The ultimate aim was for every human being to be immensely creative. Being psychic as well, we would not have needed electronic communications. If I wanted to talk to you, I would be able to put my mind in contact with yours even if you were in a far-off place. We all have small intimations of that possibility. It seems to me such mental powers are grievously reduced with every advance in technology.

As a specific example, I now use hearing aids and I can't hear without them, most of the time, not with most people. But my own small remaining ability to hear gets reduced further by using these hearing aids. In parallel, I

think technology tends to curtail our possibilities and accelerate our dependencies.

After all, the great strides that have been made in technology came from previous generations. Maxwell discovered some of the differences between electricity and magnetism. He and Farraday took imaginative, metaphorical leaps. Abraham Lincoln and Winston Churchill didn't have to study previous speeches to come up with the Gettysburg Address or "I have nothing to offer you but blood, sweat, toil, and tears—" They came out of a past that depended on independent human beings rising up to exceptional thoughts at incredible moments. They were not dependent on electronic machines they did not really understand

As a small example, I don't know anyone with a computer who doesn't talk about the glitches.

ML: Look, the first person to use a wheel after the drudgery of dragging things—must have felt great pleasure. I don't see—

NM: Wait a moment, there are crucial turning points in the advent of modern technology. The center of all that is electronics. Whereas the first wheel was made of wood, and sharp stones were used to shape it. These were things people could comprehend, they came out of the earth. Then people began to learn how to smelt ore. Dangerous business, tricky, but

they found the means to get fire to melt the ore and so could separate the slag from the molten metal. The Iron Age began.

I say there's a profound difference between early and later technology. Early technology, lasting through to the 19th century, consisted of dealing with very powerful and explosive elements in nature and mastering them, so there was awe and excitement to it. Huge excitement for the railroad when it was developed—people loved to travel on trains. They might be cramped and reek of their own foul coal smoke, but they were exciting. Now, traveling on airplanes is not agreeable. Everyone thought it'd be immensely exciting but it isn't. It's reductive. You don't feel like a voyager so much as a piece of trussed-up transported goods. Electronics is the great divide—the watershed between what I would call good technology and bad. Because no one knows what electronics is. I defy a physicist to reach my mind with an explanation I can comprehend. For that matter, we don't even know what electricity is. A current of electrons, yes, but do we know anything about the makeup of an electron? Does it possess its own consciousness or does it not?

ML: So that's the pivot point, then? That's when technology becomes a miserable activity? But when you were a boy, the radio—you must remember the radio—the crystal set and all that.

NM: You had to be able to solder, yes. But even then, you had to buy your vacuum tubes. People assemble computers today out of factory parts. I did model airplanes when they were made of balsa with glue. Then plastic came along. In my childhood, plastic was not common. Bakelite was the nearest you got to it. Now plastic is omnipresent. And it's inert. It doesn't bring on any sense of the uncanny. It offers an inkling of non-existence. I'm just paranoid enough to believe it's the Devil who loves plastic because it's going to deaden God's sensibilities before it's all over. God won't be able to get to us through shields of plastic. About the time, oh, thirty years ago when women began to wear plastic clothing—the stuff stank, you remember, the awful smell of plastic clothes? I began to think that may be the point where the ballgame was lost. Women with their finer sensibilities were adopting plastic.

ML: My last question: Great religious ideas have great followings and they last for millennia—some do fade, some die, but the greatest last for millennia. And I'm assuming there's a reason for that. Your faith in the theological and intellectual efficacy of your system is strong. I've observed it for many years and it's deep-rooted inside you. But you have also said your system is not going to be adopted by many other people.

NM: Not in a hurry. No. There's no immediate solace offered for our fears.

Only an appeal to our human pride.

ML: Does this bother you?

NM: I suppose that if I had developed these ideas when I was 30 or 40, I would have wanted to become a religious leader. But that is not in my capacity. If there's any validity to any of these thoughts, if they take root in people to some extent, then, yes, these notions may yet be adopted by some. Because I do believe that there are two elements now on the horizon that can yet destroy the world as we know it. One of them is technology and the other is organized religion. The second drives people into stupidity. It can take intelligent children and deprive them of their ability to look at existence. They're obliged to force their thought to fit a mold that may never have existed. And certainly doesn't exist now. That drives people to extremes. So I do feel that my existential sense of God as a Being who needs us as much as we need Him could yet reach many. But I feel no inner directive to convince people right away. I am just centered enough to recognize how far that is beyond my means.

INTERVIEW VI

Ritual, Rote and Telepathy

ML: We have not spoken of ritual as part of religion. Recently my wife and I went to the ordination of a priest. It was an extraordinary event. Thirty or forty priests and bishops and deacons stood over the kneeling aspirant, touching a shoulder or back or, if they could not reach the person, they touched the shoulder of someone who could. All the while, a chorus in the background was chanting "Veni, Sancte Spiritu, Veni, Sancte Spiritu." (Come, Holy Ghost). While another singer, the lead singer, was singing

a capella verses about the glories of being a priest, of the holy responsibilities and obligations, the special status that they had among believers ending with the ancient pronouncement from the ordaining bishop, "Thou art a priest forever." It was a very moving, a very powerful experience. It made me think of one of our earlier conversations in which you noted that fundamentalists believe that if they keep their nose clean and observe ritual, they had a ticket to heaven. Does ritual have any significant merit for you or do you reject it completely?

NM: I've thought about it a good deal. Put it this way: I have high suspicions about ritual. It seems to me that at best, it's a mixed blessing. You know one of my favorite remarks is that repetition kills the soul. Well, obviously that remark has to be explored before we go further. Any number of kinds of repetition are, I will admit, crucial to the human venture. It is, after all, one of the ways by which we learn. And there is such a thing as creative repetition. Nonetheless, I'm suspicious of ritual. Where, after all, does my theology start? What occasions it? What stimulates it? I would answer (as I did in the preface) that it is because I have worked as a novelist all my life. I don't want this to be misunderstood, but, in a certain sense, novelists are dealing with a few of God's problems. Judgment, particularly. If you're any good at your work, you've spent your life thinking about

human nature. Since few good novels can do without a villain, you are, of course, soon living with the notion of Evil.

Now where in all this is the relation to ritual? Ritual is repetition and in writing a novel, you look to do the opposite. A fine novel does not keep repeating itself. That is exactly the hallmark of a dull work. So, most good novelists are wary of repetition. Moreover, most people I don't approve or tend to be masters or monsters of mediocre repetition. The politicians we despise are one example. So one develops an understanding that repetition can be dangerous when used as a tool by mediocre people. Unimaginative parents often know nothing better than to repeat what they say over and over. I confess that worries me about the nature of ritual. I think it looks to set human nature into a form. TV evangelists seem diabolically inspired to me when they cleave and cling to repetition. Earlier, as a child, synagogue services left me bored. Most of it washed over me. I might just as well have been a shell on the surf's edge. But for a little wear and tear, I was the same shell at the end of the service as at the beginning, and this was true year after year.

I did experience one ritual that was interesting to me. It was my induction into Transcendental Meditation which was in fashion thirty-five years ago. I remember that for my initiation ceremony, I was told to bring a

flower to the initiator. He happened to be a gawky kid who was absolutely wild about Transcendental Meditation which I had found no more than odd and a little boring. At the commencement of the practice each day, you were supposed to empty your head for twenty minutes. You did your best not to allow much thought to come through. I said to myself, "I've been doing this for years as a writer." Every time one goes to work in the morning, the first thing to do is empty your head. I've been practicing Transcendental Meditation willy-nilly.

Now, during my initiatory ritual, they said a few words in an Asian language, and then gave me a mnemonic to repeat. I forget what it was. It was something like Allen Ginsberg's OM. Allen Ginsberg's old OMMMMM. I kept repeating whatever the sound was in my head for twenty minutes. Whenever an errant thought came into my brain, I had to be ready to use the mnemonic to wash the thought away. It was a small ritual, but I did feel an effect. Something did take place. Obviously, then, in a deep and powerful ritual, a great deal happens. Let me move forward to make the point. Given my fundamental notion that God and the Devil are at war all the time, I would go so far as to suggest that ritual may well have been first created by the Devil. God, recognizing its efficacy, and determined not to lose any soul unnecessarily, entered ritual as well. I

think ritual is composed then of the presence of God and the Devil. It does tend to have the demons and the saints marching in. There is a power to the repetitions; the music, the chanting, the ceremony, the concentration of the principals. So it may indeed be an important moment. One of my favorite notions is that the Lord and Satan are there when major events occur. A general, on the eve of a great battle, gets out of bed and finds it very important to him whether or not he stretches out his left foot first or his right.

ML: A ritual?

NM: No, but he has a sense that powers are present. Anyone who reads Homer will find nothing strange about this. So, I think my answer would be that I don't scoff at ritual, but I don't trust it. I would be happier if we lived without it, yet I have to recognize that my upbringing, my tastes, my life has had little to do with rituals. Nonetheless, they are fascinating. Because there may be any number of occasions when God and the Devil have to cooperate—exactly because they each are trying to outwit the other. For that, they have, at times, to engage in formal contact. Wrestlers do have to grasp each other.

ML: What about rituals concerning athletes? I'm sure professional boxers decide which glove is going to be laced on first and how many minutes they

want to be alone before the fight and which jock strap they wear. I know professional baseball players have certain things they have to do. The center fielder has to step on second base when he runs in or, you know, the forces will be against him. So athletes are particularly superstitious and they go through various rituals and preparations before and during the game. Soldiers do the same thing. When I was in the Navy, I knew sailors who were tremendously ritualistic about how they tied a knot. It was a bad omen if you tied a knot the wrong way, or did something on the ship that was not performed exactly in the right way. You felt like you were calling down evil things upon you. These are not religious rituals but they are often done with the knowledge that there is something in the air.

NM: Yes. I used to be susceptible to that when I was younger. I do know what you are talking about. Back in San Francisco in 1963, I used to walk parapets which had sheer drops to the street below. I used to be full of dread every morning because I knew that before the day was done, I'd be walking a parapet. They varied between eight inches in width to so much as a foot and a half, so there was no great risk unless you lost your head. But I would suspect that the spirit world if you will, does pay close attention to people engaged in unusual events. We started by talking about ritual. Now, we are involved with rote. Whenever people engage in rote, in other

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

ML: I never told you this story, but when I was writing my Doctoral thesis on you, I had a chapter on your cosmology. I had to face two or three English professors plus a Philosophy professor on the Ph.D. committee. He argued with me about it. Wrote me long letters.

NM: Let me get this straight. While you were formulating the thesis, this happened?

ML: Yes, he was reading drafts. He said that your system, as far as he could understand it, was terribly incomplete.

NM: (laughs)

ML: He said he could not find in it either a beginning, how the universe came into being, or how it ends. How the cosmic war would end at the end of time or even if there would be an end of time.

NM: He sounds like a major league ass.

ML: Well, no, he was gentle with me. But he thought anybody who had a philosophical system, ought to have—let me finish—

NM: Let me just stress one point: I never heard of this before, that you have to have a beginning and an end to your philosophy. What about Logical Positivists? Do they have a beginning and an end?

ML: Well, he was an Aristotelian. That probably explains a lot. But he also felt that you had no clear definition of Being. What he believed and what a lot of philosophers believe, is the central question of philosophy: Being. What is being? What is the ultimate nature of Man what is the ultimate nature of God? What is being? When he confronted me I kept saying, existentialism, existentialism. As much as I knew about it and I knew a little but not a great deal. One of my English professors on the committee said, "Look, Mailer is a literary man. He's not a systematic philosopher. He has ideas, he has feelings, but he isn't out to create a philosophical system." And that's what finally got the philosopher to back down. He goes, "You're right. This is a literature Ph.D., not a philosophy Ph.D." After all, you have written about Marx, Freud, Kierkegaard, Sartre, Schopenhauer—it wasn't that you weren't familiar with some philosophy; you were clearly interested in philosophical questions—but finally, I guess, that any philosopher who won't propose any ultimates is a very unusual

philosopher. As I read it, you present no ultimate nature of God, no ultimate answer to any of these questions. And so, reading over everything that we have done so far, I keep coming to the same thing—we don't know, we can't be certain. Yet, from most philosophical points of view, there's usually one rock somewhere.

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

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

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

written. We are not just serfs, nor the children of patrons drawn in to sing a note in the children's chorus. We are the base of this opera. So to demand a philosophical presentation where I must say where we are going, is, given my point of view, not an answerable demand. All we can know at best is where we might be at the present. Everything in existence fortifies this concept for me. I know where I am at this moment. Within reason. But do I know where I will be in a year? Will I still be alive? I don't know. If I should remain alive for twenty years, can I have any notion of how I will be then? Can I have a concept of where society will find itself in a hundred years? Hardly. We live in the present. That is what we are given. We do have instincts and they can be far-reaching. I would go so far as to say that I would go along with Goethe's belief that these powerful instincts are God-given. We are embodying God's plans, but such plans are subject to change because the storms of the cosmos are not all prerecorded, The future of the world is not yet written. The Devil, after all, warps human affairs.

ML: Here, I wish to enter a relevant note. The moment of death carries more weight in your theological thinking than in any other I know of, but I don't see any consideration of what happens to, I believe it's 20%, of all people who die of strokes, heart attacks, aneurisms. I have a friend who died, so the doctor said, before he hit the ground—you know, there is no

time for them to prepare themselves, there is no time to reflect, project, anything. Are they just unlucky, is this just a flaw in the way God did things given the importance of our state of mind when we go into eternity? These people have no chance.

NM: To begin with, the answer may lie in the famous Catholic dictum with which Graham Greene was obsessed: There is always time to repent! Between the stirrup and the ground! Time, after all, to anyone who has had experience with minor drugs like marijuana will know that time can extend or compress. A tenth of a second in a dream we are told, can feel like five minutes. But apart from that, even if you have no time at the moment before your death, I would say that death takes place within us as we live our lives. The recognition of death is always present at the point where morality enters into consciousness. The question, "Am I a good man, or a bad man?" accompanies us from early age. "Am I a good child or a bad child?" As you grow older, so you also think more about judgment. Of course, not everyone believes that such a process exists. It is disheartening that so often you will hear fine people say "Oh, there is nothing after this. All I want is a little peace." It is a sad remark, particularly sad to me because, given my notion that many of us look to the promise of being reborn, it is sad if life has been so corrosive that one does not care to be reincarnated. That

suggests there has been too punishing an existence, too deep a sense of defeat.

ML: I'm not making myself sufficiently clear. We had a long discussion in which you emphasized how critical the final moments of one's life were. They were, according to you, extraordinarily important because that was the time to prepare yourself. You used the example of people in the gas chambers who were cheated out of that moment and how terrible it was for them. But, you know, if you have a brain aneurism, you don't have a tenth of a second. You have nothing. Your brain stops. There's no thought.

NM: Let's say 99% of the people who are alive have a reasonable amount of time to think before they die.

ML: They do.

NM: All right. You are talking about the one percent. And if I can't account for that one percent, then I can't. Everything I attempt here, if I may honor it with the assumption that it is philosophical, suggests that we don't look for one hundred percent in anything. I'm opposed to the notion that any kind of thought can be wholly complete once it looks to engage the meaning of life. That is another reason for detesting fundamentalism. It insists on one hundred percent. What I have to say may only be valid for some people, but I do believe that, yes, our preparation for death is

important. If you have just a few minutes at the end, it isn't as if you are facing death for the first time; you have been facing it all your life. Let us say you are handing in the final submission.

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

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

failed in one life, but manage to succeed in the next, then, yes, to that degree, you have strengthened God.

Let me offer a crude scenario. If, in one existence, you were terrified of heights, well, then possibly for the next, you are placed in a family of mountain climbers. So as a child in this new existence, you may go through horrors. But now you have guides to carry you up to an aerie you could not reach in your previous life.

So, I would venture to say that at the moment of one's death, one may have a better sense of what one did or didn't do in one's life and what one might like for the next life. Can that not give a coloration to the soul even at the last moment?

ML: All right. Let us say that such a person does become a successful mountain climber. If you have a succession of such good reincarnations, what happens then? Does a person ever get to be as good as it is possible to become?

NM: I don't think so. Most of us are so highly imperfect, so underdeveloped, so frustrated, so small in relation to what we could have been, every one of us, even those of us who are relatively successful, that the question also becomes how much has God learned from us. It isn't that God understands us so well that all we need is a little tweaking. God learns

along with us. Continue to think of God as a protagonist in the cosmos. So, some of His divine decisions on reincarnation will work; others not. God's hope is that His works succeed more than they fail.

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

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

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

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

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

NM: I would say that God has a vision of existence which He sees as more creative, and more useful to the future than other competing visions in the cosmos.

ML: What is that vision?

NM: That life can become more and more creative, diverse, splendid and incredible.

ML: OK

NM: Now give me another vision of existence. That we all are to sit in the heavenly fold and listen to hymns which are beautiful because God has put us in heaven? What the hell is more final about that?

ML: There is the vision in many religions that you merge with the universal mind. You merge with the mind of God, you become part and parcel of God. And you exist not just in sugar land or Club Med, but exist in pure intellectual bliss having been completely purged of all weaknesses and corruptions and so forth. Many religions hold this belief. The Hindus, for example.

NM: That assumes we're all here ideally to get to a certain place. If we keep our lives pure enough, we will reach such bliss. But I am saying that heavenly bliss is not guaranteed. Everything we know about the nature of existence also shows us that it's cruel, paradoxical, glorious, disappointing, tremendous, and often more modest than expected. And so I believe we are part of a vast creative process that is attempting to go somewhere without being able to guarantee what the end is. In our lives, we certainly work without knowing the end. The only certainty we possess is that we are going to die. We don't know what will follow that. We can assume certain answers, but we know, or ought to know, that we are making no more than an assumption. Let me add that if every one of our understandings comes down to uncertainty, why assume that God knows what the end is? That is also a large assumption.

ML: Does it fit or not fit in your theology that America has a special place in God's vision?

NM: I've written about that on occasion. The quagmire in Iraq can be blamed on American Exceptionalism. I would say that all of us, all humans, belong to exceptionalism. Not just Americans. All of the globe is part of God's exceptionalism. No particular country represents God's basic sense of how to do it. It's vainglory to think we Americans have a purchase

on exceptionalism. How, for god's sakes, could God put up with suburbs and malls and superhighways and plastics?

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

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

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

ML: I know when Kennedy was assassinated somebody said, and you quoted it, that God may have withdrawn his blessing from America.

NM: It was John Updike.

ML: And that remark moved you. You thought he might be on to something there.

NM: Yes.

ML: Several times in this and other conversations I've had with you, you've mentioned the possibility that God might have intended human

beings to develop their telepathic powers. In your novel, Ancient Evenings, some of the characters do employ exactly such powers. And modern novelists can, in a sense, read minds. Because they're exploring what people are thinking. One of the great advances is when the novel moved into the human mind.

NM: In which century would you say that was?

ML: Well, it really only started around a hundred years ago.

NM: Dickens enters people's minds.

ML: Not much. Not like Joyce. Or Virginia Woolf.

NM: All right.

ML: Do your speculations about telepathy have anything to do with using this novelistic tool? I mean you certainly explore the consciousness of virtually all of your heroes. You rarely see characters from just the outside.

NM: Yes, but I don't think that I would lay claim to any more telepathy than is average. We all have the experience of thinking of a song and someone in the room starts humming it. People who are married for a while often find they're thinking of something at the same time. We phone someone just as they are about to call us. But in terms of daily novel writing, I think we study everybody from the outside. Once in a while, through love, we do enter literally the inner presence of someone else. But,

generally speaking, we novelists observe. We study society. We try to understand how the social machine works. We try to understand characters who are different from ourselves. We work with the notion that there is a little bit of ourselves in the stranger. Certain characters do come alive even though they are far apart from our notion of our self. The best novelists can do that. All the same, telepathy is but a small part of it now. I do believe, however, that God did want us to be telepathic. The Lord did not necessarily envision electronics. Electronics, I suspect, are the Devil's contribution. God just assumed we would become more and more telepathic and in the course of that, there would be less need for technology. Technology stifles God's creation. Smog is not good for God's air. Static is not good for His ears or ours. I don't want to go through the old litany of all that is wrong with modern civilization. I will add one notion, however, which is that technology being now with us, we have to look upon human history as God's attempt to deal with the Devil as well as with us. If the Devil succeeds in establishing technological shoots and outbursts and venues and avenues throughout all of society, God must engage technology as well. But He comes in second. The Devil is the pioneer in technology. So I would assert. Unless it is we humans who outstripped the Devil.

ML: Right. But one of the new phenomena of technology that is sweeping not just the US but the world—in fact, the united States, I understand, is behind great portions of the development, certainly in Europe and Asia—is cell phones. Only half the people in the States use cell phones, but in Asia and in Europe it's much higher than that. It's seventy, eighty percent. Is this opportunity to call up people all the time, anywhere in the world, not creating a whole new set of communications in the world that never existed before?

NM: I see it as the kind of mess that comes from an over-reliance on comfort. I'm not at all sure that instant communication with everyone alive is ideal. Not at all. In the past, it was often the hunt for information that shaped the development we made of the information. We were stimulated by the hunt. The difficulty in obtaining information was a most vital part of the intellectual process. Today, we talk about gluts of information. We are all being buried under mountain ranges of data.

ML: I remember, you were there at the birth of television and you had many theories about it and have written about it. It seems to me that the cell phone in many ways is almost equal in its power.

NM: With television, back in the early days, everybody who felt positive about it was leaving the full effect of commercials out of the equation. TV

commercials did a terrible thing to the American people. They introduced the expectation that your powers of concentration were required to be ready to suffer a series of hits (interruptions) through every hour that you watched.

ML: You've made it clear that, to your mind, ideation may be closer to the Devil than the Lord. Which made me think, what about language which is perhaps the most complex and subtle creation of intellect. Where does language fit into this discussion?

NM: Language does not come only from intellect. Language is the marriage of intellect and the senses. Whereas, technology is often divorced from the latter. Plastic, for example. Most electronic machines are not agreeable to employ. Think of the cast-iron vise in an old-fashioned cellar workshop. It makes cranking sounds as you use it, and you do get a feeling as you tighten the screw whether the piece in the vise is being held properly. Not being crushed and not too loose. You obtain very little of that with technological machines. At best you're reading dials, and your eyes might even find a little play in the subtlety of the dials. But you can't ask technology to enrich your physical reactions. Whereas, language does come out of the senses. Half of language is onomatopoeia . We are drawn to different languages by their qualities. I love German for its guttural vibrations on one's larynx, and French for the emphasis upon the nose, the

centrality of the nose. I love English for the mannered postures available to your voice, and Spanish for the fire you can feel within it. Ditto for Italian with its sense of bravura. Hebrew for its primitive roots. All such reactions come from our senses. So I separate technology and language—they exist at opposite poles of the intellect.

ML: I've never heard you speak philosophically about language.

NM: Well, I had all sorts of theories years ago but I never got down to grips with it. I do have these notions still. I think certain consonants have associative qualities. I would say that in English "R" almost always has to do with anger, rage, ire, fury, redness, roar. "L" may be related to love—lassitude, leisure, likelihood, languor, libidos, luxury. "S's" are sibilant. They suggest displeasure, sinuosity. I tried to make up a rule for all the consonants, but R, L and S are the easiest. "B" is almost always impact. "B," "K," you know. Break. Sounds that implode upon your ear tend to have relations to B, K. F....

ML: Well what is the relationship between God and the Devil to language?

NM: That's beyond me. But, look. Animals come close to speaking. I had a dog fifty years ago, a standard poodle. Immensely bright. I always felt that his greatest pain, his soul suffering—because dogs in my opinion do have souls—and in fact parenthetically there is one very large but

unascertainable notion that in Karma we may go back into the animal chain again. Who can know? In any event, this dog was extraordinary. He made searching sounds in his throat trying to speak to me. Sounds you couldn't begin to spell out. I could make them for the tape recorder but no one could transcribe them. And that dog wanted to speak. So I think in a certain sense, God was discovering language through the eons of evolution and the sounds of His animals.

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

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

INTERVIEW VII

Intelligent Design

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

NORMAN MAILER: Why?

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

NM: I start as a novelist, and we can't afford to be ideologically bound, even if, in practice, we are. Many of us do tie ourselves up by way of style. Take Henry James or Hemingway. Both were fabulous stylists, but they paid for that huge achievement by being able to write only about certain matters. Their style locked them into narrower modes of perception. As I've said often enough, Picasso had a huge influence on me. For him, style was not a part of one's person, but a tool to use for making a particular

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

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

The tsunami comes to mind. What was offered for explanation by religious spokesmen was that God is a great mystery. His ways are unfathomable. One more time they were hiding behind the Mystery.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Fundamentalists have no understanding of an artist. As they see it, the Creator saw it all at once, did it perfectly (in a week) and brought it out. Lo and behold, it's been perfect ever since. He never failed once. We're the patsies. We ruined it by not keeping our noses clean enough to breathe in

all of God's laws and directions. But God's design was perfect from the start. The fundamentalists are charging full-speed into a profound contradiction of themselves.

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

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

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

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

ML: Tectonic plates. . .

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

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

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

Because nowhere in existence do you find a free ride. Anything that comes along which seems wonderful in the beginning, meets opposition,

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

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

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

ML: That's imperfection.

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

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

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

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

NM: I'm listening.

ML: In the vastness of the universe, there are billions of stars and solar systems and galaxies. By our limited knowledge, of the ones we've looked at, not one comes close to having the basics to design a universe—that is, the water and rain, the flora and fauna that went into creating our amazing, complex organic system that has been able to work together over a period of time. There's nothing like that anywhere else that we can see in the universe. Couldn't it be we're just a fluke of the cosmos? In so vast a universe with so many possibilities, finally there is one planet that developed out of the equivalent of mega-billions of monkeys pounding out *Hamlet*.

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

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

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

ML: For our solar system.

NM: For our solar system. It may be that this God failed with other planets. Prior to the earth. I won't even begin to approach that. I will repeat that it is far more difficult to comprehend the complexity of our existence if God does not exist. Because then we are back to the monkeys writing *Hamlet* and that is hard to believe. It is much easier to suppose that *Hamlet* is a part of human design. And if it's not, if it did take a nano-trillion of monkeys to produce the equivalent, what a waste. There has to be the assumption, along with everything else, that existence is moving toward a goal, and therefore lives within the boundaries of an economy. It is also possible that existence itself in the deepest, most cosmic, sense, is in peril. Of necessity,

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

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

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

NM: We do try to. Some of us. Sometimes.

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

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

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

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

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

NM: They're not clockwork.

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

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

is that they don't allow the figures in the book, the characters, to push their own limits to the point where they make the plot unacceptable, and so throws the design into chaos.

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

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

book out on the waters. Whereas God, I will obviously argue, tends to launch each Intelligent Design to see what happens to it. That is how God learns, how He proceeds to the next Intelligent Design.

Let me enjoy one wild aspect of this notion. In my book about Henry Miller, I spoke of three men coming into a hostess's living room, Henry James, Hemingway, and Henry Miller. Each takes off his hat and behold! To their vast surprise—they had no prior knowledge of this—a cow turd is steaming under each hat. James, I then go on to say, might have perished from an experience that awful. Hemingway would have gone into a depression—he would have seen it as emblematic of the nature of life. Just when life seemed something you could enjoy, unexpected disasters shattered your mood. And Miller would have said, "Good Lord, how did that turd get on my head? And just look at the hostess. Her nostrils are quivering, or is that because of her twat? She is so excited—what a wonderful moment!" Miller is an example of someone who couldn't stay with a plot for five minutes because he wanted to run right into the world and discover something new about himself and/or the world. He is at one extreme, Henry James at the other. Between them lies the effective use of Intelligent Design.

ML: But what would Joyce have done?

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

ML: I think he would have appreciated it.

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

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

NM: Your point..

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

NM: Without a foundation.

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

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

ML: I do remember that.

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

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

NM: Let me put it this way: we first have to become close to God and helpful to God—large questions we haven't even entered. God is not only an element in existence but a moral presence. Until we can feel we are some kind of great help to God, why should God trust us? You remember, at the end of Harlot's Ghost, Hugh Montague goes off on this—to me—
intriguing speech that God, having decided that the advent of humans was

not yet to be trusted, proceeded to then create the illusion of evolution. In reality—so goes Harlot's thesis—the earth was created entire, *ex nihilo*, by God in six days. He then laid in evidence all over the earth and in the seas that evolution had done it instead over millions of years. Implied in all that is a suggestion that until we get close enough to God to feel we are in some kind of alliance, can we begin to have some knowledge of what might be behind God. But that won't happen until we get nearer. Sartre doesn't let us point in that direction at all.

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

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

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

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

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

NM: Right there, you run smack into the most obdurate aspect of Catholicism, the insistence of Catholicism on God's perfection. What

characterizes my idea of Intelligent Design is that it is partial—not perfect, but partial—a partial improvement. I'm glad I have the novel to fall back upon as a metaphor for this. When I write a novel, it's an attempt to come up with a piece of intelligent design, but it's never perfect. Some parts are better than others. If it goes into publication, the critical returns come back. Very often those returns have little relation to what you had written.

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

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

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

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

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

You know, when they are beautiful, the services of organized religion move me. I feel "How tragic. How painful." All this devotion, all this loyalty, and it goes into an intellectual sump. It explains nothing. All you

are finally asked to believe is that God will be there to hear your prayers, God will welcome us when we die—as if that's all God has to do.

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

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

ML: A joint endeavor—

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

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

NM: Well, I reject the language of the question. One of the absolute disasters that Hitler brought to human understanding was an abuse of the concept of race. Because race offers us great clues. It is perfectly possible—and here again, one can only speculate—but it is perfectly possible that races, in the beginning, were Intelligent Design for different situations. In other words, for people in the tropics, God was saying, "well,

how can I design the heating system of their bodies so they can bear the excessive warmth more easily?" And made separate adjustments for the north. We're discovering that living in separate climates produces different relaxations and strictures of the throat. Languages reflect that. Mind you, God as the artist, might be discovering within the material itself, where the continuation might be. Certain sculptors talk about how they do not know exactly what the work will become until they cut into the marble. It is the marble which discloses what they must do with the next stroke. The same process of discovery may be present in human or animal design. The environment plays a mighty role.

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

reductive phrase, you keep assuming God is a nice person. That seems a bit arbitrary.

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

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

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

NM: Yes. He studied to be a rabbi in Lithuania but by the time he came over here, the only way he could make his living was as a peddler. Then he moved to a town in New Jersey called Long Branch where he opened a shop and worked as a butcher. There was only one synagogue in Long Branch, so when the regular rabbi was ill or off on vacation, my grandfather stood in

for him. And my mother was proud of this. The fundamental snobbery of the Jews—it was much better to be a rabbi than a butcher. As a contrarian Jew. I was delighted, it gave me two different strains to develop.

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

NM: My grandfather was most religious—he began studying the Talmud when he was four years old. One of the best things to be said about the Talmud is it's very hard to become a fundamentalist while studying it. It's too easy if you live only with the Torah but difficult when reading the Talmud. Unlike the Torah (which is the first five books of the Old Testament) the Talmud inquires into the nuances of things. For instance, in that long-gone age, people brought animals to the temple to be sacrificed. Very often there were small disasters—a poor man might have decided to sacrifice his prize heifer because his child was fearfully ill. But on his entrance into the synagogue, the heifer would defecate. Well, the Talmud is ready to focus on just where it defecated. Was it outside on the patio? Or did it do the job on the steps? In the vestibule? In the aisle? At the altar approach? Did it defecate on the altar? Outrageous! For all these are separate violations of the most holy, and so call for different penalties. In certain cases the animal can still be sacrificed. At other sites, like the altar,

the animal is lost completely—it must be disposed of completely. It cannot be eaten. In the Talmud, there are, nonetheless, all these efforts to find zones of relative compatibility between God's laws and human needs—so the Talmud becomes the opposite of the Old Testament, and needless to say, the New Testament where the law is, in effect, inflexible.

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

NM: I wouldn't call it ambiguity. I see it as the wars of committees who are looking to fix what His behavior might have been. For their theological purposes, not his. So, occasionally, they were at odds. But each side of the disagreement was inflexible.

ML: Did your mother talk much about her father?

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

ML: He was obviously a compassionate man.

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

INTERVIEW VIII

Theodicy

ML: Any venture that looks to deal with the philosophical problem of evil, fits this category. And there are many. I will cite a number of theodicies, but there are so many I will move to the next so soon as you, from your point of view has done your best to refute the premise. NM: Agreed.

ML: God's ultimate purpose, some philosophers say, is to glorify Himself. He, by definition, He, alone, is infinitely entitled to do that without vanity. But He does allow evil to exist so we will appreciate His goodness all the more. It is analogous to the way that the blind man healed by Jesus appreciated sight more than those around him who had never experienced such a condition.

NM: Let me take up first what I have never understood. Why is there this enormous desire in God to be glorified? Why is that so acceptable to so many branches of religion? We laugh at people who insist on being constantly glorified. We speak of neurotic movie stars or spoiled athletes, crazy generals and impossible authors, mad kings and greed-bag tycoons. One of the few things we all seem to agree on is that excessive vanity, once it has grown into a thing in itself, is dire. By that logic, a god-sized vanity is hard to comprehend. Where is the need for it?

ML: Maybe we can change "glorified" to "loved." God wants to be loved.

NM: Why does God need to be loved? That's a large question. It may be true, but if God needs to be loved, then I think we are entitled to start posing a few questions. Is God's need to be loved so crucial because God, like us, is over-extended? When, after all, do we have our greatest need to be appreciated? It is precisely when we are worn thin—precisely those times when our courage, our stamina, our determination, our belief that we possess worth, is attenuated. At such times, we are more in need of love.

ML: Are you saying that is where God is now?

NM: It is the only justification I can comprehend for God needing so much adoration from us.

ML: Moving to my second point, do you have any interest in the argument that He allows evil to exist in order to intensify our love for Him all the more?

NM: I find that strange. I've always been bothered by the excessive love that God appears to demand, or, worse, that the churchmen who rule His places of worship insist upon. "Jesus needs your love, Jesus wants your love." Well, Jesus is giving love, presumably. Does He need it in order to return it? What they're saying—without understanding, because they never follow anything to conclusion—but one of the elements in their thinking that repels most serious young people away from theology, is that fundamentalists, for example, seem to make a point of not contemplating the consequences of their thought. For if God does need a great deal of love, then why? Why? The question has to be asked. Doesn't it suggest that we dwell in a situation where God's fate depends upon our development as well—the good or evil world that we are developing?

Now, all we have to work with in these theological speculations is what we know from our own experience. People who need love desperately are not often in good shape. If God created us in His or Her image, which I do believe, then God must also want us to understand some real portion of what is going on in His universe. It is to God's advantage, I would argue,

for us to understand what God's needs might be. Unless, on the other hand, human history has been so vile and so awful, so permeated by the large and little triumphs of the Devil, that God has a legitimate fear of being destroyed by mankind so soon as humans obtain enough power. That may be a real possibility. If it is, exorbitant requests for love become even more disturbing.

ML: Here is another theodicy: Evil is one of the means by which God can test humanity and see if we are worthy of His grace and His love. The evil and the suffering that comes to us prove to be educational; it can make us better people. He is testing us and the tests are good for us.

NM: I find that offensive. Apply it to a parent and a child. We test the child—and in some situations we do test a child—but do we do it to see if the child is worthy of our love? Literature is rife with portraits of detestable parents, fathers and mothers of that detestable ilk.

ML: Consider the second part: it is educational for us. It makes us better people. We do that with children—we do test them to improve them, we say, "Now that you've been through this, you're a better person for it." We do that all the time to our children.

NM: On the other hand, there is also large vanity in the assumption that God knows all about evil. Why not try to live with the notion that God is

trying to discover what evil is about? What if evil is, at present, more bottomless than good? Isn't that a corollary of the notion that God is not all-powerful? What, after all, is God's relation to evil? Is He trying to discover more about it? May it be that God doesn't comprehend evil all that well, any more than as parents we are always quick to understand if our children are siding toward evil. Are parents always the first to know?

ML: It was Dostoyevsky who said suffering is the sole origin of consciousness. That only through suffering could we improve our comprehension of the world around us a little more. Do you reject that?

NM: I can agree that suffering is, yes, a mighty educator, but it is also an immensely expensive one. Some learn a great deal from it; all too many are reduced if not destroyed. Suffering can maim more spirit than it creates. Some learn best by suffering through small stages, shifts in one's uglier habits. If, for example, you want to become a better man or woman, that might require not indulging greed.

ML: A form of suffering.

NM: A modest form. If I want something, and I can't have it, I may be suffering like a child. Whereas Dostoyevsky was referring to suffering at a level so intense that one had to wonder whether one could go on. Was existence worthwhile? Suffering of that order can become too intense.

Some people turn to suicide. And it can be true that a number do pass through such storms of the soul and come out on the other side not emotionally crippled, indeed have much to offer. But most are hobbled. Most have lost too much.

ML: Let me offer another theodicy, the "now and then." Evil and pain exist in this world, but only as a prelude to the afterlife. There, no pain will exist. So God offers a balance: Much suffering, pain and evil in this world, but in the other, there will be none. The scales balance.

NM: That is comparable to a man thinking, "I'm poor, but there will come a day when I am wealthy." Of course, the poor man has nothing to offer concerning the way and the means by which he will become wealthy. He has nothing but his hankering. By the same token, any notion that we will live in peace and beauty afterward may be naught but our need for future promises. Are we looking for good salesmanship. "You won't know what true happiness is until you buy this wonderful car. You'll come back and thank me for having sold it to you."

In the theodicies you've presented so far, there is always the assumption that God is in control of our fate from beginning to end. By my lights, theological misdirection rears up right at the commencement of the thesis. Anyone who looks even casually at the variety of incredible animals

who have come down through evolution (and/or Intelligent Design) has to assume that God may have said to Himself at a certain point, "This little animal, this macaw, is going to be the best of its species." Then, it turned out that it wasn't. So God moved on and made a better bird or made a better hedgehog, or a better pig. Then, man came into it and began in his turn to alter the animals. And often, improve them. (As we see every year on TV at the American Kennel Club.) Yet, the moment you accept a darker notion of existence—that is, live with the assumption there are hazards and perils added by the Devil, then God's effort becomes a contest where no one, human or divine, necessarily knows which side may win. Many might be ready to commit themselves to such a contest. In contrast, look at how our sense of challenge, is reduced if it is all happening to illuminate God's greater glory. Then, all we have to do is remain patient and pass through our suffering—because a happy ending is guaranteed. No! I much prefer the assumption of the Greeks that tragedy lies next to happiness, and both compose the staples of our existence. We can live with the hope that it may all turn out well, but such hope will be empty unless we are also prepared to live with a tragic outcome. We need to have the bravery to proceed, but in no way are we entitled to proclaim that a wonderful heaven is waiting for all

of us, and we need only keep our minds clean and, most preferably, theologically inert.

ML: The fourth theodicy is one of Maya. Illusion. This is how some deal with the question of evil. They say: what humans consider to be evil or suffering is either an illusion or it's unimportant. Events that are thought to be evil, such as death by natural disaster, are really not so. It could all be part of God's scheme. Eastern thought—Taoism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Confucianism—take this stance. They do not engage the problem of evil. You are mistaken, they would claim, if you think it is really there.

NM: This argument could survive into the 20th century. Then, the Holocaust shattered it. Shattered it force majeure. The particular facts were so odious that they dictated the need for a different approach.

Contemplate the Holocaust, the gulags, the atom bomb. The mystery and the outrage of excessive human suffering is intensified by at least one order of magnitude. In consequence, the notion that evil is illusion grows offensive. Of course, Maya assumes that all of the "outside world," good, evil, and neutral, is illusion—wonderful, lovely outer events are as illusory as suffering. It's all Maya. But I must say I find that disagreeable. I suggest that we at our maximum are no more than the equal of any holy cow in any Hindu pasture. Indeed, the notion that all life is illusion is

comforting to the ethos of the upper classes of India. They can salve their bad conscience at the sight of the hideous poverty around them. It's all illusion they can tell themselves happily and most conveniently.

If you believe in karma as I do, believe not only in rebirth, but in subtle divine judgment (hopefully it is subtle) concerning the manner in which you will be reborn, another part of me remains sardonic and expects that God may have His or Her occasional bureaucratic problems operating the mechanics of reincarnation. If populations die at a steady rate with only a statistical spike here and there—a local earthquake, a terrible storm, a flood—God can receive and judge incoming souls. Forgive so crude a presentation of celestial mechanics, but it must serve for the moment. When reincarnation is flooded with a huge number of deaths that have no meaning—because they are abrupt, even near-instantaneous, without warning, and provide no opportunity to die with any grace, and so leave the victim bereft of awareness at the moment of their death—there to die marooned from any sense of why they now must die—then they enter reincarnation with less preparation within themselves. The most sensitive mortal anticipations may have been lopped off. It is worth repeating. I would argue that a sudden, unexpected death is much worse than death that

comes to one after a modicum of thought and fear and resolve and expectation. I believe there is a difference, and it may be profound.

So I think the Holocaust ravaged many human entrances into death. I also believe there may have been confusion in the heavens, even a celestial nightmare. Reincarnation was flooded with near to nameless dead.

ML: Was it so different from trench warfare in the First World War where they were killing 150,000 people in a week? Surely, that equals the rate of people being exterminated in the Holocaust. By the time the First World War was over, something like 30 million people were gone.

NM: I believe it's analogous, but not identical.

ML: So every time this has happened, like at the Battle of Stalingrad, all of those. . .

NM: When you go into a battle like Stalingrad, you are, at least, aware that you may die. What was diabolical about the Nazi camps is that they were most careful not to prepare people for death. They did not state: "We are going to gas you today." On the contrary, they told the concentration camp inmates that since they were lice-ridden and filthy, they would receive showers. Courtesy of the camp. So, be so good as to undress. Those prisoners who were most obsessed with cleanliness, trooped happily into the gas chambers. A minute later, they were dying with fire in their lungs, and

screaming, "You lied, you cheated me." I am arguing that for a thousand people to die in a large room over one hideous instant of betrayal is to feel that God or someone on high betrayed them.

In contrast, the soldiers in Stalingrad knew there was a large chance they were going to perish. That, I would submit, offered less grievous problems to the powers of reincarnation than the gassings of the Holocaust. I repeat: it is so important to have a sense of why you are dying. I go so far as to believe that can prepare you for your next existence.

ML: Are you saying God was not able to accommodate many who were ready for reincarnation?

NM: What is basic in the universe? Certainly the laws concerning the conservation of energy—we know that you cannot do everything at once for everyone. All existence seems to be built on that set of proportions. So, to assume that God is in complete command of reincarnation is equal to assuming that He or She never suffers even a passing despair before huge, unforeseen disasters—indeed, why must we assume that God anticipates every event? Or is in command of every energy for every occasion? He or She created our world but that doesn't mean every oncoming situation was delineated in advance. Hardly so. History because of the ongoing actions of

God and the Devil is not often open to prediction. Before the future of history even divinities take pause.

ML: What happened, then, to those victims of the gas chambers?

NM: I would offer this speculation. I would say most of those who desired reincarnation did receive it, but in unsatisfactory fashion. This would derive from the argument I proposed earlier that the closest we come to heaven or hell is to encounter some angelic witty presence who decides how you are going to be reincarnated. And where. When God's wit is present, that is as close as you will get to heaven or hell, either the knowledge that you will have a better life or a poorer one at the start of your next life. But when the Creator is not functioning at His or Her best, but is too beleaguered, too extenuated, too despairing, too exhausted, then the choices are made for reincarnation can be deemed gross—there's not enough of God to go around. It is a way of saying the Holocaust deadened God's wit. Too much was happening at once. God, I will repeat once more, is not inexhaustible.

ML: I hear what you say, but why is it more difficult for God to assign a new birth to someone who died in the Holocaust than someone who died in the trenches? I don't see the difference.

NM: OK, let's put it this way—you have been a teacher. You certainly won't dispute the suggestion that you can walk into certain classrooms and

see that certain students are ready to learn, whereas others look lethargic. Some are eager to be in class and others are there because it is compulsory. So, I am saying that when you die with great bitterness in your heart, you are harder to reach. How does this not apply to reincarnation? I am now improvising outrageously, but allow me. Let us say, that the monitoring angel comes by, takes one quick look and has a sense of how the recently expired soul before him can prove strong here, weak there, and might well deserve to go to this rebirth or that. In normal situations, they can make quick decisions. But if the dead person's soul is in disarray, then it can be analogous to you deciding how to give necessary counsel to a student who has come into your room in fearful drugged-up condition. You don't necessarily know whether they should be assigned to a given class. I think this can carry over to what I'm talking about.

ML: Next one. The big picture, the fifth theodicy. God's divine plan is good. What we see as evil is not really evil. Rather it is part of a divine design that actually is good. Our limitations prevent us from seeing the larger picture. Certainly you'll grant that God envisions more than we do.

NM: Certainly.

ML: So things we think are a terrible tragedy turn out a year later to be positive experiences.

NM: Yes, the army. The worst experience of my life. And the most valuable. That's one thing. But to build a theological system on this theodicy may be excessively hopeful. It does not explain evil at all. It does not justify the Holocaust. The first person who can show me how the Holocaust was good for God's purposes will alter my thinking drastically.

ML: The great example is Judas. Judas was a traitor, a betrayer, yet he was absolutely necessary to God's plan. . .

NM: How do you know what God's plan was? You're taking the received wisdom of theologians who have been living with these enigmas for two thousand years and coming up with the answers that serve their respective needs. But what they conclude may have nothing to do with cosmic or earthly reality. In *The Gospel According to the Son* I concluded that two things happened because of the crucifixion. One: God lost to the Devil. Worse, he had expected to win. He thought Jesus was going to change humankind profoundly and immediately. He did not foresee the end. God, having so much to oversee all at once is not necessarily focused on what each one of His particular Creations is capable of. While I'm willing to assume that Jesus was His bold stroke, I would add that in chess when a really bold move is made and the player is not sure how it is going to turn out, you record it with an exclamation point plus a question mark. I would

say God's expectation for Jesus was both an exclamation point and a question mark. Then, like many another bold move, it did not turn out as expected. The Devil won—Jesus was tortured. At this point, God in His brilliance came up with an answer to the Devil. He gave us to believe that His Son actually died for our sins. What a human chord was struck! But to suggest that this was all planned in advance—crucifixion and resurrection—dubious. God may well have been responding to a crushing defeat with claims of half a victory. That makes more sense to me: God was re-writing the depths of what had happened after the events ensued—which is exactly what humans do all the time. We call it History. It is one of our fundamental activities. I suppose I even offer the assumption that God is not only like us in many ways but, indeed, He or She also has an ego to protect, that is, a necessary reservoir of confidence enough to keep striving.

ML: The next theodicy argues that evil is not the cause, but the consequence of people failing to observe God's will. Universal, reciprocated love would solve most of the problems that lead to the evils in the world.

NM: Well, let me go back to something I said earlier. God is searching for a deeper set of meanings in evil. Conceivably, God may feel that He does not understand evil all that satisfactorily. Evil has aspects that God's

understanding may not penetrate. My repetitive notion is that God, like us, seeks to learn. Maybe at the commencement, whatever form it really took, some vast deity, very far removed, said, "All right, new and most youthful deity, this will be your territory. Do what You can with it. If You can."

ML: That's a Gnostic idea.

NM: "And if You fail—well, it's happened to other deities. All the same, You are an artist, the best artist we have available just now for Your assigned part of the cosmos." Given this scenario, our young God soon discovers that He or She has a great deal to learn about evil. And is soon fascinated with evil.

ML: Well, you have a view of evil as a powerful, dynamic force.

NM: Yes, at the least I see evil as looking to destroy the part of the universe that we know—our world.

ML: Emerson said there really is no evil, just the absence of good. But that there are degrees of good.

NM: Too easy. It enables us to go to sleep at night without pang or fear. But on the nights when one can't sleep, sometimes you can feel there's evil in the room, evil in your heart, evil in people around you—not all the time, but (rarely—thank God!) on those occasions when one's felt such a presence, you certainly cannot say that it is not really evil, merely a lesser

degree of good. Maybe Emerson never felt an incubus on his chest. He was, after all, such a fine spirit.

ML: Another argument: Evil is the consequence of God permitting humans to have free will. Human cruelty is the price of freedom. God gave us this freedom and He cannot interfere. Without the possibility to choose to do good or evil, humanity would be robots.

NM: That's the best single, strongest argument. But theologians wriggle out of it. They put God back in control by the end of the philosophical day.

ML: Well, yes, at the end of time, God does take over again. This is a testing time.

NM: Here is exactly where existentialism needs to rear up. Yes, God had to give us free will in order to find out about us. He could learn so much more about us provided we were given free will. But, of necessity, the door had to be left open to the Devil. This was a move done, perhaps—on a cosmic level—in fear and trembling. Yes, great fear because the final answer had to be left open. It was not free will unless the Devil had something like an equal opportunity to influence humans.

I would add that by now it is a tri-partite war. If it is only a contest between God and the Devil, and we are no more than the field on which it all takes place—some species of Astro-turf—then we still do not have free

will. We have to be equal as players to God and the Devil. That has to open a new kind of fear for us. Some could, in consequence, all go down to disaster. The usual supposition, however, is that God will finally be victorious, and, yes, we, His soldiers, will all go to heaven, a view held for centuries. No longer, however, I would say. Now, it is as if any one of these three forces can triumph. Many will now even conceive of a universe without God and the Devil. I don't pretend to know how to speculate on this. Let's say it is not inconceivable that man may become more and more powerful in relation to God and the Devil. If They have exhausted each other, we may even arrive at a point where it does become man and woman's world, our human's world.

ML: What would make that come about?

NM: Technology. It's obvious—well, obvious to me—that every effort is being made in these years to replicate a human being and, once done, forge armies of them. It might take two centuries but it does seem to be what we humans are hell-bent on doing. At that point, free will will have grown so large and so livid that it will be looking to replace God. I naturally, see that as absolutely disastrous. If I have been ready to question God's judgment on many a matter I am wholly reluctant to put any faith in our judgment. We are far from equipped to deal with the cosmos.

ML: Here is the last theodicy. The eighth. God is a righteous judge. And so people get what they deserve. If someone suffers, it is because they have committed a sin that merits such suffering.

NM: What if a divine balance has been disrupted? We had a different relation to existence ten thousand years ago. You had to hunt an animal down if you wished to eat meat. Now the beasts are brought to stockyards. Flesh for consumption is slaughtered in disagreeable fashion. Sows are kept in cribs so small they do not have room to move once they are fattened. The world of nature once lived on the basis that nearly everything contributed to the feeding chain. Add reincarnation, and the cycles of life and death were taken care of. This was the original conception. Today, as one example, the overlay of contemporary agribusiness has skewed it. In like fashion, the earlier human notion that excessive evil was compensated for—that if you were killed before your time, reincarnation could make adjustments—may no longer be operative. Yet it is still remains the only explanation I know for why many young soldiers are, when tested, ready to die in battle. I think they have a sense—comparable in some degree to the terrorists who are blowing themselves up—that they are going somewhere special. Right or wrong, this is their belief. It is a deep belief, indeed so profound that one cannot necessarily ignore the possibility that it is real.

But repeat this theodicy, would you?

ML: God is righteous. People get what they deserve.

NM: God does the best He or She can do. That doesn't mean people get what they deserve. If they did, the universe would be equal to a clock.

ML: Would you agree that it was inevitable once God gave us free will, and intelligence, that technology would follow?

NM: No. I am working against the tide on this one, but it could be that at a certain point God hoped and expected all of us would become psychic.

Great entertainers would be so intense in their art that men and women all over the world could experience the performance. Yes. Depending on how skilled and beautiful your senses had become, you could receive these performances, you could have people influencing other people at great distances. Of course, it did not happen. We looked instead for technological means of communicating. And that blunted the possibility of such fine senses. It helps to account in part for the near-mute, somewhat odd and wistful sense we acquire when we watch a world event on television.

ML: I would say that if you put people in a physical world, they are going to invent the wheel. And once they do, technology follows from that.

NM: No, sir. No, sir. Electronics has nothing to do with the wheel.

Electronics was one jump by mankind that God may have had nothing to do with.

ML: So when we went from a mechanical universe to an electronic universe—

NM: A leap not anticipated. Or such is my supposition.

Now most people who believe in reincarnation do expect that sooner or later they will reach enlightenment or some equitable resting place, and look back upon the problems and sufferings of earthly life as no more than way-stations on the journey. But I can't agree. I think reincarnation makes no sense if the end is foretold. I can't emphasize this enough. None of my arguments make sense if the end is known. I think it is precisely because the end is unknown that human terror sits at the root of every theology, as it has for millennia. It is so difficult for humans to accept the likelihood that this world is as open and undecipherable, as chaotic, as wayward, as playful, as perverse, as unexpected as, in secret, we fear it is. I think this is what has driven any number of theologians to the notion that it has all been foretold, that the end has been granted to us. But, such conclusions are not only philosophically untethered, even outrageous, but have gotten us into all sorts of trouble. Because a foreordained end narrows our lives, shrinks our

thinking, and tends to bring out the worst in us. We become addicted to quick judgment concerning others even as we cling to a partial optimism in which we only half-believe.

ML: In all these conversations we've had about the nature of God, your supposition has been that God makes mistakes, He is not perfect, He is much like us. But we know we have evil in us. There is evil in us as individuals, and as a race. And if God is so much like us, then God does indeed have evil in Him or Her. And that explains everything—you don't need a devil.

NM: No, no, no, no, I don't think that's it at all. God could have a little evil in Him and the Devil a great deal.

ML: Let's say it's 80/20. If God just has 20% evil, wouldn't that be enough to account for all the natural disasters and the Holocaust?

NM: But 80/20 is an assumption. What if it's 95/5 or 98/2? This sort of argument one can only grapple with in a novel. That might be interesting.

ML: There are theologians who take this position. They're called "open theists" and take the position that God is imperfect and has enough evil in Him—and the evil in God, coupled with the Devil, is responsible for the miseries of the world.

NM: Well, that could certainly be an answer, and if you want to respect the Old Testament as more than a great work of literature, but also as a document with some reality, you certainly have a Jehovah out there wreaking evil on a large scale as well as goodness. And it could be that God, being existential like us, was trying to reduce the amount of evil in Himself or Herself.

ML: By doing what?

NM: By Jehovah trying, for one thing, to get that prodigious temper under control. By daring to have a Son, a great attempt to improve matters. It may be that God was always trying for more, over and over, and often deciding, "No, this move won't work." It may be that after Christ's death, He had to decide if He wished to build the Catholic Church. And maybe the Devil was joining Him. It may be easier to comprehend the history of the Catholic Church if we assume that they were building this Church together and worked in collaboration, and with some considerable unhappiness, yes, God and the Devil built it together as most unhappy and embattled partners.

In other words, God may be out on an odyssey not unrelated to ours. He or She may get better along the way, but not succeed altogether.

ML: Are you saying that many human institutions can be the creation of both God and the Devil?

NM: Of course.

ML: Do you see any human organizations or institutions that are free from the taint of evil? Or are they all mixed?

NM: I think there's evil in everything.

ML: Baseball teams. . .

NM: You bet.

ML: Football. . .

NM: How not? [pause] One last thought. Earlier, you were advancing the argument that suffering is good for you. That submitting to God's will without complaint is virtuous. And this virtue will earn you all kinds of rewards. We will endure whatever God sends since that is our ticket to eternal bliss. Of course, if you dare to ask how a perfect God can make matters so imperfect, or worse, unjust, the only answer you can give is, "Do not presume to understand the mind of God." Right there, is the most dangerous single argument advanced by churchmen. It is exactly what drives people out of their faith because it tends to make faith brittle. Any time there is something you cannot comprehend, you are told, "It is beyond you—your faith has to carry you through this." So greater and greater spiritual loans are borrowed from faith. Sooner or later, and in so many, faith snaps. And people leave the Church, leave religion, cease to believe.

While "Do not presume to understand the mind of God" is the most-employed of the various explanations of evil, it is also, in its final effect, the most demoralizing.

I vote then, as is obvious, for an existential God who does not demand my unwavering faith, but prefers instead that we look to find, despite God's flaws and ours, a core of mutual respect as we set out together to attempt to create a viable vision that can lead us into the unforeseeable future out there with its galaxies, its light-years, its enigmas, and ultimately, let us hope, its availability. Perhaps the greatest gods of the cosmos are also on a search and may not be wholly indisposed to welcome us.

INTERVIEW IX

ML: As we have agreed, the form of this interview will be a discussion on Gnosticism. I think this may even be the most natural way to conclude this book.

NM: That may be. But I have to recognize that although I have lived with that word in many a text over many a year, indeed even gave a full reading to Elaine Pagel's *The Gnostic Gospels* some years ago, I am still not comfortable with the term. I feel ignorant of its meanings in relation to what we have talked about.

One of the perils of bad memory from which I suffer is that one retains not nearly enough of one's serious reading. Growing old usually ensures that if you last long enough to reach your eighties, your memory will bear more resemblance to a bare wall than to a text.