

ML: Forewarned, forewarned. I came prepared. I would start by saying that you are hardly alone. Gnosticism is not a religious movement and it has been shunted pretty much off the face of the ideological earth.

Here are a few of the general traits: There is first, a disdain for authority and Orthodoxy which is opposed by a great belief in studying the self. The self is regarded as a phenomenon that you had to understand to some serious degree in order to attain larger knowledge. In this sense, the Gnostics were close to the Manichaens who were dualists, but not absolute about it. Like the Gnostics, they saw the body and the spirit as separate but mutually dependent. They were very taken with Jewish mysticism which of course had been present long before Christ, and so pre-date the Gnostics who seem to have come into existence around the second century B.C. and, indeed, in the beginning were an esoteric branch of Judaism. As you may recall from reading *The Golden Bough*, there were many competing sects at this time. But the Gnostics had great respect for Judaism while at the same time valuing the Greek belief in knowledge and self examination.

NM: My knowledge of Jewish mysticism is not profound, but I did some reading in the Kabbalah and the Zohar. Neither existed, however, at that point.

ML: No, although later, when the Kabalah did develop, the Gnostics were not opposed to it. They liked it. As they liked certain Buddhist texts—

NM: You're talking about a thousand years later.

ML: That's right.

NM: The Gnostics, in other words, continue well into the Middle Ages.

ML: Probably they end with the Inquisition.

NM: I thought the various uprootings of the heresies in the early centuries of Christianity took care of the Gnostics. Not so?

ML: It diminished them greatly. As I say, Gnosticism came into existence around the second century B.C. and built its ongoing strength by taking in Jewish strains, Christian strains, even Buddhist strains right up to the fourth century A.D. At that point the Christian church, especially under St. Augustine and St. Irenaeus, mounted a strong campaign against them using St. John as the point of their spear. Because St. John was a great believer in revelation, and the Gnostics were not. Augustine was another fierce opponent, and, of course, St. Irenaeus wrote five volumes against the heresy. Many of the tenets of Christianity, for example Original Sin, Resurrection, and Jesus as the son of God were later additions to Christianity. In the year 200, however, there was no sense of Original Sin and

Resurrection was barely an idea. The assumption that Jesus was God also came later. In good part, these ideas came in opposition to Gnosticism.

NM: Could you say that the first purpose of Original Sin was to forge a powerful weapon against the Gnostics?

ML: Yes. Gnosticism advocated individualism in search of enlightenment. It believed in reincarnation. It believed that all humans had some kind of divine spark. The spark may be trapped, impossible to free, one might be out of touch with it, but it was there.

NM: I agree with so much of this.

ML: I thought you might. It's no accident that the fundamentalists, to the extent that they know anything about Gnosticism, see it as a disreputable part of early Christianity, and best kept in the closet. If Gnosticism survives at all now, it may be among some sects who live on the border of Iraq and Iran-- the Mandeans, for example, are still there. The attribute to emphasize is that in Greek, *Gnosis* means "knowledge." *Gnosticos* is someone who seeks knowledge by searching the depths of the self, looking at the self as the available ground for enlightenment. When it came to the body, they were more divided. Some saw a division between the spirit and the flesh, some felt that the flesh wasn't important at all and therefore they

could go out and fuck themselves silly because it didn't make any difference.

Another branch of the Gnostics were purifiers. To the Zoroastrians, fire was holy because it purified. Water was holy. But they didn't believe in sex. Ergo, they died out. While Christianity became monolithic, Gnosticism divided. And that is another one of the reasons it didn't survive. Nor did it have an Augustine or an Irenaeus drawing everything together, and organizing a belief system.

NM. Well, I think it hardly matters whether it was a conscious move on the part of the early Church fathers, or an instinct, but I expect the Church fathers were certain that Christianity had to be absolute. Otherwise, it was not going to work. To hold together there must be no questions. Naught but answers. So the Gnostics were directly offensive to the Church fathers. It seems as if they certainly agree with what some of us are saying today: That there are no answers. There are only questions. The mark of a good society, a few of us might argue, speaking of a society that has not yet come into existence, is that you move from one set of questions up to a higher level of questions. Whereas, the early Christian philosophers founded their church upon the opposed conclusion. People must be given absolute certainty about life and death. Particularly about death. An absolute statement of Heaven and Hell was required. The notion of reincarnation was too

nuanced, too special, too elegant, too delicate, too possible. So, it had to be absolutely forbidden; and today, for fundamentalists, is still off the board.

I was reading Nietzsche's *Anti-Christ* a few days ago, and at a certain point he says, "All priests are liars." It's a marvelous remark because it happens to be not only daring but true. Whenever you speak with absolute authority about something that you cannot prove, the decision to speak with such authority means that you are ready to live as a liar. It seems to me that Christianity, because of its determination to be wholly authoritative, was able ultimately to create huge societies. Now, these huge societies work by half and by half they fail. Certainly, for centuries, they functioned well enough to limp along philosophically full of unanswerable questions, hideous inequalities, and clouds of mendacity, ready to sweep all unanswerable questions under a rug of absolute faith.

ML: Long before the Gnostics, it was taken for granted that there were many gods. This is certainly true of the Egyptians and of the Greeks. The Hindus believed in a variety of deities. The Africans reacted to all kinds of spirits high and low. It is as if Judaism and then Christianity came to a contrary conclusion; this plethora of gods did not serve their faith. It would be better for humans to believe there was one truth only.

NM: And one God. Which would of course explain the intensity of the early Christian attacks on the Gnostics.

ML: Yes, they burned their books, they expelled them, they killed them. You know, when they found the Gnostic Gospels in 1945 in Egypt, those were remarkable documents—third or fourth century copies of documents that went back to the time of Christ. Elsewhere they had been systematically burned and destroyed. But because of the obscurity of this hiding place, these scrolls had not been uncovered, and so it was a great revelation. Historical and Biblical scholars had always known about the Gnostics but mainly because Augustine and Irenaeus had attacked them. They never heard them speak for themselves. When they found the Gnostic Gospels, they discovered a completely different Christianity, one that did not embrace a monolithic God and had a host of negative feelings about the Old Testament and the intensity of rage and jealousy in Jehovah. We can ask: What was he jealous of? Maybe other gods. So the Gnostics became the losers in this huge struggle.

But you could see, at least personally I see in the narrowness and the Orthodoxy of Christianity from the time of Augustine on, how narrow is Christianity in relation to its roots. A hatred of the flesh, the concept of Original Sin, the insistence that

Jesus must be God. He cannot merely be God's messenger. And to counter such concepts, remarkable figures did come out of the Middle East—John the Baptist, Jesus, Mani, Zoroaster, Adonis, Dionysus, Osiris—incredible figures. From a Gnostic point of view they would all be messengers sent down to keep alive the spark.

NM: Wouldn't it also be an early attempt to understand the mechanics of existence? I would even say that this curiosity about the nature of God was seen by Judaism and Christianity as the great enemy. You cannot build a powerfully structured society so long as there are all too many ways to elaborate the details. The Judeao-Christian enterprise was determined then to become an absolute arbiter over the more mysterious elements of existence.

ML: And should there be a debate, it was to be resolved by the supreme leaders of the Church.

NM: Yes, do not look into yourself. Refer to your external authority.

ML: And so you could say that the final expression of this was in 1870 when the Catholic Church came up with the infallibility of the Pope. That was always implicit. But finally they now had to state it. It was the final consolidation of Papal power. When you think of the world that was in existence around the time

of the birth of Christ, you had two prevailing religious visions in the Middle East at any rate, the Greek and the Judaic. They were opposed to each other in a variety of ways and complemented each other in other ways. Christianity can be seen as the synthesis of many of those ideas.

NM: Wasn't Judaism more of a complete religion? On the other hand, Judaism was relatively small. To explain how a Christian sect of Judaism took over that much of the Western World in a few centuries it is necessary, I think, to assume that Rome was at the core of that development. If Rome hadn't existed one could suspect that Gnosticism might have continued. Gnosticism, after all, had to be congenial to many upper-class Romans. That would be my guess.

ML: Yes.

NM: It gave them a chance to explore themselves. When people are wealthy, they want to do just that. But there were other leaders in Rome who believed that Rome had to become the final answer to existence; Rome, and its government. Some even saw that with the aid of Christianity they could fortify authoritative government. Existence could be dictated from the top down. They could even overcome their own upper classes. So this becomes my assumption: It took the Romans to recognize that belief in Jesus Christ was going to be very good for

Rome. Immediately, however, this was far from happening. In the first centuries after Christ, Christianity softened Romans. Compassion, after all, was at the core of these new beliefs. Nonetheless, the fundamental Roman concept that it was vital to have an immensely powerful government at the top, did prevail. And Rome became the seed-bed of the idea in the Middle Ages that for society to exist, there must be absolute authority wielded at the center of the summit.

Perhaps without this Roman spur to centrality, our civilization could not have been built. In that sense, the authoritative lie, the New Testament, upon which Christianity was founded did create Western civilization—even if it took twelve centuries to reach the Renaissance. I expect it took so long because the lie implicit in this new theologically ordained faith, this respect for order from above, did present built in obstacles. The finest minds were obliged to believe in dogma. Their lives, after all, were at stake—which can account for the philosophical distances they traveled to make the illogic of faith palatable to themselves. Medieval philosophy became a study of the ways in which you can arrive at your desired end by the most special means of language that enable you to come out at the end with an affirmation of mighty oxymorons—as, for example, God is All-Good and All-Powerful, which, of course, violates not only our own experience

but our sense of history. All we can know or feel are intimations that something did create us. There is also our philosophical sense that it is far more difficult to explain our existence by the absence of a first cause than as the consequence of one. So, one can believe in God in the way of a latter-day Gnostic. Yes, it is not because of anything I read, nor anything I have been taught, certainly not because of what spiritual propagandists have been trying to put in my head all these years. No, I believe there is a Creator because that makes more sense to me. If there is not a God, then I cannot conceive of how our universe came to be. So I go on from there to say that if there is such a God, I have to assume that He or She is not perfect. Not on the aforesaid basis of one's own experience and the world's experience. With that, we stumble forward, blunder into further intimations of existence, not knowing whether there are forces in existence larger than our God. Quite possibly, there are. And, so the reason we are having these dialogues—and I cringe at the ongoing crudity necessarily inherent in such brusque presentation of such sensitive ideas. Nonetheless, it is what I can now offer. The reason we are having these dialogues is that I think fundamentalist notions of absolute authority have come to a point where they are destructive to live under, too excruciating intellectually to serve good purpose and too much of a manic faith-machine

capable of inspiring world disasters. There was a period, lets say, when without fundamentalism, there might not have been a civilization. That period is now gone. In our age those same ideas are choking us, distorting us, perverting and blinding us. Just turn on your TV and listen to televangelists yelling for faith and money. Their presence is so toxic that I feel ready to dismiss the eloquent and exceptional rationale of the best theologians and philosophers. I have to add that their need to justify the very improbable propositions that make the televangelists possible, also makes the same best theologies go through excruciating intellectual gymnastics. Embarking on an immense error demands huge powers of development in the brain of the person who is working on that vast error. Even though they fail ultimately (and so egregiously that we have had to pay for their failures through the centuries) nonetheless, the powers of human ratiocination have been increased. That is part of the perversity of philosophy. Working with an illfounded thesis can also improve one's ability to debate.

ML: So I guess from what you've said you now understand why here and there in commentary on your work people will say, "Oh, Mailer, he's sort of a Gnostic."

NM: Well, yes, now I do understand. Not that it matters. I just want to accomplish something with these dialogues. Normally, you are not supposed to

talk about religion unless you know a good deal about it, and then you are still wise to say little. But I have proceeded to ponder these questions without being qualified. Yet, my basic argument is that of course I am qualified all the same. We all are. That is why I can say yes, if you want to get down to it, I probably am a Gnostic in the sense that the inner feeling I have about these matters is so clear and so acute to me. I certainly do feel ready to talk about it. Indeed, I would go so far as to say that oxymorons pollute the mind, and the Great Oxymoron—All Good and All-Powerful—is the most virulent of them all—which is equal to saying that modern-day fundamentalism is poison to the human spirit.

ML: Whereas Gnosticism now indicates the road to take?

NM: Perhaps we can now afford to be Gnostics. In their early Christian time, the fundamental wisdom of human beings may have been: "We need order. We do not need stimulation. We do not need thought that is lively and novel and new. We need order. We need command from above." That was a stage in human existence. It was much like the stages of existence that children pass through where they must live under order at a certain point or nothing holds their behavior together.

ML: You're talking like a Hegelian now.

NM: Well, I don't care about the labels. I think we are at a stage of development where Gnosticism may serve us better.

ML: I can imagine how you as a new Gnostic must think about corporations too.

NM: Well, we don't have to go there. Right now, I much prefer to wander through the forests of theology than the quicksands of economics.

Let me conclude, however, by thanking you for the order and stimulation you brought to this theologically ignorant mind.

## PRAYER

ML: Here's a question on ritual. It will introduce us to the question of prayer. All your ideas, I would say, have an underlying assumption that God has a continuing, even a profound interest in some individuals, and certainly in the ultimate fate of the human species, flora and fauna and the rest of His creation. This is completely at odds with some of the earliest recorded religious expression, namely from the Sumerians, whose prayers were always begging the gods to "Remember!" Prayer and ritual were a constant attempt to engage the attention of forgetful and indifferent gods who had created but had abandoned humanity. This, by the way, wasn't a notion emerging from disasters and dislocations but could be found even as their civilization flourished. Can you comment?

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

cite such events as formidable. Answered prayers are as seen as often as miracles. Prayers are not usually answered. Isn't that because prayers rarely receive a clear response? But then I think of the Lord wading through an avalanche of prayers: "Oh, God, let my team win the game!" "Oh, God, let me get some money. Let me sell this old heap that's no good and get something with spoke wheels."

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

Now let's suppose some people have a child who's ill, and they pray to God with great sincerity asking, begging for their child to live. I'm willing to accept the effort as not something to sneer at. I won't say it works humanly speaking, but we can certainly feel for the parent.

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

tradition, ditto for the Buddhists and some Hindus, and probably Hasidics engage in some variant of that. Do you see a value in this kind of passivity?

NM: I would answer yes. I'm not opposed. If we're going to come nearer to God, to find a sense of God behind the words; it's perfectly conceivable to me that the deity of whom I speak does pay attention to transcendental sincerity. I have a crude analogy to offer. Occasionally, after having worked on a novel, you come across a review that's so intelligently written and gets so close to what you were attempting to do, or, even better, offers insights you did not arrive at by yourself that your work is illuminated. Such a critic makes me feel better about the act of writing. So, do I also think that there are people who contemplate existence, who pray in depth to God and are qualified to do so. They are not petty. What I hate about prayer is that so often it is superficial and greedy. Most of the time it is looking for an undeserved advantage: I'm kind of stupid, God, but maybe you'll help me because I'm praying to You. They do it as if modesty is the only passport needed.

ML: This is about Buddhism: what's your take on the Buddhist notion of the bodhisattva vow? Reaching nirvana is a catch-22—if you have achieved a level of deep compassion, enough to reach nirvana, you can't go happily off into it while other sentient beings are still here struggling and suffering.

So, even though you personally have a free-pass out of this far from perfect world, you voluntarily reincarnate as a "bodhisattva"—a helper, a teacher, a guide to the way—and keep reincarnating until everyone has achieved nirvana. Devout Buddhist lay people of many persuasions, and all the monks and nuns, take the "bodhisattva vow" at an advanced stage of their training.

NM: It's a beautiful notion. The difficulty I've always had with Buddhism, however, is not bodhisattva, but nirvana. As I see it, the point of existence is not to rise above our petty feelings and leave them behind, but on the contrary, to be able to struggle with those petty feelings in such a way that we lift them into more vigorous feelings. Nirvana always struck me as a place I had no interest in reaching. Whether it existed or not—I had no idea—it did not appeal. I remember talking to a friend of mine who's a good Buddhist and I soon fell into a polite rage. Over just a few drinks! "You Buddhists always talk about nothingness, at how to arrive at nothingness," I told him, and added, "As writer, I can tell you, I live with nothingness every minute I'm working. I sit at my desk and for the first half hour there's nothing—I have to pass through such nothingness in order to come to a few ideas. You're not really talking about nothingness. Nothingness is an awful

state! It's so empty a state. Why don't you talk about what it really is you are looking for which is the ineffable?"

I hope he was struck with the thought, even if only by a little.

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

Whether true or not, is another matter. But it is a beautiful notion.

ML: At the end of your last interview, you said that in many ways the Creator might be comparable to a Greek god—strong yet not all powerful, flawed but noble, well, you know Greek myths are full of incidents where the gods took human form, or animal form. Apart from the well-known stories of Zeus turning up as this or that personage to impregnate some human woman, there are also stories of Zeus turning up as a beggar. In one story, peasants take in a wretched beggar overnight, share their far-from abundant meal with him, treat him very well, and next morning, find his bed empty and a sack of gold in his place—Zeus came calling, and rewarded them for their kindness to the poor! God showing up on earth is an idea embraced long before Christian theology.

NM: I don't see any need to answer the question. I just take it for granted. If God wants to appear as a human, why not? And indeed, He would. But I think what's more interesting is the belief that if you're good when you don't have to be good, something favorable can happen. Which I think is also part

of human nature. Humans live for revenge—but they also live for the belief that we are capable of goodness. For me, the brunt of these stories, is the human desire involved. I want to be capable of goodness and indeed I would also wish to believe that there is something in the universe which will reward you for goodness. Prayer, I would argue, is all too often the stepchild of that emotion.

ML: I want to go back to a crucial point. Earlier you said you doubted the efficacy of prayer because all too often they were requests for personal gains or status; money, a job, a new car. But do you give enough purchase to the huge number of people who pray for guidance or forgiveness or for strength to avoid sin. These types of prayers may exceed the greedy type. Who could say?

NM: I would agree. Let us even assume they do exceed it. My point is that God may not pay great attention to most prayer. Think of it as an immensely abused communication system which is overwhelmingly present in human affairs. I would suppose that God can pick up human messages without the need for prayer. I will admit that a prayer can have, on occasion, such vibrancy that God is cheered by it. But I would also say that most prayer is wasteful, and self indulgent, An exercise in narcissism. Over the years, I've heard so many people say, "I'm praying for you." My reaction

is, "I don't need it. It's not helping. You're just invading my presence."

Often it is no more than another petty human weapon. It could be well intended. They do care about you, they want to do the best they can for you.

But do they really need to pray to make their feelings legitimate? If they love you, then you are probably going to reap a benefit whether they try to talk to God or not.

ML: How so?

NM: Through the warmth you receive from them. The honest warmth of their feeling rather than the oratorical "I'll pray for you."

ML: You feel then that prayer tends to be meretricious?

NM: That may be too strong a word. How about over-subscribed?

Ninety percent of prayer may not necessarily lead to anything. I think a lot of people pray in order to intensify their sense of focus. They are doing it for themselves. What I don't like about prayer is the enormous baggage that goes with it, the stultification of society that is shored up by prayer; the number of mediocrities who pray for something that they know nothing about. You can see humungous examples of that on television every night, crowd-rousers invoking the holy efficacy of prayer while seizing every false advantage they can find—including, how not?—quick appeals for money.

ML: Static.

NM: Worse. I think the interception of prayer may be one of the Devil's most powerful instruments. Whenever a prayer is offered that is lacking whole integrity, the Devil may know how to profit from such shoddy work.

ML: Many religious people find solace in praying together. They believe that group prayer, at a religious service or in a group of people, is a more efficacious way of reaching the Lord. Now, the Lord may be too to pick up a single cry for intercession, but he can hardly neglect a full house of prayers from, say, St. Peters, led by the pope on the Son's birthday. Quantity changes quality as you are forever saying.

NM: There is no question in my mind that St. Peter's would attract God's attention. Still, we must enter into the nature of the communal prayer. For example, right now, a war is being waged between Islam and ourselves. If there is a particular phenomenon that characterizes Islam it is how they pray together five times a day. They put their forehead to the ground, they raise their buttocks towards heaven and they pray. And we in the west look down on it. We tend to consider that kind of excessive. Moreover, we don't necessarily believe that Allah is well intentioned. To us, he is an alien God. So, the fact that a number of people get together for such prayer, and have a

community of opinion doesn't make them appear virtuous to us. For that matter—change of venue!—when a theater audience laughs as one, does that have any relation to prayer? To feel that one is part of a great group of people is reassuring regardless of the occasion. But whether prayer is beneficial is quite another matter. All over America there are now prayers to Christ for our soldiers in Iraq, whole communities praying that our soldiers don't run their Humvees over terrorist's explosives. Of course, you've also got Islamics praying just as powerfully and just as intently that their enemies will be wiped out by the same explosive.

ML: Why not also say that the people at St. Peters may be praying for us to get out of that war.

NM: All right. Exactly. Some are. And I can believe there is a collective telepathic power that humans can have. With a thousand people together, or ten thousand, yes, the effect is magnified. But to assume it is magnified to good purpose is a very large assumption. It could as easily be magnified to an evil one. Usually it is intensified to a complex but not particularly pertinent aim. Humans are skewed away from the point all the time.

America spent close to fifty years believing that Russia was the evil empire while all the time that ugly, cruel place was getting weaker and weaker and growing worse and worse as it became less capable of destroying us. For the

last two decades of the Soviets never saw them for what they were, a constipated commerce-locked economy, an over-ordered society, slow in development, and in relation to us, as boastful as it was empty. Its secret desire was to rise to some beginning of economic equality with us. They lacked the inner wherewithal to believe they could destroy us, and all the while our anti-Sovietism served the needs of the American power-seekers. We kept the American public afraid of the Soviets long after it may have been justifiable. By the end they were not the Evil Empire but the Wretched Kingdom.

ML: We were praying against it too. Praying for its collapse.

NM: We weren't praying for its collapse. We were hoping that when a war came we would destroy the Russians before they would destroy us.

ML: But when we read in the newspapers about what was going on in Russia in the seventies and eighties and how grim it was, I'm sure a lot of people were saying, "The Lord is bringing the Russians to their knees."

NM: Well, now, you have a great many people saying, "maybe the Lord will bring Islam to its knees." Islam is saying, "Allah will bring the great Satan to its knees." The notion that a country is holy or evil, I find offensive.

ML: Right. Even in the Islamic world we know there is such a chasm between the Sunnis and the Shiites. Their detestation of each other is profound.

NM: They certainly outdo the old animosity between the Catholics and the Protestants.

ML: You've spoken about dreams being a contested field. That is, Divine and Demonic forces use dreams to send their messages to humans. If this is true, why can't God and the Devil also communicate their messages to a mind seeking a line of communication with something transcendental. I assume you believe that humans can pray to the Devil as easily as the Lord.

NM: Unwittingly. Let me put it this way: I think people who believe in the Devil have ceremonies that are not exactly prayer—but more like communion with invocations. There may be a fundamental concept among in magical groups that you don't reach the Devil by praying to him or her. You invoke him or her. I would say that the tendency in Christianity, all exceptions noted, is to pray to God rather than invoke him.

ML: Does your belief in Karma have anything to do with your less than enthusiastic feelings about prayer?

NM: I think I would say that if you live a life which is a little better, a little braver, a little more compassionate or responsible than what was expected of

you, you may well be taken care of in your rebirth. This assumes that a foul-up in communication does not occur in reincarnation, but of that one can hardly be certain. In any event, let me argue that attention to one's Karma is a grand substitute for prayer, a real and legitimate and profound substitute for prayer. Nonetheless, I can see exceptional cases where a prayer is so beautiful and comes out of such depth in a human and has such inner resonance that divine attention is paid. But, I think such prayers are as rare as the work of a fine artist. Let me add that you don't have to be an educated person to have a beautiful prayer. Such a prayer comes out of the depths of your experience and shows a hard-earned balance of perception and passion, of forgiveness and true human need. Such elements can form an exceptional unity. We can understand a parent praying for the health of a sick child and find it honorable, and true whether the prayer is heard or not, honorable because of the intensity and focus of the love.

ML: You are arguing then that if prayer is to be efficacious or to be heard at all it has to be all of those things you said, whole, pure and free of cynicisms.

NM: And best of all—free of buried motive, of motive that is concealed from one's self.

ML: The saints can also be addressed in prayer.

NM: For Catholics.

JML: For Protestants too.

NM: It seems to me that Catholics have about five times as many saints as the Protestants. Is that true?

ML: Well, they do have a lot of saints. But there are many that Episcopalians and Lutherans will recognize. Obviously, if there is a heaven and there are as many people up there as Christians think there are, untold numbers of saints are to be found in heaven. However, to know for certain that someone is in heaven, that's the definition of a saint.

NM: Among Catholics? Literally?

ML: Literally. And Protestants too. I'm certain. So when you say, "Oh, he was a saint." Well, you'd say, "how do you know?" So when the Church says, this person is a saint...

NM: The Protestant's saints as well?

ML: Oh, yes.

NM: Who are the Baptist saints?

ML: I think among fundamentalists you almost never hear about saints.

NM: Jesus is the all-purpose saint for Baptists. God, Archangel, Saint, law-giver, cheer-leader and coach all in one. I suspect that the mental and spiritual benefits some good honest people receive from referring in their

thoughts to a particular saint comes because that helps to bring some kind of focus to their problem. Yes, thinking about saints helps them to focus. That is one more reason that the church didn't last two thousand years for too little but, not being a Catholic, I feel equally that the distortions of existence which accompany Catholicism are immense. I am not, however, going to say that the Church has not been good for a good many people in a good many ways, yet it has also stomped upon human imagination. So I would go so far as to say that Catholicism ultimately may be stultifying to God. And is half possessed by the Devil. I would say as much for any other established religion. I don't need Catholicism to be the villain. All organized churches and synagogues are, in that sense, obfuscations to separate us from a closer sense of the nature of God.

ML: But you have talked about God's involvement in some of the great religions over the years.

NM: How not. How not? What about the Devil's involvement? Is God to allow him sole occupation of the altar? And the congregation? There they are, fighting it out in all the alleys and places of religion. There is not a seminary in the world of whatever persuasion where you don't have God and the Devil working day and night right down into the acolyte's genitals—the temptations, the agonies, the repressions, the wonders. How many fine

seminarians have to wonder finally whether they are working for God or the Devil? Can one even be a fine seminarian without some concern over that?

ML: To conclude—can you begin to explain why so many people do pray?

NM: The act is obviously cleansing for a good many. It requires some concentration on what is one's greatest need at the moment and what might be one's greatest hope. It can encourage modesty in men and women who are vain, and perhaps even inspire courage in a few. Prayer can also enable one to come closer to what is most awful in oneself. Prayer can offer the only solace available when grief is overwhelming. All of those positive elements can be present. What I distrust, however, is the notion that prayers will certainly be heard on high and thereby will prove efficacious. Believe in that as a fact and one is back in the depth of century-old superstitions that left our minds circling endlessly around the same empty intellectual places.

It's a mystery, so don't think about it. Be philosophical!

MAILER  
LAST PAGES

To shift the course of this discussion, there are some remarks I have been thinking about for some time with which I would like to conclude. Part of the interest I've had in theology has been political. If I pose the question—what kind of political system would God like, I'm not convinced God is certain. In different times, the heavens may have been partial to Monarchy, to Communism, and certainly the Lord was interested in Democracy, in Capitalism. (As was the Devil!) These systems are not without comparison to the designs of God's animals. Which ones turn out best? I think a great deal was put into Communism at one point. However, I also have this

notion that the Devil is at war with God, so, even as Communism ended badly, democracy could end badly. It's why I speak of an existential God.

You may ask: Where is the positive element in all this? And why politics? How can that give us a sense of beauty, awe, or even a feeling that we might want to be nearer to God? What do people like me believe in this vein? What are my positive intimations of God as a political presence? Well, I do believe there are elements of compassion in our world, elements of goodness. It is not difficult to believe that love is more of a life-giving force than hate. The majority of us are working, after all, to create a world where there is reasonable equity. What political form could that world take? If we start with the brilliant arguments of writers as great as Nietzsche, we would have to argue that it is wrong to pay great attention to the weak, the poor, the hungry, the meek, the mediocre, the inferior. They are, Nietzsche declares, a prodigious dead-weight upon existence. Filled with hatred, they wish to destroy all that is noble or aristocratic, beautiful or fine. It is a sustainable argument—Nietzsche is probably the most talented and powerful conservative of them all. Yet, as a thesis, it only goes so far before it crashes, and that is for a very simple reason. The aristocracy was corrupt, as were the theologians and the oligarchs of capitalism. Conservatism is as

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

On the other hand, even at its best, Socialism has never worked too well. Why? Because it refuses to live with the notion that God exists and is part of the human balance. So a built-in paradox intrudes on what was conceived as an open equitable system. It is that the majority of leaders who come to power under socialism do not believe in the existence of God and are soon engaged in personal competitions, rivalry, and finally the over-riding impulse to be the sole leader—yes, who will have the prevailing ego? My feeling, then, is that to advocate socialism without some existential sense of religion in the foundation itself, is to make a profound error. The beauty of Christ—what Christ was saying to all of us—is that the poor have as much reason to exist as the wealthy. I don't want to oversimplify Nietzsche's argument, but finally he did feel that Christ was not only speaking to the unwashed but arousing a great rage in them, and this rage would yet destroy all that was first-rate in civilization. I would argue that unless we have some real understanding of the needs of the poor, and the rights of the poor, plus the passion of the poor to become more than they have been condemned to be for generations, we are only looking to bypass the horrors of society. So I say that socialism without belief in an existential God cannot offer as much

to human illumination. Whereas socialism accompanied with belief in a God who wants much of what we want, can liberate society for us. So I suppose that if a socialist society should ever prevail with a belief in an existential God, I think we might begin to find some more developed stirrings of human equity. Let me say, since I have a great distrust of large organizations and monumental government power, that I also think small business must be a viable part of any existential socialism. Let the largest organizations be socialist rather than corporate. Because the corporations cannot be trusted. The corporation is—I've called it the Big Empty. The corporation is psychopathic. It does not care about its past, it has very little interest in its previous history; it has very little interest in its future.

ML: It does have an interest in its future.

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

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notion of community, of neighborhood. For small business may be more innovative than socialism, more on a par with inventors, artists, gamblers, and adventurers and teachers, more in proportion to the scope of human wit. Whereas the concerns of corporate management are for power and profit, exceptional overweening profit for the top.

Behind an existential socialism with an open regard for small business lies the idea that we might even be working with God. Not working to obey Him, to praise Him, to slave for His vanity, but on the contrary, to live with the idea that God does share desires with us, that we are at last working together, yes, finally, after millennia of hatred of God, beseechments of God, intense if mindless prayer, sloughs and promontories of ritual, attempts to take God by inquisitorial force, attempts to do without God, attempts to glorify Him at the expense of all reason, there might be at last an agreeable sense that, yes, we are working with the deity, and he is working with us. If we don't understand God in large part, God in turn, doesn't understand us altogether. Yet, we might even develop the beginnings of a real regard for each other. So, one would postulate a society built on the religious notion that God needs us as much as we need God, and I would say that does offer more promise than the ongoing over-inflated managerial ethic of corporate capitalism so ready to declare that when what we suspect—somewhere in

our souls—is that the exact opposite is more likely to be true. Greed is Good, and the Free Market is Valhalla.

END

## MAILER'S COSMOLOGY

Lennon

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

STERN: This is really something

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

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

MAILER: I believe in it.

STERN: You believe in it.

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

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

ability to rough-hew not only his own destiny but to affect God's as well.

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

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

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

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

Movement must precede morality, and "the message in the labyrinth of the

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

root from which the fact may have evolved" is what should preoccupy us. And the "root" for Mailer, as it was for Emerson, Whitman and Melville, is a processive universe where human possibilities expand and contract with the movement of history.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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