

Mark Rudman

The Book of Samuel

to the memory of Paul Magnuson

I.

When the time came to name my son, we chose the name Samuel. His name wasn't derived from anyone in the family. We chose Samuel because three of the writers who moved me most were named Samuel: Samuel Johnson, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and Samuel Beckett. As it turned out we weren't the only people in our neighborhood who had chosen to name their boys Sam. (And there is no shortage of Samanthas, which has led of late to some funny banter.) My Sam's two best friends in daycare and pre-kindergarten (Purple Circle and the possibly disastrous *The Magical Years*) were also named Sam. It turned out that among the handful of parents with whom I became friends—once we were thrown into what is called “a community”—two had sons named Sam. There was an actor and writer who was also amused when we addressed our Sams in varying tones to differentiate—unless we resorted to Sam Rudman and Sam Denisov.

Imagine for a moment walking into a room full of children where parents, teachers, nannies, and other desultory characters are calling out, “Sam P., Sam G., Sam D. . .” and then three-year-old “Samantha” who quips back, “Sam!” I think most of the other parents had members of their families who, in living memory, had been named Sam, or had chosen the name for its earthiness.

I, on the contrary, had rather thoughtlessly chosen the name Sam over the dead body of my beloved grandfather Abraham Tarzan Levy. How could this have happened? Because his brother and my uncle were named Sam. If I had had a special affection for Uncle Sam (Levy) it would have been one thing, but although I saw him frequently during the first fifteen years of my life, I didn't. The most notable thing about my uncle Sam was that there was nothing notable about him. He was, and I do not mean this cruelly, a shadow of my grandfather. He was probably dwarfed by my grandfather's charisma and gifts. The most notable thing about Uncle Sam was that he contributed almost nothing to any conversation, although sometimes he might tap his cane. Once, twice, never more than three times. He was no talker. He could draw out the word “yeeeeeahhh. . .” in a gravelly monotone, like Krapp relishing the syllables of “Spooooool.”

In other words, Uncle Sam was more or less present in a room with other members of this often mercurial and always animated family, and that was it, amazingly, except for a mild resemblance he had to the actor Ralph Bellamy, who around that time portrayed FDR in the film *Sunrise at Campobello*, a biopic to stir the blood of the middle-aged (I begged not to be dragged to it). I hope that my grandfather hasn't been turning over in his grave all these years because I named my Sam Sam.

Not long ago Sam blew into our apartment, in the midst of a high-spirited interaction with a seventeen-year-old girl (windy hair, jeans torn at the knee) whom he introduced as Samantha. I didn't see her after that and one day, for reasons too delicate and personal to mention here, I asked if he had seen her. And when he responded, "Who? Sam?" I felt the dizziness of the Sams.

But just as the naming of my son had nothing to do with my uncle, the fact that my son and these three are named Sam has little or nothing—or perhaps everything—to do with my concerns. One day, somewhere between Thanksgiving and Christmas 2004, it came to me for no reason whatsoever that when Samuel [Taylor] Coleridge wrote the line "My genial spirits fail" in "Dejection: An Ode," he couldn't have meant what he said. Coleridge, despite the tragic vicissitudes of his life, never, or rarely—as when in the grip of severe laudanum withdrawal—lacked geniality, affection, the desire to be with other people in any of a number of capacities in addition to the one that required (and desired) him to hold discourse. This possible confusion about Coleridge's intended meaning occurs because genial means something very different to us from what it meant to Coleridge. For Milton, Wordsworth, and Coleridge, genial spirits are linked to your genius—that is, your presiding deity, which produces the sexual energy for creation, for the propagation of children as well as poems. Since Coleridge was married to one Sara (Fricker) and loved another Sara (Hutchinson), whose code name was Asra, his affections became paralyzed. The lack of love between Samuel and Sara had gradually grown into a hole he could not fill, a wound he could not stanch; or a wound that he could have stanch, but only if he had been able to exchange one Sara for the other.

Ted Hughes identified Coleridge's lifelong pattern of reliance on women as a direct effect of his past: "When his beloved father died, S.T.C. being only ten, his mother sent him off to the monastic garrison of Christ's Hospital—from which, it seems, he was allowed to return to her bosom only three or four times in the rest of his school days. During this period he shifted his passionate dependence onto his sister, Anne—who then died, after a long illness, just before he left school for university. Later on, to one half-affectionate woman or another, he would say his mother never gave him any feeling of what it was to have a mother." If Hughes was right, this would have left him prone toward emotional bankruptcy and failure. If he didn't feel he deserved to be loved, choosing the wrong wife would have been almost inevitable.

2.

My wife, Madelaine, and I made the pilgrimage to Nether Stowey and Hay-on-Wye in the summer of 1976. We headed, with heady optimism, to this site where Coleridge composed some of the greatest poems in the English language. There were miles and miles of pylons, tormenting the yellow grass, bleached from the drought. The little village was white and spotless. I was beginning to get the kind of nervous feeling I like to pretend that I don't have in the vain hope that it will go away. We had arrived at the exact instant that the shops and pubs were pulling down their shutters and hanging CLOSED signs on the doors. These are the empty hours in Europe. We pushed ahead down the deserted highway. Nary a sign, a directional marker, for Coleridge's house. When we arrived, there was a sign swinging in the wind, the kind of sign that you might have seen at an inn, with a picture of the long-locked, round-faced S.T.C. We paid the nominal entrance fee to a matron who made it very clear that she had no interest in or really any idea of what she was doing, except that it was a job that paid and that she resented having to interrupt her knitting. We walked through the display of Coleridge's letters and poems under glass and became especially involved in his correspondence with Charles Lamb. Being there made it manifestly clear how few people had been working to create what became the Romantic revolution and how dependent they were upon each other's friendship. I had looked forward to seeing the lime tree bower where Coleridge composed the poem he dedicated to Charles Lamb. It was long gone. Standing on the property, idyllic but isolated, I realized why he had seen fit to repeat the phrase "my gentle-hearted Charles" three times in "This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison," as if to prove to himself that his friend was truly steadfast and constant.

What may have also contributed to the loss of his genial spirits in "Dejection: An Ode" was his awareness of Milton's copious use of the word in *Paradise Lost*. One angel brings Eve to Adam: "What day the genial Angel to our sire/Brought her in naked beauty more adorned." A line even more saturated is "sate with genial moisture." The line of Milton's that most accentuates Coleridge's sense of sexual deprivation occurs in *Samson Agonistes*: "So much I feel my genial spirits droop."

What comes instantly to mind is an emphasis on geniality that I remember Lionel Trilling stressing in his introduction to "The Poet as Hero: Keats in His Letters." Trilling makes a forceful and convincing case for "Keats's geniality toward himself, his bold acceptance of his primitive appetite and his having kept open a line of communication with it," and the "decisive effect upon the nature of his creative intelligence." This is a stunning and valuable insight; but it is Trilling, not Keats, who uses the word "genial."

Now, since I was long ago infected with the bracing insights in Trilling's essay and have often since then thought of Keats in connection with some form of life-enhancing geniality, I set myself up to be slightly misled, slightly off-target, when it came to Coleridge. Despite the despair that it elicits, it is a more powerful line of poetry than

the one by Wordsworth in “Tintern Abbey”: “If I were not thus taught, should I the more/ Suffer my genial spirits to decay.” Coleridge, I argued to myself, did not suffer from a loss of geniality, taking the word as I remember Trilling used it in relation to Keats, in which case geniality is what you think it is, for better and for worse. It can even mean something as quotidian as liking to be among other people, which stands in contrast with so many pernicious myths about poets, especially Romantic poets, and certain writers such as Samuel Beckett. Coleridge, I thought, must have used the word “genial” in that phrase for the sake of assonance so delectable it would have pleased Keats, though Keats was more the priest of the open vowel than of the dental. For all we know, Keats may have marked this line of Coleridge’s for special praise in his own sonic quest.

Richard Holmes testifies in his biography that “Coleridge wrote to Estlin on 18 May: ‘I have known him [Wordsworth] a year & some months, and my admiration, I might say, my awe of his intellectual powers has increased even to this hour—& (what is of more importance) he is a tried good man . . . His genius is most *apparent* in poetry—and rarely, except to me in tête à tête, breaks forth in conversational eloquence.’” In other words, Wordsworth wasn’t particularly genial except as it pertained to the higher order of functioning.

It’s also possible, and we will come to this eventually, that Coleridge may have derived the word “genial” from one of his fabled German sources, which he so prodigally plagiarized, as he did Miltonic ones. But I want to stay for a moment with the more quotidian notion of geniality, and it is worth restating that for both Coleridge and Wordsworth, prior to Keats, the notion of health and well-being and Eros as the ground out of which poetry would spring was already a preeminent factor in their radical new poetics. Keats would find geniality a fundamental resource, an inroad into imagination and certain ideas—frequently misconstrued—for which he is known. For Coleridge this vein of geniality—the thrill of performance, of mesmerizing others with his monologues—would become like a drug, perhaps as much of a drug initially as the laudanum to which he became enslaved.

There is talking within the work of art and talking outside of the work in the realm of life; that is where the dangers surface. Of Coleridge, Hazlitt observed:

I accompanied him six miles on the road. It was a fine morning in the middle of winter, and he talked the whole way. The scholar in Chaucer is described as going

. . . Sounding on his way.

So Coleridge went on his. In digressing, in dilating, in passing from subject to subject, he appeared to me to float in air, to slide on ice. I observed that he continually crossed me on the way by shifting from one side of the footpath to the other. This struck me as an odd movement; but I did not at that time connect it with any instability of purpose or involuntary change of principle, as I have done since.

The sociable aspect of geniality would for Coleridge become a dark source. In some ways it would become a dark source for his namesake Samuel Johnson as well. This may seem absurd, but bear with me. To put it bluntly, they each aspired beyond anything else to write poetry. It doesn't matter if it was great poetry or not: the point is that both Coleridge and Johnson ceased to function as poets at a ridiculously young age. Pin the blame on laudanum or overwork as much as you want, the result is the same: the genius in their genial spirits had failed them. In some essential way they were no good to themselves. It's interesting to speculate on how people feel about their own achievement in light of their early aspirations.

I am led down this path by the dark fates of both my fathers.

We can't let ourselves forget that Samuel Johnson didn't write one word of the book he is best known for, Boswell's *Life of Johnson*. The fact that he was among the two greatest talkers in the history of England, the other being Coleridge, did little to curb his internal sense of failure, of disappointment. Alongside this lay the fact that Johnson was among the most sociable of men, one who loved nothing more than human company, who hated nothing more than being alone.

Samuel Johnson metamorphosed James Boswell. The two in one created a dialogic form that would transcend anything they would have done on their own. Coleridge remained grounded in the conversation poem. There was often talk about doing a book of conversations with Coleridge, modeled on Boswell's *Life of Johnson*. He couldn't have gone any further—no one has—with the supernatural ballad that he evolved in “The Ancient Mariner” and “Christabel,” and for him the conversation poem did not develop into the kind of dialogic poem that would have brought into being an ongoing genre, which in turn would have sustained his poetic imagination. The idea of other people being there was far more real for Wordsworth than it was for Coleridge; just the idea that he was addressing his friend in *The Prelude* was enough to give it its own subtle internal dialogical structure. In fact, Wordsworth's imagination could encompass a dialogue with all of nature.

3.

Literature is in part a story of doubles, or alter egos, and it's a sustaining trope; in Shakespeare these multiply exponentially because the drama, not the poem, is his frame. But Don Quixote and Sancho Panza, Diderot and Rameau, Jacques and his Master are among the most fruitful collaborations in the history of literature. The permutations of this pattern are vast. This dialectical method, which extends back to Plato and runs through Hegel and Marx, and, as we've established, through Boswell and Johnson, is lost on Coleridge and accounts for some of his longing. Not only in “Dejection: An Ode” does he lack a spring of renewal that Wordsworth has, but he lacks the imaginative facility that allows him to create another, or to become another. The poetry stops due to the absence of another.

Once he feels betrayed by Wordsworth's decision to cut prize poems like "Christabel" from the *Lyrical Ballads*, and after his marriage fails to give him the intimacy that he needs, he ceases to be a poet. And by falling in love with Sara Hutchinson he could no longer deny his sense of estrangement from his own wife, Sara Fricker. It is as if one day the curtain went down, poetry abandoned him, and Coleridge became for the next forty years of his life a critic, a metaphysician, an autobiographer, and a legendary talker and lecturer. After reading a poem of consummate loneliness and isolation, such as "This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison," I'm not surprised that Coleridge would go on to name his magazine *The Friend*. No one needed a friend more than Coleridge at that moment. Some emptiness, lovelessness opens up inside. The idealization of solitude and nature won't suffice for him; he belongs in the company of other people, much like Samuel Johnson.

This corresponds to one of Saul Bellow's insights about Humboldt, the character modeled on Delmore Schwartz, in *Humboldt's Gift*. Bellow's Humboldt imagines that he needs solitude in order to create, so he goes off to live in rural New Jersey. This decision turns out to be the beginning of his demise. How curious that it is Humboldt/Delmore Schwartz whom Robert Lowell quotes as saying "if you got people talking in a poem you could do anything." Looking back, it was almost a conspiracy between Frost, Eliot, and Pound *to get people talking in a poem*: an attempt to keep poetry contemporary with other evolving forms. And the new science. "My nerves are bad to-night. Yes, bad. Stay with me./ 'Speak to me. Why do you never speak.'" (*The Waste Land*, T. S. Eliot)

Speech has its own distinctive idiom. It's historical: you know when somebody speaks what era they're from, what moment they're in. And the speaker can always be trusted to be the bearer of a partial truth.

It's surprising how many great novelists, like Faulkner and Fitzgerald, claim that Conrad's use of a storyteller within a story gave them the impetus that they needed. I've also noticed that film directors often cite Akira Kurosawa's *Rashomon* as one of the first films that attracted them to their medium. Once again, though the story is told in images, each telling of how a murder occurred is entirely different from the others, depending on the speaker, whose presence dissolves as the images unfold, and we are riveted to the light on a sword blade as a man walks through a forest into a clearing where all his troubles will begin. But if anyone imagines that Marlow and the narrators that interrupt and embellish his versions of events concerning Lord Jim, Captain Brierly, Kurtz, and his pursuers contribute to relativity, they've reversed the master's master: truth. The events themselves are never in question, but they provide an outlet for Conrad's range of observation, which far exceeds his capacity for invention. The only way I can read a book like *Nostramo* is in reverse; that is, I finish one page and am so intoxicated by the cadences and the audible visual reverie they induce, I then read the previous one again. Conrad tracks characters who chose darker destinies to maintain a self-image founded on romance novels. People remain

mired in concepts of what it is to be who they think they want to be. And we're all subject to this temptation.

4.

Each of the Samuels is a kind of representative figure of his era. I have noticed how often people have felt compelled to talk about the three Samuels—Johnson, Coleridge, Beckett—and the one I am now going to add—film director Samuel Fuller. It's possible that the differences among these figures have more to do with time and place than with the work they produced. Each responded to a necessity that went beyond the confines of the individual and generated a universal appeal that is very difficult to pin down. If Fuller seems a bit outranked here, we have to keep in mind his titanic effect on the imagination of the film directors who came after him.

Each form struggles to evolve as befits the medium. It might even be James Boswell who identified the possibilities of dialogue when he undertook to record his conversations with Samuel Johnson. Imagine if Johnson or Coleridge had given themselves the license to let people talk in a poem. This was a formal solution that didn't occur to these earlier great talkers, who may have been distracted by the formidable example of the poetry of Elizabethan theater.

But this is the significant link between Eliot, Frost, and Pound: dialogue. And a significant moment in the evolution of the possibilities of poetry.

“My nerves are bad to-night. Yes, bad. Stay with me.
“Speak to me. Why do you never speak. Speak.”

*

He saw all was spoiled. “Don't let him cut my hand off—
The doctor, when he comes. Don't let him, sister!”
So. The hand was gone already.

*

“I never mentioned a man but with the view
“Of selling my own works.
“The tip's a good one, as for literature
“It gives no man a sinecure.”

“And no one knows, at sight a masterpiece.
“And give up verse, my boy,
“There's nothing in it.”

Poetry and painting have followed a similar course, and each art had to wait three hundred years for its next giant step, its metamorphosis. Cubism, Apollinaire's “Zone,” *The Waste Land*, *Birth of a Nation* . . . There's even a dialogical element in the method of shooting film that D. W. Griffith evolved. John Boorman writes in *Adventures of a Suburban Boy*:

Before Griffith, the camera was set up on a tripod and recorded a play acted out before it. It would then be placed at another location and a further scene performed. These were cut together so the audience became accustomed to these shifts of place, but the shock of the shift was softened by a written title card, so the experience was still close to that of live theatre. *Imagine how startling it must have seemed when the camera first shifted its point of view, picking out a close-up of a character and then reversing itself to a close-up of another person. By having one look camera left and the other camera right, Griffith created the illusion that they are looking at each other.* [italics mine]

5.

Many of us adore some of Samuel Beckett's fiction, but with *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame*, with sparse dialogue, he pushed his art into another dimension that is equal to the highest poetry. Everyone was shocked when this most reticent and least sociable of men, though not quite the recluse some have imagined him to be, turned to an outward form like drama.

I have commented on the loquacity of the Samuels, but what connects Samuel Johnson and Samuel Taylor Coleridge is the urge to communicate. They're remembered because their primary activity of life was communication and the furthering of that.

The forms of Coleridge's isolation led him, as has often been remarked, to "Hamletize," to think and talk too much when the occasion demanded action. This is one of the reasons that Byron made his rather gentle jibe at him in *Don Juan*:

And Coleridge, too, has lately taken wing,
But like a hawk encumber'd with his hood,—
Explaining metaphysics to the nation—
I wish he would explain his Explanation.

No one admired Coleridge's poetry more than Byron, who championed "Christabel" when no one else could recognize its originality. Byron detected that the author of "Kubla Khan" was headed down the wrong path, and how does the eminently down-to-earth Byron begin *Don Juan* if not by exclaiming that he needs a form to accommodate his desire to talk for five hundred pages in octosyllabic couplets—a form to celebrate diversions and digressions worthy of more overtly digressive writers like Diderot. So many of the poets in the English nineteenth century found expansive poetic forms to accommodate their desire to talk; not Coleridge and not, in the earlier century, Samuel Johnson. One thing that all these works point to is what Donald Davie has referred to as the insufficiency of lyric. What makes this remarkable is that—with the exception of Wordsworth—Samuel Johnson and Samuel Taylor Coleridge probably had a superabundance of gifts that allowed them to come closer than any other English poets to rivaling Shakespeare.

It would be Samuel Beckett, almost two hundred years later, who would make the problem of being alone his most persistent theme. No one has explored the problem of being alone more exhaustively than Samuel Beckett. And yet Beckett, as I've

suggested, contrary to popular belief, was also genial and loved company (if he could choose it). If he had not, I doubt he would have called one of his most lyrical and exquisite late works *Company*.

6.

Both Sams, Coleridge and Johnson, were eventually consumed by a disease, though: the disease of talking. Talking became a substitute for creation. In this sense, their genial spirits had failed. And talking offered many pleasures. They had rapt audiences, immediate gratification. I repeat, this talking was a disease to the extent that it usurped an energy that was essential for any imaginative work that they wanted to be doing, that they initially envisioned as their destiny. And in another way the profusion of prose that flowed from their pens with an almost inconceivable fluency had a dark side as well, insofar as it occluded the possibility of poetry. So much of poetry is about resistance to flux, not the dissipation of tension in discourse.

Another moment such as the one in which I thought Coleridge couldn't really have intended the word "genial" came to me when I read a passage in Walter Jackson Bate's biography of Johnson. Bate observes that Johnson had composed an essay about a book of some length at a speed that not even modern technology could reckon; when questioned by Boswell on his opinion of the book, Johnson said he never considered reading it, that he had just let his pen fly after assimilating the implications of its rather copious title. Boswell thought Johnson's riff, written without revision in one sitting, was an excellent piece of work, far superior (does that go without saying?) to the book he was reviewing. I'm sure he did honor to the author. Samuel Johnson makes the epithet "quick study" seem inadequate. It's crucial to note that Johnson was writing this essay purely for money, and often after he completed one of his multitudinous pieces he forgot that he had written it—a sort of selective amnesia, like P. T. Anderson writing sketches for late-night television after the box-office failure of *Magnolia* (surprised?). This is why Johnson was happiest when tethered to such monumental and rewarding projects as his *Dictionary of the English Language*, the *Lives of the Poets*, and his edition of Shakespeare. I've just concocted a fantasy of an essay by Edmund Wilson, an essay like the winged one he wrote on Michelet in *To the Finland Station*, depicting the drama of Samuel Johnson writing his dictionary.

As Bate points out, "Like nothing else, the daily sight of this [his wife Betty's disintegration] impressed upon him his failure to live up to what had been expected, the ironic unpredictability of life generally, and the remorseless speed with which time was moving through their lives." This was immediately after he had composed his greatest poem, "The Vanity of Human Wishes."

7.

Coleridge would cease to compose poetry, but he would become the most sought-out lecturer in England during his lifetime. Johnson turned out inconceivable amounts of prose for hire.

Johnson's *Dictionary of the English Language* is his principal opus, his great poem. Johnson's project is more germane to twentieth-century writing than the works of Pope or Coleridge or Wordsworth. The closest thing to it in the twentieth century is Walter Benjamin's *Arcades Project*. The parallels include intricate mosaics, and the idea that the entire book is like an arcade that you can walk through. The encyclopedic tendency, passion, or impulse is also one of the motives behind both *Ulysses* and *The Cantos*. This influence is more substantive ultimately than the legacy of Romanticism and subjectivity. I'm not saying that I subscribe to it, but that its effects are ubiquitous. Louis Zukofsky's *On Bottom* is the other work that's closest to Benjamin's *Arcades* insofar as they both consist of quotations. One of the flaws of modernism was rampant nonreferenced quotation that led to obscurity, and one characteristic of postmodernism is rampant quotation with all the sources on display. But what I'm trying to emphasize is the physicality of these projects—the dictionary, the *Arcades*, and *Ulysses*. All three are meant to be environments unto themselves, which human beings might actually be able to inhabit if they weren't in fact books made of words. In other words, Johnson's dictionary contains all that was salvageable to people who used the English tongue up until that time. Joyce invited the reader to reconstruct Dublin from his careful reconstitution of it in *Ulysses*. Don DeLillo's reconstruction of the historical contexts of *Libra* and *Underworld* are tied into the same project. These are sharp-edged, scrupulous works, which cut through the slime and fraudulence that is the source of so much malfeasance over the past hundred years. Since the invention of the airplane, Johnson's hard-mindedness is rarely acknowledged as a source of this valuable aspect of twentieth-century skepticism, and that's because it's such a deep source, and like the purloined letter in Poe's story, it's right in front of our faces all the time and we never think to look at it. It's right in front of our faces, but as an example of a psychic, not a physical problem. In back of these instances are Flaubert's *Bouvard and Pécuchet*. And Johnson's *Lives* remain more viable than most of the works of the poets he wrote about.

Arcades are memorable in themselves, and while a lively controversy has surrounded Eugenio Montale's jackals in his *motetti*, no one has remarked that the setting, the environment, brings its own form of engagement. I've always felt drawn to the galleries in Modena where Montale spies his notorious jackals. The simple place name itself made me want to go there, and whenever I found myself in Italy, to stroll through any kind of "galleria," which is, okay, an elegant old-world version of our shopping mall . . . or is it? I can tell you where shopping malls are glamorized and the site of possible romance: in Phoenix, Arizona, and Greenville, Mississippi, and Florence, South Carolina. In my youth, I was surrounded by people who were over-concerned with typology. People who were more concerned with being known for the wrong thing (what they considered suitable) than with the vital process of creation itself; people who had never, I would wager, set foot in Bergsonian duration.

8.

If I make the mistake of letting it leak out that I'm working on something called "The Book of Samuel," there are people who can't refrain from asking if I've considered

Samuel Pepys or Samuel Richardson, as if such a concept might be capable of infinite expansion, whereas I have, “falcon-eyed,” a very finite end in sight, and my goal is to get there—but not by flying above the clouds and getting above the turbulence, no—over rugged terrain. Here again so much hangs on the balance of one word, or a word and phrase.

9.

Both Johnson and Coleridge suffered from what I have chosen to call an “everything-nothing syndrome,” a term I came up with when I was thinking about Cesare Pavese’s narrator in his novel *The Moon and the Bonfires* and that narrator’s relationship to another character, Nuto, who functions as a kind of ego-ideal. Throughout most of the novel the “I” is like a shadow of Nuto, who possesses a stability and wholeness the narrator can only dream of: that is, this is the way the narrator sees it; it isn’t an accurate reflection of reality. As for Johnson and Coleridge, they imagined themselves as nothing in comparison to Pope and Wordsworth, who were everything. Johnson and Coleridge lived their lives in the shadow of how they conceived of the greatness of their—of these—contemporaries. This idealization of the other was inextricable from their greater sadness and sense of disappointment. I didn’t light on this idea thinking about literary works; I noticed it in the way people talk about each other. There are people who, as everyone knows, know they exist mainly through their sense of a certain connection to someone else. How this may be understood in a romantic relationship is another matter entirely. I’m talking about friends, contemporaries, peers. When I listen to people going on in this way about whoever has slipped in as their ego ideal, I want to intervene. I also feel slightly sickened, not to say bored. What a terrible way to go through this life, selling yourself short in exchange for the comfort, the umbrella, of another person’s imagined wholeness.

In time, of course, this wholeness is transformed into achievement, and the syndrome is concretized so that A can talk about B’s accomplishments and somehow objectify the inflation. I’m not trying to get at anything so profound; I’m saying that it depresses me. And it depressed Johnson and Coleridge. It didn’t depress Samuel Beckett, who functioned as Joyce’s secretary for a short time and worked his way through the master’s overwhelming achievement by creating his own entirely other overwhelming works. But it’s not comparable because Joyce and Beckett weren’t exactly contemporaries. And underneath a certain “I”’s overestimation of the other, there may lie an egoism so outsized it dare not declare itself. Johnson and Coleridge handed over the mantle, the baton, of poetry to Pope and Wordsworth. Coleridge is the far more depressing case; sometimes listening to his praise of Wordsworth at the expense of himself brings one to the brink of tears. How could it not? I forget who had the idea that at the outset Braque and Picasso were like mountain climbers joined to one another; was it Braque or Picasso who made this observation? I think the latter—or a third party. But here again nature ultimately took its course and fulfilled itself in the case of both parties. There’s nothing to argue about in the face of a talent as capacious as Picasso’s. Braque was Braque and Picasso remained Picasso.

This puts the vanity of human wishes in another light. Human wishes are vain if disappointment is inevitable. Juvenal and Johnson have different concepts in mind when they probe human failing under the aspect of “The Vanity of Human Wishes.” For Wordsworth, Whitman, Hopkins—and Freud—human wishes are not vain. Or is the real difference between wishes and wishing, conscious and unconscious wishes? The more I write the word “wish,” the more ghostly it sounds, like “wisp.” Hushed voices, whispers, don’t dare to say the wish aloud. And then there is the bond between wish and will. Wishing is prelude to willing. It is the wish that gives the impetus to the search. And if a wish connects to desire and desire to imagination, the result just might be art.

Freud is responsible, but not to blame, for the radical shift in the sense of “wishing.” Hardly anyone now can think of wishing without assuming that it refers to the leakage of unconscious desires that Freud pinpointed in *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*. It is time that we took another look at this and the unexamined assumptions aspect of nature. Freud’s patients were not only revealing their inner lives through the proliferation of slips of the tongue, to which everyone is continually susceptible, they were also victims of distraction: their misreading of signs, for instance, might cause them to get off at the wrong stop—or more importantly not get off, because it was the fate of many of these patients not to leave Germany in time to avoid being thrown into concentration camps. Freud detected the dangers of being unconscious, out-of-tune. The people’s ignorance of their own wishes was inextricable from their denial of the social and political reality that was threatening to engulf them. This reinvention of the wish is vastly more profound than anything that preceded it, but Freud’s project didn’t include the practical application of these realizations, and he died shortly after Germany invaded Poland. I dislike the clinical nature of psychological terminology, but for clarity’s sake, I should add that what Freud meant by “ego,” in which the unconscious and conscious are meshed so that a person proceeds as a whole, is very similar to what used to be thought of as a function of the will. The will was evidence of connectedness: union of body and soul. It was the “idea” that could direct this will, this energy toward one thing or another. It’s the idea and not the will that supplies the intention. Today we think of the will as supplying intention, and intentions are—I mean, who gives a fuck about intentions? William Gass’s essay on Henry James puts this in a properly brutal perspective; it’s called “The High Brutality of Good Intentions.”

10.

I want you to imagine a film of *The Canterbury Tales* in which a falcon lifts off from a pilgrim’s glove and climbs into the empyrean to the top of the screen; in a split second, it morphs from falcon to Spitfire in midflight alone in the sky; cut to the pilgrims now transformed into soldiers holed up in a small village, who will eventually make their way to Canterbury.

The other night, Mother's Day Eve 2005, I had a chastening experience. My son Samuel had asked me what he should get Madelaine for Mother's Day. He suggested a book. I asked him to let me think about it, and then I had this inspiration that if Sam wanted to do something for his mother on Mother's Day that would really please her, he could accompany us that night to the Walter Reade Theater. A Michael Powell film festival was just kicking off, and that night Thelma Schoonmaker, who was married to Powell toward the end of his life and was Martin Scorsese's longtime editor, would be speaking. Sam didn't thrill to this idea, but since he wants to be a filmmaker and his favorite director is Scorsese (we caught *Casino* the day it opened, and it remains an indelible film for him), he consented and even administered smelling salts to help me recover from the shock, since I knew how much he dreaded the idea of being seen in public with his parents on a Saturday night. I really anticipated that Thelma Schoonmaker was going to take us through Powell's films in an exhilarating way and that Sam would be captivated, swept away. The evening was an immense disappointment. She stayed mainly with Powell in the years after he had been barred from making films, after the scandal of *Peeping Tom*, and what we saw on the pristine screen at the Walter Reade Theater was not brief movie scenes but slides of him walking the Scottish countryside in kilts with his friends or riding a horse while holding his young son on his lap. I took enjoyment from Michael Powell's enjoyment of life, but there was little to interest me and almost nothing to hold Sam's attention. In fact, the only reason that I'm mentioning this at all as I make various transitions, from century to century and concern to concern, has to do with Schoonmaker's focus on Powell's disenfranchisement, his ruin. The director of some of the most inspired films ever made, like *The Red Shoes*, *A Matter of Life and Death*, and *I Know Where I'm Going!*—the first nondocumentary shot on location in the Hebrides—was reduced after the debacle of *Peeping Tom* to living in such a hand-to-mouth way in a small cottage in the Cotswolds that for five years he couldn't afford whiskey. This connected in my mind to the somewhat parallel fate of Samuel Fuller, who wasn't able to get a film made for five years between *The Naked Kiss* and *Shark!* and, as I've said, had to fight like hell (excuse the Fullerian diction) to get *The Big Red One* made, only to have it taken out of his hands and butchered. What took place brings up the line in *King Lear*: "who's in, who's out." But underneath these associations, there began to form a connection between the fates of Samuel and Michael and those of my own fathers, Charles and Sidney. (It's dawning on me now that many of the men who have entered "The Book of Samuel" were the victims of not-so-simple twists of fate.)

And then there is Michael Powell's own film (his favorite—many people's—not mine) about an aviator who is also a poet, *A Matter of Life and Death*. Given how these images rattle around in the collective unconscious, it's not unlikely that Powell chose to focus on an aviator in response to the scabrous treatment the flyer gets in Jean Renoir's *Rules of the Game*.

"One year I watched a war in London," Nanci Griffith sings on her album *Flyer*, as she dreams of a rendezvous with a handsome pilot, "In the airport leaving London."

Renoir doesn't mock his aviator so much as the social nexus which has disavowed any heroism that can't be trivialized to fit within the rules of their game.

But Michael Powell didn't get the idea for this rapid transition of falcon to fight plane from an earlier motion picture. My hunch is that this romantic, poetic, and poetry-crazed director found his inspiration in Hopkins's poem "The Windhover."

then off, off forth on swing,
As a skate's heel sweeps smooth on a bow-bend: the hurl and gliding
Rebuffed by the big wind.

One crucial distinction between Hopkins and T. S. Eliot is what differentiates a hawk and a falcon—more precisely, Hopkins's kestrel and Eliot's peregrine falcon. The kestrel is in constant turbulence, like a low-flying plane, and this demands constant vigilance, as does the poet's task.

But, as the passage now presents no hindrance
To the spirit unappeased and peregrine
Between two worlds become much like each other
(*Four Quartets*)

The peregrine, by seeing far-off distances so clearly and flying so high above other birds, may be a bit blind to what's close up, like "falcon-eyed Caesar," as Dante calls him. Maybe heights are best aspired to. The difference between Hopkins's poem and Eliot's *Four Quartets* is equivalent to the difference between a kestrel and a peregrine falcon. The kestrel flies lower to the ground than the falcon, and among birds the falcon comes closest to getting above the turbulence. Eliot's falcon is transformed into spirit ("the passage now presents no hindrance") and can move unencumbered on condition that the spirit remain unappeased as well as peregrine. The tension and compression and torque that Hopkins wanted are inseparable from aspiration and reality. This is another way of explaining why *Four Quartets*, though incomparable, does not help blaze a trail for future poetry. It's an end in itself.

The two worlds that become much like each other are reconciled in Eliot's poem, which is based on a musical premise that keeps it weightless. It's a paean to the spirit world. In contrast, Hopkins leaves generations of poets with something to chew over, wrestle with. And the model for the sprung rhythm with which Hopkins renders the falcon's push can be found in Coleridge's poem "Christabel":

The night-birds all that hour were still.
But now they are jubilant anew,
From cliff and tower, tu—whoo! tu—whoo!
Tu—whoo! tu—whoo! from wood and fell!

A merging of the two impulses, the natural and the supernatural, occurs in Robert Duncan's "My Mother Would Be a Falconess":

Ah, but high, high in the air I flew.
And far, far beyond the curb of her will,
were the blue hills where the falcons nest.

. . .

I tore at her wrist, at the hold she had for me,
until the blood ran hot and I heard her cry out,
far, far beyond the curb of her will

Schoonmaker spent a large part of the evening talking about projects of Powell's that never came to fruition, one of which was *Thirteen Ways of Killing the Poet*; his theme, she emphasized, was always the war between art and commerce. "Hollywood's a factory town," Budd Schulberg has said, "only instead of motor cars or steel, we turn out cans of film. . . . But there's nothing glamorous about it."

II.

Samuel Fuller was an unnamed presence in my life. (How odd it always seems when the Museum of Modern Art or the Film Forum has a retrospective for a filmmaker whose films I routinely saw because they were the only ones showing in town . . .)

I remember taking a group of kids in Kankakee to see *China Gate*, playing in the town's one theater, on my ninth birthday; I felt an enormous attraction and revulsion toward Fuller's deglamorized black-and-white palette. (And how horrible to have it conflated by coincidence with the degrading *China Doll*, a film that appeared the next year to punish my senses, as I was offended by the very concept of a person being reduced to the concept of a thing.) *China Gate* was as transparent as the poster: LOVE AND WAR IN FRENCH INDO-CHINA. The film's main stars, Gene Barry (as "Brock"), Angie Dickinson (as "Lucky Legs"), and Nat King Cole ("in his first dramatic role"), and the incongruity of the offbeat casting, telescoped an out-of-joint, out-of-scale world, demented, changing so rapidly that the camera could barely keep pace. In his posthumous autobiography, Fuller recounts why he cast Angie Dickinson in her first film role: "With her high cheekbones and slanted eyes, Angie passed for a Eurasian. *And those legs of hers stretched all the way across a Cinema-Scope screen.*" Fuller's heated hyperbolism, blunt, expressive, crude, is a plunge into the unconscious. (In *Forty Guns* Barbara Stanwyck sits at the head of the table surrounded by forty men—"forty pricks" Fuller calls them, each of whom "has had her.") Fuller tracks Nat King Cole as he walks through the bombed-out building crooning these corny quasi-Brechtian "lyrics" fashioned by Harold Adamson:

China Gate,
China Gate,
Many dreams and many hearts,
You separate.

Bowl of rice,
Bitter tea,
Is this all the good earth
Has to offer me?

Merrill's Marauders was an aberration at the time for the aberrant Fuller: it was in Technicolor; it was steeped in the colors of death, and steeped in death, and steeped in the death of the manly, forthright, fortitudinous, dependable, athletic actor Jeff Chandler, who then died off-screen from blood poisoning during surgery for back pain before the film was released.

If Fuller was ubiquitous, how did I miss *Forty Guns*, my knowledge of which was limited to the director's comments and a still from his posthumous autobiography? Why did I have to wait to see it upon its release on DVD in May 2005? It so happened that I began physical therapy for problems relating to a herniated disk ("you have no curve in your lumbar spine, your belly button is to the right of center, you're rotated . . .") and the office is a block away from Tower Records where *Forty Guns* was on sale for ten bucks. This film is more thrilling than I imagined it would be, from the syncopated cuts to Barry Sullivan's legs from the knees down ("no one else walks like that . . .") to the sudden shots of his eyes that take up the entire frame and reveal the seasoned killer's concentration and hardness that withers the courage of the punk holding a gun on him—shots from which Sergio Leone is said to have derived the entire concept of the "spaghetti western" and its mix of silence and violence.

Fuller's films often provided a grisly counterpoint to my moods. I found it hard to understand, as a child, why these small local theaters featured films that offered so little comfort—the very opposite of escapism. In retrospect, it fascinates me that Fuller's frontal and bravura style became so noteworthy. His characters (actors?), none more piercingly than Constance Towers in *The Naked Kiss*, were consumed with longing and raw emotion: they wore their inner lives on their faces; the physicality—embraces and blows—that corresponded to duress! How strange it was to see these things that were so peculiarly affecting, without having been clued in to the idea that Fuller was making art. He divested himself of the methods of classic cinema. "Film," as Fuller immortally announced while being interviewed in flashing pink lights at a party in Jean-Luc Godard's immortal (despite the ephemeral nature of the medium itself) *Pierrot le Fou*, "was a battleground. Love. Hate. Action. Violence. Death. In one word: emotion." (The antistrophic French translation by a miniskirted assistant makes these pronouncements sound, if possible, even more portentous.)

The heightened unreality of Fuller's assault on the viewer's emotions put me in touch with an unfamiliarity that I later came to recognize was a primary definition of art. He put a barrier between actor and audience that blocked any romantic identification. Fuller's art is to have the battle continue inside the viewer long after the film's conclusion.

The French appreciated Samuel Fuller because they know that a work of art must be considered as a totality, even if, to borrow a phrase from Jean-Paul Sartre, it's a detotalized totality.

There is another telling small detail in Fuller's cameo appearance in *Pierrot le Fou*. When asked to introduce himself, he says, "My name is Samuel Fuller," but he pronounces all three syllables in no uncertain way; almost as a phonic version, Sam-u-el. When most Samuels pronounce their names or, like Coleridge or Johnson, have their names pronounced by others, the second syllable is slightly elided, so it sounds like Sam-yul. This bespeaks the enviable fullness of Samuel Fuller's sense of himself. I would go so far as to say that Samuel Fuller's personality had distinctive, positive aspects that would have helped all the central figures I've been talking about here—not to mention you and me. Fuller's temperament was like a counterforce to depression. He was always a writer, and long before he entered the wars of Hollywood, he had any number of novels rejected. And what was his response? To begin a new one the next day. There's the famous story of how the studio cut Orson Welles's *The Magnificent Ambersons*, the successor to *Citizen Kane*, from 133 minutes to 88 minutes, and the unused footage was lost. In a way, Welles never recovered from this barbarous ruining of his brilliant second film. As for Fuller, he had to wait until the late 1970s to shoot the autobiographical war film he had wanted to make all his life, which would tell of his experiences in the infantry and, as we would expect, war as it really is. Essentially the same thing happened to Fuller as happened to Welles: his three-hour film was reduced to two hours, and he had no say in it. As far as he knew at the time of his death, no one would ever see *The Big Red One*, his magnum opus, as he had intended it.

In a documentary on the restoration of *The Big Red One* the actors seem to have been more devastated by the adumbrated version that was released in 1980 than Fuller was. And when casting the lead role of the sergeant for *The Big Red One*, Fuller went for an actor whose life had been scarred, unutterably altered by his experience as a Marine: Lee Marvin. Lee Marvin spent his life after the war trying to cope with, if not erase, as John Boorman attests, his "guilt at surviving the ambush [I began to type "anguish"] that wiped out his platoon." His antidote, his form of self-medication, was alcohol. Having taken John Boorman as a worldly, trustworthy, and insightful guide into human character, I feel obliged to let him finish his meditation on Marvin. Forgive me if I close my eyes and hold my ears.

In one sense *Point Blank* was a study of Marvin, and I saw it as an extension of my documentary work, the studies I had made of individuals. The young Marvin, wounded and wounding, brave and fearful, was always with him. The guilt at surviving the ambush that wiped out his platoon hung to him all his days. He was fascinated by war and violence, yet the revulsion that he felt for it was intense, physical, and unendurable. . . . His power derived from this. He should have died, had died, in combat. He held life, particularly his own, in contempt. Yet he was in possession of a great force that demanded expression. So *Point Blank* begins with a man shot. Lee knew how to play a man back from the dead.

It is fitting then, in retrospect, that I should have, at the age of ten, days before the Colts would play the Giants in the NFL Championship game, met Lee Marvin at the bar at the Royal Emerald Hotel in the Bahamas. He was an unmistakable, stark presence. He sat on a bar stool with his back to the bar looking at other elegant men and women drinking together at the small, shiny tables. He wore a blue blazer and gray slacks and brown penny loafers. The initials L. M. were emblazoned in red on his socks, cufflinks, shirt cuffs, lapels, and blazer breast pocket. Lee and I were alone at the bar in the mahogany atmosphere, where the light no longer poured through the window but suffused the room. In the photographs I've seen of myself in that period, except for the monogram he and I wouldn't have been dressed all that differently.

"Are you—" I began asking.

"Yeah, kid," L. M. muttered from the left side of his mouth while looking straight ahead at the whispering couples. At the time, he was more familiar as the star of the weekly TV show *M Squad* than for his roles in films I probably hadn't seen, like *The Big Heat* and *The Wild One*.

"Can I—"

Now he swiveled to look at me and spoke in a low voice.

"Why don't we have a drink together, kid."

My excitement knew no bounds. L. M. was an extraordinary, labile creature, who moved with fluid grace.

"On one condition."

"Sure."

He leaned forward and whispered conspiratorially, "Don't tell anyone else I'm here."

I felt the delicious burden of an immense secret.

"A martini for me and—what—for my . . . young friend?"

"How about a 'Roy Rogers,'" the bartender threw in.

"How does that sound, kid?" he asked in his baritone.

"Good!"

"You don't look like a 'Shirley Temple' kind of kid," he said, then winked and smiled. "I don't want anyone to know I'm here," he added. "I want to be anonymous for a while."

I gave him a nod. He knocked back his martini in one gulp and let out a sigh. I hoped he would order another, but before I had finished my "Roy," two blonde women and a silver-haired man in a gray suit entered the bar, and the man addressed L. M. with annoying familiarity. "Let's go, Lee. Our table's ready."

"Sure, Ed. Let me just say goodbye to my friend."

I pointed to my unfinished drink. He chuckled. "Remember, it's our secret."

12.

This is what all the people suffering from depression and related mental illnesses need as a mantra: a shot of Samuel Fuller's unshakable resilience. Every once in a while, when down, I force myself to remember Fuller's attitude, which is creative and survivalist. This is the lure of Fuller's films: survival.

Not until this instant did the reason for the impact of Fuller's films dawn on me. It comes to me at this instant that he's the visionary angel behind such honest, diagnostic films as *Fight Club* and *Three Kings*—films that reveal an awareness of the global predicament. Fuller was revered and in a sense resurrected by other film directors like Godard, Scorsese, Jim Jarmusch, and Tim Robbins. But more peculiar, and more important, than the effect he had on the generation that championed his films and publicized his persona is Fuller's perhaps more direct and unconscious effect on filmmakers like David Fincher and David O. Russell. Fuller's films provide this generation with the tools they need to deal with the tectonic shift that occurred on September 11, 2001. From my point of view, it makes no difference whatsoever whether certain works of art were created slightly before or after September 11, 2001. We were already living in a global situation that was crystallized for all time on that day.

13.

Samuel Fuller, like Samuel Johnson, began as a journalist and in many ways remained one: a journalist with a camera. What Fuller offered and what remains of Fuller's legacy is not the propaganda of his mythification, but his engagement with reality. I'm saying that David Fincher in *Fight Club* and David O. Russell in *Three Kings* were in some ways enabled instinctively to this pitch of outrageousness, chaos, clarity, and brutality by something in Fuller. In a similar way was Boswell perhaps drawn to document Samuel Johnson. The word "document" is the key. *True Detective*.

When Fuller went into decline, it was because the system had changed. At some level, loosely speaking, Samuel Johnson was part of a collectivity, like someone working in the Hollywood system. Allow me this somewhat far-fetched metaphor to get at a larger point. In comparison with Johnson, who edited Shakespeare's plays, wrote the dictionary and the *Lives of the Poets*, Samuel Taylor Coleridge and William Wordsworth were independent contractors, having to start from scratch. The new reality that the Romantics confronted resisted systematization. In a similar way, Fuller's films were prophetic of an ensuing collapse.

This idea of document is integral to reclaiming the importance of art. All the Samuels that I've been talking about set out to voyage into a new form. The question is how to find identity and direction in a world so radically changed that it scarcely recognizes itself.

14.

"All's dark and comfortless."
—*King Lear*

This is what America has refused to accept: vulnerability. Basically, everyone in this "Book of Samuel" has been thrown for a loop. Nothing has turned out smoothly. It's only in an empire that a large part of the population ever thought things would turn out smoothly; that everything was under control. "Kubla Khan" is in some sense the

consummate colonial fantasy—no wonder it was interrupted as it was being written down, and the flow stopped. The barbarians were at the gate. There is something colonial about Coleridge’s supernatural poems. “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” has aspects of a parable of empire. America is very much like the ancient mariner himself. Until now, Americans haven’t really feared the consequences of having their wishes gratified; they assume that they will be appreciated for their underlying goodwill. Retribution puts America in shock. Retribution for what?

I have a friend, an historian, Alexander Stille, who has written with an almost uncanny sense of awareness on these vague and perilous aspects of history, in his book *The Future of the Past*:

Although we pay lip service to living in a global, interdependent world, Americans are, in many ways, becoming more insular. [. . .] The terrorist attack of September 11, 2001, exposed how dangerous this cultural neglect could be. Intelligence reports sent by foreign governments to the FBI and the CIA were ignored because almost no one at the agencies read foreign languages. A quite specific warning from French police on the eve of the attack went unread and untranslated.

Alex’s larger awareness could not protect him from immediate harm. On Monday in late January, I checked my e-mail before leaving to teach my first class of the spring semester and discovered a ragged communication, asking if I were friends with “Lexi/Alex.” This was followed by some reference to death. I rode the subway in anguish at the thought that something terrible, something as terrible as death, had interfered with Alex. It made no sense. I had seen him several months before carrying his three-week-old son Sam in a Snugli at a book party for a mutual friend. He was with his lovely, young wife, whom I hadn’t really met, although we acknowledged each other with glances. All that afternoon I assumed or half-assumed that Lexi was one of Alex’s nicknames. I didn’t know how to reach the friend who had e-mailed. In desperation, I resorted to Google.com. What I found was shattering. Alex was alive, and I took a deep breath to celebrate that, but something terrible and even more unimaginable had happened. What I found was a notice that Lexi Rudnitsky, his wife, had died a few days prior at her family home in Massachusetts. Alex, Lexi—a vertiginous combination when you add the dimension of tragedy. Now I was forced to assimilate, to let myself believe, that Alex’s wife, Lexi, who was thirty-two, sixteen years younger than Alex, was no longer among us. I kept seeing her standing next to him in the hot room at the party, looking happy and confident. She had had a baby three weeks before, and unknown to me at the time, she was about to have her first book of poems published in the coming year. And there, in the middle, the sleepy, dark-eyed baby: Samuel.