When in the *Biographia Literaria* Coleridge recalls his first encounter with Wordsworth's poetry, he cites the latter's power to rejuvenate his readers' vision: "above all [Wordsworth possesses] the original gift of spreading the tone, the atmosphere, and with it the depth and height of the ideal world around forms, incidents, and situations, of which, for the common view, custom had bedimmed all the lustre. . . ." The revival of vision was, as we learn, an enterprise to which Coleridge himself quickly became dedicated, for the *Lyrical Ballads* as a whole were committed to exhibiting two sorts of poetry, each of which assailed habitual ways of seeing. Wordsworth's contributions revealed the "truth of nature" by dwelling on the ordinary; Coleridge's demanded more of "the modifying colours of the imagination" and dwelt on the supernatural. For both poets, custom is a distorting glaze that forms imperceptibly over the eye and subsequently the entire mind. Speaking specifically of Wordsworth's mission but including himself in its objective, Coleridge writes that Wordsworth intended to awaken "the mind's attention from the lethargy of custom" and "to penetrate the film of familiarity and selfish solicitude [owing to which] we have eyes, yet see not, ears that hear not, and hearts that neither feel nor understand" (2:6–7).

Coleridge finds in the supernatural an effective lure for taking the reader back from the "dusty high road of custom" (2:121) to a pre-empirical vision that apprehends once more the full moral dimensions of our world. Liberated from "that despotism of the eye" (1:107) which has anchored the mind to a deadly materialism, thought becomes comprehensive and steeped in noumena. Wordsworth dwells on the infranatural.
evoking "the Presences of Nature" from the commonplace. He presumes that we think as we see; Coleridge dwelt on the supernatural, and argued that we see only what we are capable of imagining. The suspension of disbelief tends toward belief.

As "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" shows, those who see the world as unfamiliar experience a vital connection between themselves and what they perceive. Seeing under such circumstances becomes spiritualized. Speaking of Wordsworth, Coleridge writes in the Biographia that an unhabituated vision, moreover, restores one's personal past and finally the racial past; such vision is in the nature of it profoundly conservative. One is enabled to "contemplate the ancient of days and all his works with feelings as fresh, as if all had then sprang forth at the first creative fiat" (1:80). To do so, one must "carry on the feelings of childhood into the powers of manhood . . . [and] combine the child's sense of wonder and novelty with the appearances, which every day for perhaps forty years had rendered familiar . . . this is the character and privilege of genius . . ." (1:80–81). Habit and custom, although they are reflexes whose origins are in the past, in fact extinguish the very past to which they pay such dark homage. They make us forget, whereas genius remembers.

Habit is the enemy of genius, the "prime merit" of which consists in one's being able "to represent familiar objects as to awaken in the minds of others a kindred feeling concerning them and that freshness of sensation which is the constant accompaniment of mental, no less bodily, convalescence." So described, genius is the marriage of childhood vision and feeling with mature intellectual powers: "I define genius, as originality of intellectual construction: the moral accompaniment, and actuating principle of which consists, perhaps, in the carrying on of the freshness and feelings of childhood into manhood" (Friend CC:419). And in Lecture Eight (1811) he summarizes the inverse relationship of vision and habit: "In the Poet was comprehended the man who carries the feelings of childhood into the powers of manhood: who with a soul unsubdued, unshackled by custom can contemplate all things with the freshness and wonder of a child. . . . and where knowledge no longer permits admiration gladly sinks back again into the childlike feeling of devout wonder." It is in this vein that "Dejection: An Ode" recounts his lost birthright. "My shaping spirit of Imagination" has become intermittent, until finally the temper of mind required for "abstruse research" is, he puns, "almost grown the habit of my soul."

"Habit" here has a pejorative religious connotation, just as unhabitu-
ated vision is for Coleridge a source of naked spiritual power. Yet we may also think of habit and custom (I shall use them interchangeably, as Coleridge does) as political, as indicating a politics of the eye and of the epistemology upon which they are grounded. Church and state are in vision as in much else for Coleridge inseparable. From one perspective, we might suppose his attack on habit and custom to be that of a radical, and in some senses it is. But we must also take into account the objects of this attack, empiricism and materialism, to grasp Coleridge’s aversion to the latent politics of the mechanical philosophy and its epistemology. As I shall argue, Coleridge is responding in part against the democratizing, levelling, massing drift of Locke’s epistemology. I shall go on to suggest that Coleridge’s thought on the matter of vision and habit constitutes an equinoxial point between the metaphysics of Locke and the aesthetics of Pater and others. Coleridge’s deep aversion to Locke’s optics and epistemology—based in part on their political implications—prompts him, and one might include Wordsworth, to respond with a theory of vision and habit whose conservative political implications become fully apparent only later in the nineteenth century.

The “plan” of the *Lyrical Ballads* promised a moral and political revolution which of course had secondary aesthetic ramifications. When Coleridge recalls in the *Biographia* that the attack on custom was a chief priority on the *Lyrical Ballads’* agenda, we cannot but associate this intent with the radical political rejuvenation to which Wordsworth and Coleridge were also at that time committed. The shattering of habits of the eye was an optical revolution with political force, for to see differently was to think differently about nature and one’s fellow man. Conversely, there was implicit in one’s optics a politics. The optical revolution that Coleridge and Wordsworth sought to effect had a rather more distant enemy. Coleridge in the 1790s had to be sympathetic to *The Second Treatise on Civil Government*, but he could never accommodate himself to *The Essay on Human Understanding*. Locke the empiricist was the unnamed adversary of, say, “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner,” and it is Locke who haunts the discussion, spread over many chapters of the *Biographia*, of materialism.

Coleridge’s references to vision and habit in chapter 4 of the *Biographia* are strategic, anticipating as they do the crucial discussion of associationism. There are, he maintains in chapter 4, two ways of seeing, one mechanical and involuntary, one volitional and creative; there are also two faculties which embody these ways of seeing, the fancy and the imagina-
Habit and the Politics of Vision

Habit is the extension into the moral realm of the mechanical and involuntary. The discussion in chapter 4 of the optical program of the Lyrical Ballads leads inexorably to epistemology, a road particularly well travelled by the eighteenth century. It is in this direction precisely that Coleridge is about to conduct us. Preparing us for the philosophical tour de force upon which chapters 5 through 9 are about to conduct us, he remarks archly, “It has already been hinted, that metaphysics and psychology have long been my hobby-horse” (85). The point of origin of this journey is the “mechanic philosophy,” embodied in Locke and, so far as Coleridge was once concerned, most alluringly presented in Hartley’s associationism. For both Locke and Hartley habit is essential, the mainspring which governs physiology, psychology, and epistemology. Focusing on Hartley as now the best coign of vantage for attacking modern materialism, Coleridge assails Hartley’s suggestion that our nerves experience a “disposition” to certain vibrations which would be no less absurd than saying “a weather-cock had acquired a habit of turning to the east, from the wind having been so long in that quarter . . .” (1:109). So far as Coleridge is concerned the supreme peril in materialism resides in its elevation of habit at the expense of the will (“the infinite spirit . . . an intelligent and holy will”[1:120]), with the expectation that habit will slowly dominate. Habit, like some gangrene, feeds off and destroys living tissue, subtly extinguishing the will. And since the very processes of habit are anesthetizing, we are not even aware of the amputation.5

The danger Coleridge finds in virtually all accounts of association is that they “derive association from the connection and interdependence of the supposed matter, the movements of which constitute our thoughts . . .” (1:96). Our thoughts are degraded, leaving them the result of merely mechanical operations. Among the models he lists are billiard balls, nervous or animal spirits that in turn “etch and re-etch engravings on the brain,” an oscillating ether passing through the hollow tubes of the nerves, or “chemical compositions by elective affinity, or “an electric light at once the immediate object and the ultimate organ of inward vision” (1:101). Coleridge is prepared to grant that there is some sort of associative power, from which such limited functions of the mind as memory and fancy derive their operations, but he abjures Hartley when it comes to accounting for all the mind’s faculties by association. The unmitigated evil of associationism is that “the will, the reason, the judgment, and the understand-
ing, instead of being the determining causes of association, must needs be represented as its *creatures*, and among its mechanical *effects*" (1:110). Will would become merely a matter of chance, the accumulation of sufficient mechanical forces at any given moment to overcome our inertia and passivity.

As Professor McFarland has pointed out, Coleridge reserved a special contempt for Locke, even managing to anathematize the teacher while remaining devoted for some time to the disciple, Hartley. After he abandons Hartley, Coleridge has an even clearer conscience for detesting Locke. Not only was Locke the chief exponent of materialism, but he had elevated habit to a position of supreme importance. He maintained that habits of cognition and of conduct prevent experience from atomizing. Instead, they compel the coagulation of experience into ever larger units and generalities. Habit comprises for him the single most dependable integument of daily life. Indeed, experience and habit are for Locke nearly synonymous, habit being the codification of experience, the now involuntary, unconscious logic whose trammels operate and direct the mind.

Coleridge insists that vision and habit are inversely proportional, and therefore he can present the child as the avatar of genius. To Locke maturity and experience alone remedy the inherent stigmatisms of innocent vision. Locke’s whole epistemology, and particularly his insistence that correct vision depends upon habit, is dramatically rendered by the famous conundrum known as Molyneux’s Question which Locke introduces into the *Essay*. To Ernst Cassirer, Molyneux’s Question distills instantly a tangle of Enlightenment metaphysical issues to a single matrix: “A survey,” he writes, “of the special problems of eighteenth century epistemology and psychology shows that in all their variety and inner diversity they are grouped around a common center. The investigation of individual problems in all their abundance and apparent dispersion comes back again and again to a general theoretical problem in which all the threads of the study unite.” The “center” to which Cassirer alludes is this: “Suppose a man born blind, and now adult, and taught by his touch to distinguish between a cube and a sphere of the same metal, and nighly of the same bigness, so as to tell, when he felt one and the other, which is the cube, which the sphere. Suppose the cube and sphere placed on a table, and the blind be made to see: *quaere*, whether by his sight, before he touched them, he could now distinguish and tell which is the globe, which the cube?” Agreeing with Molyneux’s own speculations, Locke claims the blind man could not dis-
Habit and the Politics of Vision

tinguish them by name. Locke’s “no” to Molyneux’s question is based first on the idea that there is no ur-idea common to all the senses which would permit us to transfer knowledge gained from one to another, and, second, upon his conviction that only extensive experience enables us to have a correct grasp of reality: “For, though he [the newly sighted person] has obtained the experience of how a globe, how a cube affects his touch, yet he has not yet obtained the experience, that what affects his touch so or so, must affect his sight so or so” (1:187). A number of experiments upon the blind and newly sighted verifies Locke’s position, which is that we require “experience” and “custom” to make sense of reality. Locke concludes his analysis of Molyneux’s question with a moral: “This [the question and answer] I have set down, and leave with my reader, as an occasion for him to consider how much he may be beholden to experience, improvement, and acquired notions” (1:186). His editor reaffirms the link between optics and habit: “The acquired perceptions of sight afford unique illustrations of the large part which habit and suggestion play in the early stages of our intellectual development” (1:187).

From this point habit enters crucially into Enlightenment metaphysics. Berkeley makes Molyneux’s Question an issue in The New Theory of Vision, seizing especially upon Locke’s reliance upon habit. Although he assents to Locke’s answer, Berkeley vigorously disputes Locke’s reasoning. To Berkeley, visual ideas are categorically different from tactual ideas. He maintains we have no single, common idea of shape or size but a brace of ideas that so entwine themselves as to give the illusion—really the delusion—of a unified sensation. In reality, the five senses provide five discrete landscapes. Only because we have become habituated to a certain shorthand in language are we able to believe that sight and touch converge. Our delusion is perpetuated by grossly distorting habits of our language.

To Locke habits of sight, thought, and language bond our primary to our secondary ideas. On a most rudimentary level we would not, were we not habituated, be able to recognize immediately a tree or a steam engine, nor would we be able to read and do computations with any facility. In effect habit makes reality immediately intelligible. Locke views our susceptibility to habit as promising the happy triumph of nurture over nature, for “Custom possesses greater power than nature.” Montaigne had enunciated a similar point in “Of Experience”: “It is for habit to give form to life, just as it pleases; it is all-powerful in that. . . .” And Bacon pursues the same line: “Custom is the principal magistrate of man’s life.” We need
only recall that in the Ode custom, along with consciousness, is the war­
den of the prison-house. But for Wordsworth’s predecessors the hope is
that, politically, custom will replace anarchy; and that, intellectually, the
predictable will extinguish the vertiginous uncertainty occasioned by the
constant presence of jostling particulars.

The habituated eye, Locke argues, commands power because it per­
ceives fewer individuations. It consolidates and synthesizes, eliminating
the particular in favor of the whole. Children are in effect newly sighted,
baffled refugees from the land of the blind not, as Wordsworth insists, eyes among the blind. Locke maintains that

when we set before our eyes a round globe of uniform colour . . . it is
certain that the idea thereby imprinted on our mind is of a flat circle,
variously shadowed. But we having, by use, been accustomed to perceive
what kind of appearance convex bodies are wont to make in us . . . the
judgement presently, by an habitual custom, alters the appearances into
their causes . . . (1:186)

Habits of eye and mind are critical to sophisticated cognitive processes,

enabling us to translate instantly the black scratches on the page first as let­
ters, then words, then concepts; moreover, custom enables us to respond
unconsciously to laws without having to rehearse their premises and test
their justice on each occasion. Habit immunizes us against the particu­
lar and local. The very opposite of Coleridge, Locke explains that chil­
dren can only see; they cannot read the visible world. In short, familiarity
breeds comprehension.

Locke’s dependence on custom turns out to be problematic and, finally,

the vulnerable spot in the armed vision. It is precisely on the matter of
custom that Hume and Berkeley assail Locke—the one to demonstrate a
radical skepticism, the other to close the door in Locke to just such an out­
come. In this context we readily discover in Berkeley’s response to Locke
much of what drew Coleridge to Berkeley after Hartley. Locke’s eleva­
tion of habit forebodes an attack upon the will, not to mention upon the
Romantic axis of child and genius as apostles of the unfamiliar and the
particular. Countering Locke, Berkeley argues that we persistently, un­
consciously confuse or “embrangle” objects of sight with objects of touch
and hearing, a confusion insidiously facilitated by our use of language,
which masses together the discrete particularity of everyday life. Habit
encourages us to misread reality; habit levels, reducing the etched particu­
lar to a lumpish consolidation. The singular and diverse are subsumed in
the mass, the class. Hume proceeds a step further, arguing that habit has so insinuated itself into thought as to become an alias for reason. When Hume completes his autopsy of reason, we learn that what Locke calls reason is nothing but habit gussied up in humanist finery: "all our reasonings concerning causes and effects," Hume declares, "are deriv'd from nothing but custom."14

Berkeley finds the force of "an habitual connection" of sounds, sights, and words fused into an apparently seamless whole by language to make us stupid before reality. He intends The New Theory of Vision to restore to us the proto-language that is omnipresent but which, owing to habit, we cannot read. His purpose is thus repeated in the experimental task of the Lyrical Ballads. Returned to a prehabitual, even preassociative state, the eye can perceive with impeccable precision nature broken down into all its particulars. Vision would mean for us; we would understand of the tell-tale scratches of a divine cryptogram, which Berkeley describes as the "universal language of the Author of nature," traces of which are yet to be perceived by the unhabituated eye in the palimpsest before it.

The political bias of Locke's epistemology emerges most clearly in his advocacy of the Scientific Method. Locke submits truth to a democratic consensus, not, certainly, to the dubious aristocracy of visionaries who adduce occult qualities or who focus on particulars to the exclusion of generalities. The conclusions the Method reaches are, writes Sir Isaiah Berlin, "true universally, eternally, and immutably; true for all times, and places, and men."15 Put to the vote, all rational, educated minds must necessarily agree to the Method's conclusions. Presuming such a vote, there would be, Locke submits, "universal assent," a "universal consensus" for his argument against innate ideas. ("Universal" for Locke means the mature, rational, educated, and cultivated; he would exclude children, idiots, and the senile.) Implicit in The Essay on Human Understanding is The Second Treatise on Civil Government. The Scientific Method describes not only a process of inquiry but the very epistemology inherent to all rational minds. Truth is the residue of repeated siftings and consists of the largest remaining elements and the lowest common denominator.16

By contrast, Hume maintains there can be for our mental eye no abstract, universal cat, only Simkin in his furry particularity. It is another instance in which Hume is closer to Coleridge than to Locke. "When," writes Hume, "we have found a resemblance among several objects . . ., we apply the same name to all of them . . . After we have acquired a custom of this kind, the hearing of that name revives the idea of one . . . and makes the
imagination conceive it with all its particular circumstances. . . ." Custom (he anticipates Coleridge) is a filter or film that screens out substantiality, habit an uneventful white sound obliterating the staccato of particulars that once surrounded us. Yet no more than with Hartley can Coleridge console himself with Hume, however useful Hume might be in demolishing Locke. Hume, while degrading "the notion of cause and effect into a blind product of delusion and habit," leaves delusion and habit to reign freely over the merely spectral "now" of an intelligent will.

It is no coincidence that soon after completing the *Biographia*, which assails habit in any of its metaphysical and psychological forms and seeks at every opportunity to vindicate the will and align the self with it, that Coleridge decides to add a motto to *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*. His choice reflects his concern, voiced particularly in chapters 4 through 9, that we must oppose our enslavement to habits and above all to habits imposed by a constricting, deadening empiricism. Thomas Burnet, whom Coleridge quotes for the motto, importunes his readers to advance beyond an acclimated vision of nature to one that is supernatural or finally sacramental. Burnet was a contemporary of Newton and Locke and an implacable opponent of materialism and the mechanical philosophy. He is hostile to those who glory in the putative perfection of nature, only to slide complacently into deism. Burnet finds it abhorrent that anyone could find nature, as it is, perfect, for what, then, does that say about the genuine perfection of the prelapsarian world. For one, it says they have failed to imagine perfection; they have taken the limits of their own minds as the totality. Having so successfully acclimated themselves to nature, which in reality is "a great ruin, . . . a World lying in its rubbish," they end by exalting what Burnet himself has a visceral contempt for. He admonishes us not to surrender to the apparent blandishments around us, which, like present time and space, are calculated to shrink the circumference of vision and swiftly accustom us to the lowest common denominator of the visible: ". . . Souls that are made little and incapacious cannot enlarge their thoughts to take in any great compass of Times or Things; so what is beyond their compass, or above their reach, they are apt to look upon as Fantastical. . . . Who would set a purblind man at the top of the Mast to discover Land? or upon an high Tower to draw a Landscip of the Country round about?" Surrendering to such democracy of vision, we dismiss the visionary, and with him the apparitions of the supernatural, as a mere idiosyncracy.
Burnet stands in relation to Newton as the elder Gosse, the author of Omphalos, does to Darwin. A counterrevolutionary, Burnet resists a battery of scientific evidence to argue that the universe is geocentric and to offer instead an anti-Newtonian, theological theory of rainbows—that there were none before the Deluge. What Newton and Locke stigmatize as "occult qualities" that infiltrate unguarded minds are for Burnet indispensable elements in our understanding of nature's fallen state and hence its vestigial prelapsarian glory.

The motto of "The Rime" points to custom as the servant of a dreary empiricism: "I do not doubt, however," writes Burnet, "that it is sometimes good to contemplate in the mind, as in a picture, the image of a greater and better world; otherwise, the intellect, habituated to the petty things of daily life, may too much contract itself, and wholly sink down to trivial thoughts." Coleridge enlists Burnet to support his own theological beliefs as well as to prepare the reader to exit the cramped landscape dictated by habitual ways of seeing. Ugliness and horror may be the emblems of the fallen world, but habit and the resultant trivializing of the potentially divine are the symptoms of postlapsarian vision, which, regretfully, tends not to discover those traces of a gorgeous beauty among ruin.

"The Rime" provides us with the most dramatic, vivid instance of Coleridgean vision and its antagonist, habit, as they are outlined in the Biographia. The poem stands in relation to major elements of Romanticism as Molyneux's Question does in Cassirer's estimate to Enlightenment metaphysics. The Mariner has escaped habitual vision; he has come finally to see, as it were, the Ancient of days, apprehending an image of the world in its near nascent splendor and supernatural power. Like Wordsworth's Leech-gatherer, the Mariner's eyes have an uncanny glow that is exaggerated by his body's ghastliness. Both have in a sense dismissed the body and the substantial world; both are associated now, to their perpetual ennoblement, with the lowest of creatures, watersnakes and leeches, things whose primordial marine existence links them above all with the prelapsarian. The brightness of the Mariner's eyes is a gift of the visionary episode which had transfixed them, the moment in which he saw that "every track / Was a flash of golden fire." The Mariner's eyes have caught this light, the repetitions of "glittering eye" and "bright-eyed Mariner" (ll. 20, 40, 619, and elsewhere) attesting to the capacity of what one sees to irradiate permanently the seer: "This heart within me burns" (l. 585).

As a "rhyme" the poem tells the story of the Mariner's vision, im-
paired by habit, and the restoration of his sight; but as hoar-frost the rime of the Mariner is precisely that film, that glaze, which freezes over and deadens the visible world. Rime and rhyme are polarized, one representing the numbing, indeterminate region (a seascape of frost and mist, of "dismal sheen" and "fog-smoke white" tupidly illuminated by the moon) that fosters habit and freezes the will, the other the tale or poem itself, the supreme instance of "an infinite spirit, an intelligent and holy will."20

The oxymoronic Mariner—"whose eye is bright, / Whose beard with age is hoar" (l. 619)—embodies both uses of rime and is himself the incarnation of polarities that, until he blessed the watersnakes, were perceived by him as opposites rather than as complementary elements of the whole.21

The poem recounts a ballet of the antipodean elements—heat and cold, the worlds below and above the line, and the sun and moon. But at the critical moment when he is moved to bless the watersnakes, moon and sun are juxtaposed in an image of a potentially unified vision:

Her [the moon's] beams bemocked the sultry main,
Like April hoar-frost spread;
But where the ship's huge shadow lay,
The charmed water burnt away
A still and awful red.

(267–71)

When the Mariner embarked on his voyage the sun itself "shone bright." But in the polar regions the visible world is deadened, the cold, eery light, and rimey glaze acting on the eye as an anesthetic: "through the drifts the snowy cliffs / Did send a dismal sheen . . . The ice was all between" (ll. 55–8); the dreadful groans of the ice reach the Mariner buffered and hollowed, "Like noises in a swound" (l. 62). The moon finds a dismal complement in the whitened air, which further attenuates the insubstantial lunar tint: "While all the night, through fog-smoke white, / Glimmered the white Moon-shine" (ll. 77–8). He shoots the bird under conditions that give the appearance of an emptied, ghostly seascape, the act as much one of aggression against the ambiguities of an indeterminate reality as one of gratuitous violence. For the moment he seems to have elicited meaning. The "good south wind" blew behind, but the mist lingers in which the sun is "hid." When, at last, the equatorial sun burns off the mist, the Mariners experience only a new, more terrible occlusion separate them from nature: they, now, are disembodied, insubstantial, "a painted ship /
Habit and the Politics of Vision

Upon a painted ocean" (ll. 117–18). Becalmed, they suffer from heat, thirst, and *tedium vitae*, their stupefaction an apt emblem of the vapidity which made them indifferent to the visible world and their subsequent morality, a scientific morality based as it was exclusively upon cause and effect. The rime that earlier coated the seascape finds its counterpart in the film that now deadens their vision: "glazed . . . How glazed each weary eye." The punishment fits the crime. Yet it is a crime of which Coleridge believes the readers of the *Lyrical Ballads* to be culpable, for Wordsworth and he intended to dissolve the film of familiarity glazing the readers' eyes, thus restoring vision to the morally and aesthetically dead, "those who have eyes yet see not."

At this critical moment in the Mariner's journey, just about the structural midpoint of the poem, he is afforded a "a sign in the element afar off" (Gloss). The "sign" is initially pedestrian and inauspicious, at first merely a something in the sky, a speck, then a mist. At last a shape emerges, and this in turn then resolves itself into a sail. The sign's real significance resides in the process by which the Mariner sees it, not in its being an actual ship. His seeing it in the way he does initiates and bears formatively upon his ultimate recovery by enabling him now to pass from the blurred and indeterminate generalizing vision to the meticulous apprehension of the particular. The visual course he takes from a "something" to a sail is the converse of Lockean perception, which insists we erode and recompose particulars into some general thing. In seeing the "sign" as he does, the Mariner grasps an elementary truth about all nature, the irreversible quiddity of particulars and yet, despite this, the kinship among categorically different things:

\[
\begin{align*}
I \text{ beheld} \\
A \text{ something in the sky.} \\
\text{At first it seemed a little speck,} \\
\text{And then it seemed a mist;} \\
\text{It moved and moved, and took at last} \\
\text{A certain shape, I wist.} \\
\text{A speck, a mist, a shape, I wist!}
\end{align*}
\]

The evolution of the ship from scarcely a mote to a shape climaxes with the Mariner's slaking his thirst upon his own blood and crying out, "A sail! A sail!" The effect of the metonymy here and of the gathering force of
his swiftly particularizing perceptions (from speck to mist to shape) leading toward that most particular and particularly meaningful of things—a sail—describes a way of seeing that concludes with and extols the individuated. The passage from speck to mist, shape, and sail initiates the rebirth of the Mariner’s vision. In making sense of the speck, and in his capacity to get to “ship” and then back to “sail,” he begins the reconstructive process essential to his moral life, a way of seeing that simultaneously discerns the irreducibly individuated while being capable of recognizing the fundamentally analogic nature of things. The Mariner here affirms “the great law of the imagination . . . that a likeness in part tends to become a likeness in the whole.”21 The metonymical way of seeing is, like all fundamentally imaginative acts, moral. In addition to being its own sort of particular, the ship is a cluster of discrete parts forged into another identity, “A certain shape, I wist.” Compelled to step through the stages by which it reaches a notion of a whole thing, to see a thing de-composed, the mind receives dramatic proof of the inherent likenesses that complete themselves through the mind’s composition of a final unity. Like those pictures that, when turned in relation to the angle of light upon them, reveal an entirely different scene, the ship teeters wonderfully between whole and part; and indeed the Mariner’s assurance of its wholeness is sufficiently certain to permit him to begin to reverse the process when he cries out “A sail!” His next utterance—“See! See!”—is as much a command to his shipmates as a jubilant affirmation of restored vision.

There is a connection between the Mariner’s sense of a rudimentary similitude (that suggested also in the well-known Coleridgean distinction between an imitation and a copy) among apparently disparate things and the rhyme’s visual and auditory presence to us the readers. Coleridge, I have suggested, means to compare us with the benighted Mariner and crew. We, too, must learn to see and read, though for us it is the “Rime.” Certainly we must grasp the “moral” of the tale, though Coleridge was properly impatient with its obtrusiveness and Mrs. Barbauld’s density. The moral lures us away from perceiving and knowing to knowledge, from gerund to noun; the moral is like saying “ship” instead of seeing it as the Mariner does or disembrangling the thing and finally the word as Berkeley urges us to do. Coleridge demands we read in that vein, the act being not only preliminary but ultimatelyprimary to all cognition, intellection, and knowledge.

He employs the poetry itself of the “Rime” to reeducate the reader
with respect to language itself and its alignment with the goings-on of
the poem: the profusion of rhymes—internal rhymes, slant rhymes, and
sight rhymes, as well as puns such as that in "rime" itself—require of us
as readers a recognition of rudimentary analogues, for rhyme itself re-
inforces the notion of dissimilarity in unity. The likeness between us and
the Mariner, and between what he sees and what we read, is born out
in the proliferating analogues and look-alikes throughout the poem. If
the Mariner dimly perceives kinship through the evolution from speck to
sail, and is moved to bless the water snakes as a result, we experience the
essential fraternity of things through the poem's various pairings. In "On
Poesy or Art," consisting of notes made in 1818, Coleridge mounts a com-
plicated argument for the supremacy of poetry—of language—over painting
and music: that art will be supreme which has the power of "humanizing
nature," which is what language accomplishes, for it is "a translation of
man into nature. . . ."²² Painting excludes the mind and hence the latent
analogies between nature and man, while "Music . . . has the fewest ana-
loga in nature," manifesting a superfluity of mind.²³ Sight is for each of us
a rudimentary instance of the wedding of mind and nature, but it is finally
poetry (meaning language) that best exemplifies all art's capacity to be "a
middle quality between a thought and a thing, . . . the union and recon-
ciliation of that which is nature with that which is exclusively human."²⁴
The various sorts of doubling in "The Rime" force upon the reader an
awareness of the deeper analogues, those which insure the presence of
"unity in multeity."

Just how closely related the reader's visual education is to the Mariner's
becomes apparent through a remarkable succession of linked metaphors
that follow shortly upon the Mariner's crying, "See! See!" The setting sun,
we are told, is laced by the spars and ribs of the ghost ship and appears
to be a face through a dungeon grate. The associations ramify to a com-
parison of the Mariner's bony body with the "ribbed sea-sand," the ridges
left by the receding water. The metaphors carry into the reader's field of
view essentially unlike things. Coleridge's capacity to identify the elemen-
tal similarities that make possible such a metamorphosis, and our capacity
to recognize this variation of speck, mist, shape, ship, and sail, attest to
the imagination's capacity to discern (in a sense to give) unity to a cascade
of particulars. The images here resemble that unfolding that Wordsworth
in the 1815 Preface singles out with respect to the Leech gatherer, who
is first perceived as a stone, then a cloud, and finally as a primordial sea
beast. Wordsworth writes that this visual evolution demonstrates a function of the imagination, "the conferring, the abstracting, and the modifying powers of the Imagination. . . ." Now, when the Mariner laments that he feels "Alone, alone, all, all alone, / Alone on a wide sea!" and that "the sea and the sky / Lay like a load on my weary eye" (ll. 232–3; 251), we sense that his aloneness and the dispiriting emptiness of his vision are occasioned not by his own vacuity but his need to perceive and affirm relationship in the visible world. In this case, a stunning series of highly individuated images, associated in a manner that seems anything but mechanical, predictable, and hence habitual, lead us to the almost palpable conviction of that associativeness of things which makes metaphor morally true as well as aesthetically pleasing.

As he stares at the movement of the water snakes, "the elfish light, / Fell off in hoary flakes." It is of course his image, that of the light's falling off in hoary flakes. His eyes, linked in their restored state often enough with the bright, hot sun, seem to penetrate the rime-like covering that cloaks the slimy things. He sees now "their rich attire: / Blue, glossy green, and velvet black, / They coiled and swam; and every track / Was like a flash of golden fire." He suddenly loses his own dryness. An arterial "spring of love" is pumped from his heart, disinterested and generous and the very converse of his earlier drinking his own blood. With his blessing of the snakes, the albatross, like the rime peeling off the water snakes, also "fell off." His vision is so altered that upon returning home the Mariner must ask, in what is perhaps the most poignant line of the poem, "Is this mine own countree?" But of course he has no country any longer, only transient auditors, such as the wedding guest who listens like a three-years' child, whom the Mariner stuns into "the child's sense of wonder and novelty."

The notion that "the actuating principle of genius" derives from childhood vision, along with the attack upon habit, will have a great impact on later English writers, particularly Ruskin, Dickens, Arnold, and Pater, and upon the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. In The Seven Lamps of Architecture Ruskin, employing the imagery and desultory rhythms of Arnold's "The Buried Life" (which is in turn a self-consciously grim re-vision of "Tintern Abbey") maintains that each of us has a true and a false life. In that polarity so favored by the Romantics, Ruskin (bringing together in an extraordinary way much of what I have been saying about will, individuality, and habit) equates our true life with the organic, our false with the mechanical and habitual, the "hoary":

Richard Fadem
Habit and the Politics of Vision

His true life is like that of lower organic beings, the independent force by which he moulds and governs external things. . . . His false life is, indeed, but one of the conditions of death or stupor, but acts, even when it cannot be said to animate, and is not always easily known from the true. It is that life of custom and accident in which many of us pass our time . . . ; that life in which we do what we have not purposed, and speak what we do not mean, and assent to what we do not understand; that life which is overlaid by the weight of things external to it, and is moulded by them instead of assimilating them; that, which instead of growing and blossoming under any wholesome dew, is crystallised over with it, as with hoar frost, and becomes to the true life what an arborescence is to a tree, a candied agglomeration of thoughts and habits foreign to it.26

Living the true life, each of us becomes an "independent force," an aristocratic will that transcends the mechanical, the ordinary, the agglomeration.

Coleridge, Ruskin, Arnold, Pater: it is perhaps no coincidence that the most embittered attacks upon habit spring from an essentially Tory mentality—to be precise, a Tory optics, a Tory epistemology—which in addition to detesting the mechanical philosophy, profoundly resents Locke's levelling of the particular, his democratization of experience, his impetus to garner an ever larger consensus on an ever more agglomerated reality. It is not simply the mechanico-utilitarian outlook the Tory critics find offensive; but seen as a politics of perception, it bleeds out the particular and individual, substituting for it the mass of nature, the mob of sensation. In Coleridgean terms, such unity comes at the expense of multeity, and the divergent is swallowed up in the maw of a hollow consensus. No more than Locke, Coleridge's metaphysics are never far from his politics. But Coleridge's are also inseparable from his theology. He is imbued with Burnet's notion that the levelling of vision by personal habit as well as social custom will extinguish the supernatural and holy.

Nietzsche, who contributes a Continental voice to this chorus, singles out the Lockean tradition's dependence on habit at the expense of the organic, idiosyncratic, and aristocratic: "One finds them [the English psychologists] . . . looking for the effective motive forces of human development in the very last phase we would wish to have them found, e.g. in the inertia of habit, in forgetfulness, in the blind and fortuitous association of ideas: always in something that is purely passive, automatic, reflexive, molecular, and, moreover, profoundly stupid."27 The passage points to
Locke's *Essay* but looks with equal disdain at the *Second Treatise on Civil Government* to indict the somnambulent willlessness, the automatic and reflexive submission that has settled upon us as both individuals and citizens, the inexorable fulfillment of the democratizing of vision.

Pater carries the absorption in the particular to an exquisite extreme, declaring himself entirely immune to any contamination from the mass. Each "single sharp impression" must be isolated and savored apart from the mass. Pater encourages us to approximate "the impression of the individual in his isolation, each mind keeping as solitary prisoner its own dream of the world." Wordsworth's prison-house of consciousness has now become the hermitic palace of art. Pater so upends the romantic mind that he finds habit acceptable, if, that is, it is the habit of aristocratic vision. In order to burn always with a hard gemlike flame, Pater recommends we habituate ourselves exclusively to the isolated and particular. He writes with a keen awareness of the paradox: "In a sense it might even be said that our failure in life is to form habits: for, after all, habit is relative to a stereotyped world, and meantime it is only the roughness of the eye that makes any two persons, things, situations, seem alike." Habit now becomes a form of hermiticism, not a prison but a monastic cell. Pater's essay on Coleridge, which is maddeningly unsatisfactory in among other things its depiction of Coleridge as an acolyte to a frigid, ossified "absolutism," asks us to forgive Coleridge, reminding us to judge him by our own more pliant relativist standards. But in describing the sort of vision that we should exercise upon Coleridge so as to illuminate his virtues and excuse his faults, Pater in fact helps us to grasp all the more keenly just what Coleridge bequeathed Pater himself and what Coleridge so passionately and effectively insisted upon in the face of the Lockean tradition:

> the dominant tendency of life is to turn ascertained truth into a dead letter, to make us all the phlegmatic servants of routine. The relative spirit, by its constant dwelling on the more fugitive conditions or circumstances of things, break[s] through a thousand rough and brutal classifications . . . [and] begets an intellectual finesse. . .

Whether or not we can find Pater's use of "absolutist" and "relativist" at all helpful, the fact remains that it was above all Coleridge, advancing a Tory vision and epistemology, who detected the Locke tradition's impetus to make us the phlegmatic servants of habit.