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THE "WILLING SUSPENSION OF DISBELIEF"

The Long History of a Short Phrase

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In one sense, the history of what has become the go-to phrase in English for describing the mental state of consumers of fictions is not long at all: Samuel Taylor Coleridge had no forerunners when in Chapter 14 of the *Biographia Literaria* of 1818 he defined "poetic faith" as the "willing suspension of disbelief." But in another sense, the history can be considered essentially coterminous with the entire tradition of Western mimetic speculation since Aristotle—one riff among many on the idea that something like belief, however attenuated or modulated, is involved when we read novels and epics or watch tragedies and movies. The primary aim of this chapter is to show how Coleridge's phrase plugs into this tradition of "belief talk" and insinuates itself into common parlance, at least in English. A second aim, more methodological, shadows the first, and involves the assumption that certain variations ol belief talk—be it Coleridge's or others'—mark a decisively new (or modern) understanding of fiction or fictionality. Instead, I argue that the belief idiom, already present in Plato and Aristotle, is simply built out over time: from the Renaissance on, thinkers have taken up the sketchy, sometimes marginal remarks of the Classical tradition, smoothing and systematizing where possible while introducing competing conceptualizations and ways of speaking as necessary. This process of enrichment—which characterizes so much human activity—has not stopped to this day.

Coleridge on Dramatic Illusion

It is seldom recognized that at its inception, Coleridge's proverbial formulation does not occur as part of a general phenomenology of novel-reading or theater-going (Garratt, 2012, 756; Kivy, 2011, 99-100; Paige, 2011, 209nl4). Coleridge did have thoughts about such matters, as we will see, but the passage of the *Biographia Literaria* that is suspended disbelief's origin is concerned with the much more specific issue—a delicate issue, in Coleridge's day—of supernatural subject matter.

Recounting his collaboration with William Wordsworth on *Lyrical Ballads* (1798), Coleridge describes the conceptual ambition of the collection. Both friends shared a basic commitment to "two cardinal points of poetry"—"the power of exciting the sympathy of the reader by a faithful adherence to the truth of nature, and the power of giving the interest of novelty by the modifying colors ot the imagination (Coleridge, 1983, 2: 5). Cardinal points indeed, or poetological commonplaces; Coleridge is working, here, a widely shared opposition between two paths to readerly involvement, one that arguably can be traced back to Aristotle's thoughts about the relation between verisimilitude (or probability: *eoikhë)* and surprise (or wonder: *thaumastori).*[1] But they are also cardinal points in

that they are poles, polar opposites, because verisimilitude ("truth to nature") and surprise ("novelty") are felt to be mutually incompatible: the verisimilar tends to not be surprising and the surprising tends not to be verisimilar. The project of the *Lyrical Ballads* is to prove "the practicability of combining both" (5). Wordsworth would work the subjects of "ordinary life" that can "be found in every village" (6); his task, obviously, was to move such subjects to the pole of surprise—"to give the charm of novelty to things of every day" (7). This would come via a defamiliarization of the quotidian: Wordsworth was to strip away the "film of familiarity" that keeps us from really seeing "the loveliness and the wonders of the world before us" (7). This wonder, this novelty, was "a feeling analogous to the supernatural" (7). Meanwhile, Coleridge was to take the symmetrically opposite tack, treating "incidents and agents ... supernatural" (6) in a manner that would seem emotionally real: his job consisted in "the interesting of the affections by the dramatic truth of such emotions, as would naturally accompany such situations, supposing them real" (6). Thus the "two cardinal points" would be finessed in such a way as to produce both a supernaturalized nature and a naturalized supernatural.

It is in this context that Coleridge invents his formula. The "semblance of truth" that he was attempting to generate for his supernatural subject matter would achieve "that willing suspension of disbelief for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith" (6). Wordsworth didn't have to worry about the suspension of his reader's disbelief because the kind of true-to-nature subject he chose wouldn't generate disbelief in the first place. The only other passage in the *Biographia* where Coleridge uses terms similar to those in his famous phrase confirms the importance of the supernatural context. Shakespeare's characters, Coleridge writes, are able to "bribe us into a voluntary submission of our better knowledge, into suspension of all our judgment..., and [to] enable us to peruse with the liveliest interest the wildest tales of ghosts, wizards, genii, and secret talismans" (217-18). Echoing the "dramatic truth" that he declared as his aim in the *Lyrical Ballads* project, the poet speaks now of "a *dramatic* probability" imparted to "characters and incidents bordering] on impossibility" (218).[2] Coleridge is careful to avoid qualifying our adherence as belief.

> The poet does not require us to be awake and believe; he solicits us only to yield ourselves to a dream; and this too with our eyes open, and with our judgment *perdue* behind the curtain, ready to awaken us at the first motion of our will; and meantime, only, not to *dis*believe.
>
> *(218)*

All the components of the better known, more concentrated formulation of Chapter 14 are present—the supernatural context, plus the terms "voluntary," "suspension," and "disbelief'—along with some other details, such as the dream analogy and the helpful stipulation that a negated disbelief is not the same as belief pure and simple.

This link between suspended disbelief and the supernatural has been all but forgotten as writers and scholars of all stripes have rushed to take the phrase as a general explanation for how we experience fiction. But if the link is crucial for understanding the deeper background to Coleridge's coinage, as I will show, it is also true that our common misconception is perhaps not so wide of the mark. For Coleridge had long been interested in the more general problem of belief in fictions (especially though not exclusively the theater), and it turns out that many of his formulations in this context are congruent with the phrasing in the *Biographia*.[3] The most extensive discussion occurs in the notes for the 1808 lectures on poetry. There, Coleridge attempts to distinguish between our reaction to a landscape painting and a staged forest scene. Neither, he says, truly deceives us, but the stage nevertheless aims at a kind of illusion that the painting does not. The staged forest produces an "*analagon* [analogue] of deception, a sort of temporary Faith which we encourage by our own Will" (Coleridge, 1987, 1: 130). An illusion that is close to deception but not quite: one can feel Coleridge struggling with the fuzziness of the distinctions, as when he first writes that the aim of the stage is "to deceive," only to cross

it out and substitute "to produce illusion" (130). Be that as it may, in addition to the mention of "faith" and "will," the poet comes up with a formulation anticipatory of the suspension of disbelief's double negative when he stipulates that the illusion consists "not in the mind's judging it to be a Forest but in its remission of the judgement that it is not a Forest" (130). In a rewritten version of this passage, Coleridge scuttles the idea of remission—quite reasonably qualified by one scholar as "suspension by any other name" (Marshall, 2020, 25)—and defines the goal of the theater as the production of "a sort of temporary Half-Faith, which the Spectator encourages in himself and supports by a voluntary contribution on his own part" (134). But in a later letter from 1816, a year in which he was working on the *Biographia Literaria*—"remission" has become full-blown suspension: "the true theory of Stage Illusion" must derive from "a voluntary lending of the will to this suspension of one of it's [*sic*] own operations," that of judgment "concerning the reality of any sensuous impression" (Coleridge, 1959, 641-42). There is seemingly little conceptual daylight, therefore, between the way Coleridge conceives of dramatic illusion tout court and the reader's processing of unbelievable subject matter.

To what extent is the willing suspension of disbelief an innovation over previous descriptions of the way we relate to literature? Surprisingly, the question has hardly been posed. Some noted scholars have proceeded with the assumption that Coleridge's phrase is the sign of an epochally novel understanding of literature or art more generally. Such is the case for Catherine Gallagher, for whom Coleridge is a kind of triumphant endpoint to her account of what she holds to be the eighteenth-century "rise of fictionality"; Michael McKeon has treated the formula as convenient shorthand for a distinctively "modern" aesthetics (Gallagher, 2006, 347-49; McKeon, 1987, 128). Others have pointed to specific Enlightenment "forerunners" to whom Coleridge may plausibly be indebted (Bormann, 1972, 56-60; Chandler, 1996, 39-40; Kauvar, 1969, 91-94). And specialists of Romanticism have looked more to Coleridge's contemporaries, especially to German writers such as A. W. Schlegel, from whom Coleridge was wont to crib (Burwick, 1991). Such references may be more or less illuminating depending on the case, but the basic problem with measuring the novelty of Coleridge's phrase is that the latter is very difficult to disentangle from the entire Aristotelian tradition of thought about verisimilitude: commentators had for many centuries glossed the issue of belief, posed by Aristotle in parts of the *Poetics.*

Early Modern Belief Talk

Italian Renaissance commentators tended to elaborate on the passage in *Poetics* 9 (1651b) where Aristotle speaks of historically attested characters as superior to invented ones precisely on account of the automatic belief they inspire. Francesco Robortello, in the first of the major commentaries on the *Poetics*, offers this restatement: in order to feel the "major passions" that are pity and fear, the audience must

> know that the thing actually happened in such and such a way. Thus if a tragic plot contained an action which did not really take place and was not true, but was represented by the poet himself in accordance with verisimilitude, it would perhaps move the souls of the auditors, but less.
> ... If verisimilar things move us, the true will move us much more. Verisimilar things move us because we believe it to have been possible for the event to come about in the way specified. True things move us because we know that it did come about in the way specified.
>
> *(quoted in Weinberg, 1961, 392)*

Robortello thus proposes—and his variance with respect to Aristotle is probably minimal—two types of belief: one, inferior, produced by a verisimilar treatment of invented subjects and characters, and a second, more prized belief, deriving from historical conviction. Based on the summaries of

Renaissance poetological discourse provided by Bernard Weinberg, we can safely conclude that such a reading was anything but unusual for the day.

To be sure, this type of credence does not equate precisely with dramatic illusion as Coleridge speaks of it. Yet, it is part of a tangle of discursive strands that are impossible to separate: they make up the belief talk that over the following centuries were reworked and expanded in France and Great Britain.[4] Some of these strands posit a belief that arises out of the experience of poetry or drama, and that can be enhanced by proper handling on the part of the poet. Thus, in 1583, Orazio Ariosto writes of gaining the audience's credence by "weaving a series of events (even if invented) as verisimilarly as possible, endowing the persons introduced with appropriate characters, [and] making them express thoughts fitted to the circumstances" (quoted in Weinberg, 1961, 936). The pursuit of belief impels other theorists to begin to elaborate practical suggestions. Thus, in a 1598 treatise, Angelo Ingegneri reasons that if actors are going to be speaking Italian, it's more verisimilar if the play is set in Tuscany as opposed to Cyprus; similarly, the temporal span of the represented action ideally should be in real time, for "that belief whence the passions are aroused" is more efficaciously produced "the more the [things of the play] approximate the truth" (quoted in Weinberg, 1961, 1090)? And already in 1543, Bartolomeo Cavalcanti offers an early articulation of what has become known as the "fourth wall" principle: avoiding the direct address of the audience,

> The actors must represent things as the persons whom they simulate would do them among themselves and not let it appear that these arc things that arc narrated or simulated; for this brings displeasure to the spectators and removes belief from the plot.
>
> *(quoted in Weinberg, 1961, 920-21)*

Was belief for these thinkers total? Generally not. Certainly, some were more doctrinaire than others: against even Aristotle, Luigi Castelvetro, for example, held that invented characters could not hope to solicit any credence at all? But in most formulations the aim was always producing *more* belief, suggesting then a kind of sliding scale whose unattainable asymptote is perfect illusion. Thus, in the words of Ingegneri,

> If those who perform the plots could make the spectators believe that those stages upon which they perform them were really those cities and those lands where the plots are imagined to have happened, they would most willingly do so.
>
> *(quoted in Weinberg, 1961, 1101)*

And even commentators who willingly speak of belief don't hesitate to hedge and to qualify: "If we wish to concern ourselves with persuading the spectators that the thing represented is really true," writes Orazio Ariosto, "it will no longer suffice to make the stage-settings of boards ... but entire cities will have to be founded" (quoted in Weinberg, 1961, 936). Belief, then, seems like the right word for these writers, at the same time it is not *quite* the right word. Thus Francesco Buonamici:

> Verisimilitude in represented things consists in assuring that the parts of the action are linked and that they bend the soul of the spectator to believe that things happened in this way; but the effect of verisimilitude on the spectator is never strong enough—unless he is an imbecile—for the thing representing to be mistaken for the thing represented.
>
> *(Buonamici, 1597, 111)*

Like others cited above, Buonamici seems to regard belief as something that arises from plot as opposed to stagecraft—thus his reference to the linking of actions. But he is careful to add that belief

is not a kind of superstitious delusion, and the logic, in these accounts, was almost always of a the-morc-the-better variety. Belief was less a toggle switch than a volume button, and the more poets could turn it up—can the music ever be too loud? -the more effect they would produce on their audience.

How far is this from Coleridge? About two centuries and all the ramifying developments such a span implies. Let's now work forward and back along that path, taking a cue from Coleridge's thoughts in the 1808 lectures. For there he gives explicit coordinates for the "dream" theory he was working out, one designed to thread the needle between the Scylla of "French Critics" who hold "Stage-Illusion" to be an "actual delusion" and the Charybdis that is Samuel Johnson, who "denfies] it altogether" (Coleridge, 1987, 1:135). The latter reference is plain. In his 1765 preface to Shakespeare, Johnson attacks the neoclassical unities of time, place, and action, founded on "the supposed necessity of making the drama credible" (Johnson, 1968, 76). "Supposed": Johnson strenuously disagrees.

> It is false, that any representation is taken for reality. [...] The truth is that the spectators are always in their senses, and know, from the first act to the last, that the stage is only a stage, and the players are only players.
>
> *(76-77)*

Who the French critics may be is less clear. As we'll see, some eighteenth-century French critics purveyed accounts of illusion that were easily as mitigated as Coleridge's own. But most probably Coleridge is thinking generally of the neoclassical doctrine that Johnson dates to "the time of [Pierre] Corneille," that is, the first half of the seventeenth century (Johnson, 1968, 75).

It is true, as Johnson says, that the neoclassical unities—and other fabled "rules" for which the French are still famous—were justified in order to secure the credence of spectators (see notably Forestier, 2003). But it is much less clear that the French held any faster than the Italians to dramatic belief as complete delusion. On the face of things, Jean Chapelain's reasoning in an early articulation of the so-called 24-hour rule, written in 1630, might appear to tend in such a literalist direction. Chapelain there declares that while the imperative behind all poetic representation is "to be so perfect that no difference is detectible between the thing imitated and the thing imitating," theater is especially up to the task because the medium "hides" the person of the poet, thus better "overwhelm [ing] the imagination ol the spectator and guid[ing] him without obstacle to the credence in the representation that he is supposed to maintain" (Chapelain, 2007, 223-24). Easily recognizable, here, is the influence of the Renaissance commentaries of the Italians, where the unities were first discussed before their systematic uptake by the French. We might also detect in Chapelain's formulation the implication of sliding-scale belief, given that theater is said to prompt *more* belief than narrative, but admittedly Chapelain does not put much pressure on the idea of credence- -perhaps because his short letter was as much a polemical document as it was a work of theory.[7]

At any rate, while rehearsing the need for belief, subsequent French theorists let some of their doubts show, the best example being a particularly contorted passage in the most important theatrical tieatisc ol the period, François Hédelin d'Aubignac's *Pratique du théâtre*, published in 1657 though probably composed starting in the late 1630s. The sentence occurs in a discussion of the necessity of temporal restriction—for if a lot of lime passes in a play, we would expect to see the players eat, drink, and sleep, and since we don't, the artifice will be obvious. D'Aubignac then writes,

> I certainly realize that theater is a kind of illusion, but spectators must be tricked in such a way that they don't imagine they are being tricked, even though they do know it; while they are being tricked, their mind must not be aware of it; but only when the mind reflects on it.
>
> *(2001, 317)*

A lot in the passage is obscure, starting with the first "but," which doesn't seem to follow from the concession of the opening ("I certainly realize"), and the use of the word "illusion" in the apparent sense of the theatrical experience is both historically rare in this period and unusual in d'Aubignac's text (where it typically refers to elements of the stage set). Still, even without elaborate parsing, we can see d'Aubignac's hesitations: spectators must not imagine *(imaginer)* they are being fooled even though they know *(savoir)* that they are being fooled; their mind must not be aware of *(connaître)* the trickery, though they are aware of it if they reflect *(faire réflexion;* during or after the spectacle is not clear). One scholar has aptly called this messy surfacing of d'Aubignac's own doubts a classic case of fetishistic denial (Harris, 2014,56). But no psychoanalysis is necessary to hazard that the multiplication of countervailing verbs stems from an attempt, however involuntary or repressed, to grapple precisely with the problem that Coleridge held doctrinaire "French Critics" incapable of seeing.

And on both sides of the Channel that grappling became much more explicit in the eighteenth century, where the word "illusion," something of a hapax in d'Aubignac, becomes integral to belief talk. Some seek to dispel recourse to belief and illusion entirely. Such is the case for Johnson, but much earlier for the abbé Dubos, who in an extremely influential treatise of 1719 reasons that while "it is true that everything we see at the theater conspires to move us, nothing there is an illusion for our senses, since everything is displayed as an imitation" (Dubos, 1719, 620-21). As we see here, and as is clear in Johnson as well, these accounts are not designed to argue for a disabused spectatorship or an early Brechtian *Verfremdungseffekt.* Rather, they provide models for explaining audience adhesion—which should be as strong as possible—as something other than a kind of belief (usually through some sort of theory of passionate identification, whose history is also a long one). Yet Dubos and Johnson are outliers, and despite their visibility they do not change the fact that most commentators prefer to tweak the belief-illusion model rather than give it up. Marmontel's widely known article "Illusion" in the *Encyclopédie* is noteworthy for its attempt to refashion the understanding of the term under pressure from Dubos's skepticism. For Marmontel accepts that people know they arc in the theater, and that "complete" or "full" illusion (the adjectives come back repeatedly) is impossible and moreover undesirable, in that (and here he follows Dubos) it would chain us to tragedy's negative emotions and foreclose any experience of pleasure (Marmontel, 1777). Marmontel opts then for what he calls "half-illusion" (Marmontel, 1777, 561). According to this model, which Marian Hobson has dubbed "bimodal," two thoughts can be present to the mind at once: on the one hand, we know we're in a theater (and can say to ourselves "What acting!"), while on the other, we really think we are watching real events unfold (Hobson, 1982, 47-49). Yet, even the bimodal model ends up getting pulled back toward the side of illusion: Marmontel further maintains that the two thoughts aren't quite symmetrically present, in that it's the illusion of reality that should predominate over the consciousness of fiction—according to the now centuries-old commonplace that stronger illusion makes for greater impact on the soul of the artwork's percipient. Theorists found it decidedly difficult, therefore, to get away from the idiom of belief and the related, newly popular "illusion": whatever refinements and stipulations were necessary when using the terms, they continued to make sense to writers of the period.

Beyond the *Incredulus odi*

And the terms made sense for Coleridge further down the line, in the early nineteenth century. Besides Johnson and the "French Critics," Coleridge left us some other coordinates for his thinking about dramatic illusion, in the form of manuscript annotations to Richard Payne Knight's *Analytical Inquiry into the Principles of Taste,* which, appearing in 1805, was fresh scholarship as the poet was preparing his 1808 lectures. Most of Coleridge's marginalia occur in Knight's long chapter on the sublime and pathetic. There, Knight vigorously dissents from Edmund Burke's proposition—which

is in complete congruence with Aristotelian thought since the Renaissance—that "the nearer tragedy approaches the reality, and the further it removes us from all idea of fiction, the more perfect is its power" (cited in Knight, 1805, 314). Knight instead aligns himself with Dubos and Johnson, both of whom he quotes more than once, arguing that the fact that "all the distress of dramatic fiction is known and felt, at the time of its exhibition, to be merely fiction" does not preclude the excitation of "real and complete ... sympathies" in the spectators" (327). But Coleridge will have none of cither of these opinions. On the one hand, pace Burke, any "fits of forgetfulness and deception" one may have during a performance are unsustainable; on the other, contra Knight, "the fact [is] that we *know* the thing to be a representation, but that we often *feel* it to be a reality" (Coleridge, 1992, 405-06). Coleridge returns repeatedly to the distinction between knowing and feeling; thus, when Knight opines that "Fiction is known to be fiction, even while it interests us most," Coleridge interjects, "This is false[;] it is not *felt* to be fiction when we are most affected" (Coleridge, 1992, 408; Knight, 1805, 354). Even though Knight does not dispute that real emotions are excited by literature, this is not enough for Coleridge, who is unwilling to relinquish an illusion model, even if the illusion is now one of feeling rather than knowing. Granted, he reasons, one "species of delusion" is impossible in the playhouse, that of the representation being taken for a reality; but "another species of delusion" must "occasionally [be] superinduced," otherwise "1 do not see how it is possible that we should be affected to the degree to which a fine tragedy exquisitely represented does affect us" (3:406). These are of course annotations, and one should expect them to be inchoate. But they show—as do the final lectures, already described—that Coleridge was fully committed to an explanation of aesthetic adhesion elaborated in terms of belief and illusion.

These earlier engagements with the tradition of thought on belief are, at any rate, banal; they leave us far from what Coleridge is remembered for. How did he hit upon the idea of coming at the problem from the other side—from the side of disbelief suspended, as opposed to belief induced? It is here that the supernatural context of the famous phrase needs to be recalled, for it helps explain Coleridge's modification of the customary idiom. "Disbelief' was most widely used in religious discourse, as a neighboring term for atheism. But it also figured as a descriptor for a modern state of mind for the rational, non-superstitious worldview that in Weberian parlance would come to be known as disenchanted. This acceptation lent itself easily to the grand narrative of neoclassicism, as when Hugo Blair, in his *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles-Lettres* (1783), writes that "the disbelief of magic and enchantments" led to the abandonment of romance fiction and its replacement by a more rational novel (307). Not that Spenser and Shakespeare, Ariosto and the *Arabian Nights*, need to be consigned to the dustbin of literary history: such enchanted poetry made sense as a product of a more superstitious era, and it could still be enjoyed even without the belief that audiences of the before times may have invested in it. But writing in such a way *now* was impossible. Thus Richard Hurd, whose *Letters on Chivalry and Romance* (1762) vigorously defends the reading of the enchanted canon, nevertheless, concedes that it cannot be a model for today's serious writers: "I would advise no modern poet to revive these faery tales in an epic poem" (101).

Coleridge's part of the *Lyrical Ballads* project thus went against prevailing neoclassical logic. In that, he found himself in the same boat as practitioners of the gothic, whose creations were routinely chastised via a phrase from Horace's *Ars Poetica* (line 188): *incredulus odi,* or, literally, "disbelieving, I hate." Horace had used the words to explain the spectator's rejection of actions too horrible for contemplation- his chief example was Medea's infanticide—and counseled the apprentice poet to steer clear of such subjects. But in the eighteenth century, Horace's line proved useful when critiquing contemporary writers who attempted to take the supernatural seriously. Horace Walpole's *Castle of Otranto* (1764) was initially greeted with favor by the *Monthly Review,* whose reviewer didn't seem entirely convinced that the novel was a translation of a medieval original but was willing to play along. But then Walpole brought out a second edition six months later, admitting authorship and

further stating prefatorily (in arguably proto-Coleridgian terms) that his novel was an attempt to blend "common life" and "probability" with "the great resources of fancy" (Walpole, 1996, 9-10), and by this point the same reviewer would have nothing to do with the book:

> When, as in this edition, the *Castle of Otranto* is declared to be a modern performance, that indulgence we afforded to the foible of a supposed antiquity we can by no means extend to the singularity of a false taste in a cultivated period of learning. (...) *Incredulus odi* is, or ought to be, a charm against all such infatuations.
>
> *(quoted in Sabor. 1987, 72)*

Some three decades later, with the gothic novel in full swing and spinning off into stage adaptations, a reviewer of a contemporary play censures the ghosts, again via Horace: "We would interdict the production of any *new* spectre on the stage. This 'reign of terror' is over: 'incredulus odi.' In a modern play, ghosts cannot be tolerated" (quoted in Cleary, 1995, 201-2n39). And indeed, Coleridge himself, reviewing Matthew Lewis's *The Monk* in 1797, doesn't hesitate to trot out Horace's injunction as proof that a work so improbable can scarcely pretend to impart a moral lesson (Coleridge, 1995, 59).[8]

But of course, this was just one interpretation of the classical poetological inheritance: others marshalled different passages to argue that an impossible premise could nonetheless be the starting point for a psychologically verisimilar work. Notably, *Poetics* 24 (1460a) contains a section in which Aristotle lauds Homer for having "taught other poets the right way to purvey falsehoods" (Aristotle, 1987, 60). The argument is less than clear, but the philosopher seems to suggest that an action that follows logically from another action will have the effect of validating the first action in the listener's mind, and shortly thereafter, Aristotle advises that any irrationality should be kept "outside the plot-structure," giving the example of Oedipus's perplexingly having no knowledge of how his father had died (60). Translating the *Poetics* in 1789, Thomas Twining homed in on these obscure comments as particularly in need of interpretation. Discounting André Dacier's opinion that Aristotle was simply advising an "artful intermixture" of history and invention, Twining argued that Aristotle was really talking about cause and effect. His gloss, which introduces remarks on the enchantments of Homer, Ariosto, and Shakespeare, contains some remarkable Coleridgian echoes.

> The Poet invents certain extraordinary characters, incidents, and situations. When the actions, and the language, of those characters, and, in general, the *consequences* of those events, or situations, as drawn out into detail by the Poet, are such as we know, or think, to be *true*—that is to say, poetically true, or *natural,* such, as we are satisfied must necessarily, or would probably, follow, if such characters and situations actually existed; this probability, nature, or *truth,* of representation, imposes on us, sufficiently for the purposes of Poetry. It induces us to *believe,* with hypothetic and voluntary faith, the existence of those false events, and imaginary personages, those ἀδύνατα [impossibilities], ἄλογα [irrationalities], ψεῦδος [lies]—those marvelous and incredible fictions, which, otherwise managed, we should have rejected: that is, their improbability, or impossibility, would have so forced themselves upon our notice, as to destroy, or disturb, even the slight and willing illusion of the moment.
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> *(Aristotle, 1789, 486)[9]*

Whether Coleridge read Twining's commentary matters little. Certainly, Twining's phrasings are intriguingly close to the language Coleridge uses when discussing both "Stage-Illusion" and the suspension of disbelief made possible when the supernatural is properly handled. But the wider point is that Coleridge's language, though innovative, is nonetheless perfectly congruent both with the reprocessing of the classical canon that took place in the Renaissance and then in subsequent neoclassical

discourse, especially when it involved the irrational or the supernatural. Perfectly congruent, yet of course different: mitigated belief is replaced, in one genial stroke, by crossing out the disbelief of the *incredulus odi.* All the other material—from the voluntary and temporary nature of the operation to the idea of a faith that is peculiarly poetic is either standard-issue or alight addition to the tradition.[10]

The Success of a Turn of Phrase

Does the "willing suspension of disbelief" represent a light-bulb moment, the ushering in of a new way of relating to literature—if not modern "aesthetics" itself? Or might it be simply a nice turn of phrase, a felicitous but otherwise anodyne tweaking of an inherited, endlessly nuanced common-place? Most surely the latter. Coleridge's formulation seems to have attracted no followers over the rest of the century: a simple Google n-gram search suggests that occurrences of the phrase before 1900 are found only in reprints of the original passage in the *Biographia Literaria.* The same search strongly suggests that its independent afterlife—that is, its uncoupling from its immediate context-is attributable to George Saintsbury's phenomenally popular *History of Criticism,* published at the opening of the twentieth century. In his account of the *Biographia,* Saintsbury qualifies Coleridge's coinage as "one of the great critical phrases of the world" (1904, 208nl). The suspension of disbelief is not yet, in Saintsbury, all-purpose shorthand for the experience of fiction: it is invoked only when the critic is discussing the successful overthrow of the rationalistic "Neo-Classic dynasty," and it is taken, therefore, as the hallmark of a "modern" sensibility (8).[11] While this narrative of rupture is unjustified for reasons 1 have explained, the importance of *History of Criticism* lies in its transforma-tion of the "suspension of disbelief" into a slimmed-down, detachable unit, or just possibly cliché: Saintsbury doesn't hesitate to drop the epithet "willing," anticipating the casual use that has slowly dominated the more complete citation of Coleridge (see Figure 2.1). And detachable the phrase has proven. It figures as the title for a whole chapter of Norman Holland's widely read study on reader response; Victor Nell's equally remarked monograph on the same topic uses it as a useful placeholder for the general phenomenon of readerly absorption (Holland, 1968, 63-103; Nell, 1988, 56).[12] And many scholars invoke it as consensual common ground, even when their understandings evidently diverge from Coleridge's.[13] Needless to say, in everyday parlance the phrase has even detached itself from its author: "During one week in 1997, Coleridge's biographer Richard Holmes recorded seven separate uses of the phrase in newspaper articles and radio programs variously describing films, books, drama, and scientific theories. None mentioned Coleridge" (Tomko, 2016, 1).
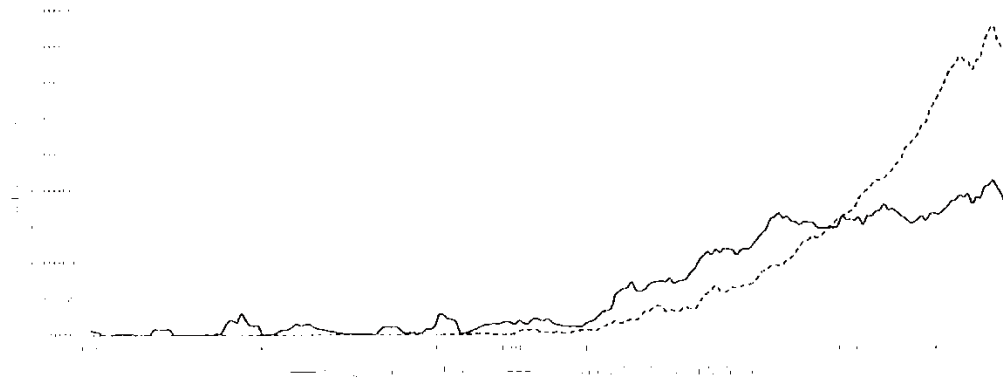
Figure 2.1 Frequency of occurrences of the phrase "willing suspension of disbelief" (solid line) and the trun-cated "suspension of disbelief" (dotted line).

But just as his dissatisfaction with people like Johnson and Knight spurred Coleridge to reformulate earlier commonplaces, (dis)belief talk has, over time, been both reformulated and—more often—rejected by scholars interested in pursuing other conceptual idioms. If some philosophers continue to find the suspension of disbelief worth keeping around (Galgut, 2002, 190-99; Schaper, 1978, 31-44), the title of Kendall Walton's article "Appreciating Fiction: Suspending Disbelief or Pretending Belief?" suggests a veering away from Coleridge's novel formula, back toward "belief," but now understood as a kind of play ("make-believe") that bears little relation to the tradition Coleridge was working with (Walton, 1980, 1-18).[14] Colin Radford and Michael Weston's seminal exchange on readers' paradoxical involvement with the fates of characters they know to be made up quotes the phrase (without attribution) before concluding that disbelief and belief are beside the point (Radford and Weston, 1975, 71-72). And generally literary and narrative theorists have followed this drift away from belief talk, into idioms of "pretense" or "immersion" (see e.g., Schaeffer, 2010). Nonetheless, as this handbook suggests, belief talk—and Coleridge's famous contribution to it—may still have a future.

Of course, it's possible to take a specialist's approach to Coleridge's willing suspension of disbelief. One might, then, try to approach it via an internal study of the poet's oeuvre: "poetic faith," for example, could be related to Coleridge's personal theology (Tomko, 2016, 65-107), or the epithet "willing" to his idea of the creative imagination (Burwick, 1991, 191-229). Or we might try to integrate the phrase into the philosophical system Coleridge was developing in dialogue with the German Idealist tradition (Marshall, 2020; McFarland, 1987, 114-45). Such approaches would plausibly end with the assertion of the historical importance of his thought, of which the four words under study would be the tip of the iceberg. Yet, no matter how the scholar may try to weave the phrase tightly back into the full texture of Coleridge's work, its subsequent success would not have been possible if its use had such a high barrier to entry. 1 have preferred to view the willing suspension of disbelief as part of the steady proliferation of discourse around human reactions to the mimetic representational practices characteristic of the West since the Greeks—part, then, of a constellation of easily transmissible, endlessly ramifying commonplaces building out over time. Certainly, Coleridge offers a striking riff on the traditional idiom of belief, and it is not given to everyone to coin a phrase of such endurance. Most likely, however, the phrase has acquired a life of its own precisely because its meaning is relatively modest; it turned out there was an intuitive appeal in speaking of crossed-out disbelief. But other ways of speaking have long had and still have competing appeal, and modern scholars, continuing the build-out Coleridge was part of, have introduced new terms—"games," "contracts," "immersion," "make-believe."

David Hume, reviewing Bernard de Fontenelle's attempt to account for the paradoxical pleasure viewers take in tragedy, found his predecessor was on to something. "This solution seems just and convincing," wrote Hume in his 1757 essay "Of Tragedy," "but perhaps it wants still some new addition, in order to make it answer fully the phaenomenon, which we here examine" (189-90).[15] Additions ever wanting, we ever rededicate ourselves to expanding the discursive edifice our forerunners have built up in hope of explaining the effects of art.

Notes

1 See the discussion of the seemingly vengeful statue of Mitys in *Poetics* 9 (1452a).
2 Here and elsewhere, emphasis is always in the original text.
3 All the relevant passages from Coleridge's oeuvre are exhumed already in the first scholarly article on the suspension of disbelief (see Morrill, 1927, 436-44). For the purposes of this chapter, 1 will not attempt to differentiate between belief in literature read from belief in drama performed. The fact is that Coleridge's treatment both suggests and erases medium specificity, and in this, Coleridge doesn't differ appreciably from the Aristotelian tradition he inherits.

4 It bears noting that these belief idioms circulate alongside (and sometimes intersect with) idioms of passionate contagion and identification: all are ways of grappling with the various ways we can be "hooked"—to use Rita Felski's term—by art (Felski, 2020).

5 In his *Poetica d'Aristotele vulgarizzata e sposta* of 1570, Luigi Castelvetro lays down similar rules.

6 "We cannot imagine a king who did not exist, nor attribute any action to him" (quoted in Weinberg, 1961, 504).

7 Chapelain was responding to an earlier text in which the aging playwright Alexandre Hardy rejected the increasingly modish Aristotelian constraints; see Chapelin, 2007, 66.

8 For further remarks on the poetological difficulties posed by the marvelous and the gothic, see Paige, 2011, 174-79, 188-96.

9 In an interesting echo of Coleridge's marginalia to Knight, Twining goes on to maintain that the syllogism identified by Aristotle makes it so that the reader *"feels* the truth of the premises" (486). As an aside, Twining appears to have been the first to intensively use the expression "dramatic illusion."

10 It is commonly held that the willed nature of our involvement is an innovation that Coleridge developed from A. W. Schlegel, who spoke of "voluntary surrender": "no other critic before Coleridge [save Schlegel] had expressed the idea that the submission to illusion is voluntary" (Morrill, 1927, 441 n13). But Twining's language suggests that the drift toward "willingness" may not have any need for a specifically Romantic imagination. Already in 1668, John Dryden had written of "the belief of fiction" as follows: "reason suffers itself to be so hood-wink'd [...] but it is never so wholly made a captive, as to be drawn head-long into a perswasion of those things which are most remote from probability: 'tis in that case a free-born subject, not a slave; it will contribute willingly its assent, as far as it sees convenient, but will not be forc'd" (Dryden, 1966, 18). While one critic has called this an "early and striking statement of the phenomenon Coleridge would call the 'willing suspension of disbelief'" (Carlson, 1984, 115), it might be more accurately said to be a then-idiosyncratic slant on neoclassical belief talk.

11 Saintsbury says explicitly that although the willing suspension of disbelief "derives of course from Aristotle, [...] the advance on the original is immense" (3:208nl).

12 Another scholar in this field has argued for rewriting the phrase as "the willing construction of disbelief" (Gerrig, 1993,240).

13 "The basic rule of dealing with a work of fiction is that the reader must tacitly accept a fictional agreement, which Coleridge calls 'the suspension of disbelief,'" writes Umberto Eco, thus quietly grafting onto Coleridge the idiom of "contract," doubtless of much more recent facture (Eco, 1994, 75). Paul Ricoeur's use of the phrase is also mediated by the idea of a contract (sec Ricoeur, 1985, 271).

14 Gregory Currie, whose theory of fiction also privileges make-believe over belief, offers a gloss on Coleridge: "'the willing suspension of disbelief' is best understood as an operation of the mind whereby we suppress our *occurrent* disbelief in the story" (Currie, 1990, 8n9). Both Walton and Currie are content to leave the phrase unattributed.

15 Fontenelle's *Réflexions sur la poétique*, which Hume is commenting, were published in 1747 but probably written in the late 1690s.

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