

**COLERIDGE'S NOTION OF THE WILLING SUSPENSION  
OF DISBELIEF: THE CASE OF *THE RIME OF THE ANCIENT  
MARINER***

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***Abstract:** In order to approach the question of aesthetic illusion in poetry and stage performance, the paper centers on Samuel Coleridge's view of imagination by providing an interpretation of one of his most important poems, The Rime of the Ancient Mariner. The poem offers a unique platform for examining what Coleridge defines as "the willing suspension of disbelief", the phrase thought to be the poet's most important critical formulation.*

***Keywords:** aesthetic illusion, dramatic illusion, Samuel Coleridge, willing suspension of disbelief*

## **1. Introduction**

The notion of dramatic illusion and the phrase "the willing suspension of disbelief" in both audience's and readers' perception of art and literature is one of the key elements of Samuel Taylor Coleridge's critical work. McFarland (1990: 337) deems the phrase "undoubtedly the single most famous critical formulation in all of English literature", which "penetrates to the very heart of the psychology of aesthetic illusion". The idea has been further developed, occupying a significant place while treated and redefined in manifold ways. In one of Coleridge's notes called *Progress of the Drama*, which he wrote as part of his preparation for lectures, Coleridge also refers to it as "temporary half-faith" (Morrill 1927: 437), "the suspension of the act of comparison", "negative belief" (Fogle 1960: 36), while Morrill calls it "the suspension of the judicial power" (Morrill 1927: 438). Brinker (1977: 194) talks about it as of "a situation of psychological concentration on the art-engendered imaginary object which makes the viewer behave in a manner which is reminiscent, at least partially, of the behavior toward real objects". In Elam's *Semiotics of Theatre and Drama*, in the chapter that deals with the "possible worlds" of drama and the relation that is established between the hypothetical/imaginary world of drama and the actual world of the audience, the notion of disbelief is introduced as "the spectator's awareness of the *counterfactual* standing of the drama, which permits him to judge and enjoy what is represented according to less literal standards" (Elam 2002: 93). In the fourteenth chapter of his *Biografia Literaria*, Coleridge offers a definition of the poetic faith as the "willing suspension of disbelief for the moment", the means of allowing the artist, actor or a poet a possibility to communicate the message intended in the given work in a less realistic context that is still necessary for the poetic effect (Coleridge 2004, *Project*

*Gutenberg*). In order to be able to adequately approach the question of dramatic illusion and the willing suspension of disbelief, my essay will tackle Coleridge's synthetic understanding of two opposing positions on the perception of both stage performance and poetry, which highly influenced him, and will situate it in the wider context of the poet's view of imagination, by providing an example from his opus, more precisely from a close reading of one of his most important poems, *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*.

## 2. The willing suspension of disbelief in literature and drama

Fogle (1960: 37) sees Coleridge's theory of the willful suspension of disbelief as "a reconciliation of or mean between the two opposite views of the French neo-classics and Johnson" and goes on to emphasize that it "is highly characteristic, for Coleridge's habitual dialectic is a demonstration of relationships between apparent disparates. While carefully maintaining necessary distinctions, he seeks to establish the essential unity of many concepts usually regarded as separate". Fogle's essay "Coleridge on Dramatic Illusion" brings attention to the two contrasting views of stage illusion put forward by Coleridge: that of the French critics and poets of neo-classicism on the one hand, and of Dr. Samuel Johnston's on the other. The French neoclassicists held the opinion that dramatic illusion was an actual illusion, where the unities of time, place and action, strictly observed by the French, were derived from the "doctrine of literal delusion" (Fogle 1960: 33); in other words, it is the theory according to which the audience believes the developments on the stage to be real life events. In opposition to that, Dr. Johnston maintains that no audience is ever deceived and led to believe that a stage performance is something that might be perceived as real, and that the "spectator understood that he was viewing a presentation of fictional events and judged it according to its adherence to sound morality, logical probability, and general human nature" (ibid.).

Defining the willing suspension of disbelief, Coleridge found the middle ground for these two opposing views of the artistic and literary reception; he claims in his theory that it is not *delusion* that is in question here, but rather *illusion* that creates what Coleridge called "poetic faith", which, to a great extent, sustains itself on the will of the audience to believe in order to allow themselves to have a full experience of what the author and the performers are seeking to convey. McFarland (1990: 337) points out that "aesthetic illusion never refers to our being tricked; it rather refers to our accepting something as true that we know not to be true"; along the same line, Brinker (1977: 191), interpreting Ernst Gombrich's views in his *Art and Illusion*, says it "should be regarded as a faithful representation of reality, namely, one which creates an impression of total resemblance to it." In the light of Coleridge's attempt to synthesize the two opposing notions, we can say that the willing suspension of disbelief could be defined as willful fallacy on the part of spectators/readers/audience, who neither lose touch with reality while engaging with a literary work or stage performance, nor do they allow its realistic impossibility to interfere with aesthetic experience. Instead, they allow themselves to get immersed into the illusion, while suspending the understanding of its impossibility. The impossibility may entail supernatural and fantastic elements, however if they contribute to conveying a universal truth of meaning rather than of facts, that is if they are in that sense probable, they will only

reinforce the suspension of disbelief and the immersion into the world of poetically, if not factually, possible events.

As for the dramatic illusion in the theatrical performance, another concept in close connection is the dialectics produced between the audience and the play, considered as one of the key points of Coleridge's understanding of dramatic illusion. Fogle (1960: 38) states that "Coleridge's doctrine of illusion supposes the audience, or a spectator, the subject; and a play, the object" and that "[t]he immediate purpose of their conjunction is dramatic illusion". Charles Lamb's (1836) essay on stage illusion deals with this subject-object relation, more precisely with the relationship established between actors on the stage (in a comedy or tragedy) as well as the relationship between actors and spectators. Lamb finds the exchange between the stage and the audience very important, as it is this exchange that the dramatic illusion issues from. Lamb (1836: 26), talks about the "degrees of credibility demanded" in the actor's performance of a "mournful or a merry story" marking a slight difference in the degree demanded for a tragedy and for a comedy, and arguing that the degree required for tragedy, unlike that for comedy, must be absolute:

If we suspect the [mournful story] of falsehood of any one title, we reject it altogether. Our tears refuse to flow at a suspected imposition. But a teller of a mirthful tale has latitude allowed him. We are content with less than absolute truth. 'Tis the same with dramatic illusion. (ibid.)

Lamb discusses the actor's ability, whether it be high or low, to render "mortifying" and "pitiable" infirmities of character pleasurable for the spectator in a comedy, through "an inner conviction that they are *being acted* before us; that a likeness only is going on, and not the thing itself" (idem: 25). Fogle (1960: 33-34) quotes Coleridge's words that "we are brought up to this point, as far as it is requisite or desirable, gradually, by the art of the poet and the actors; and with the consent and positive aidance of our own will. We *choose* to be deceived", and further comments on this phenomenon as "a complex attitude in part self-willed, in part created by the skill of the playwright and the actors".

### **3. *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner***

In her essay "Coleridge's Theory of Dramatic Illusion", Morrill (1927: 443) asserts that "[t]he principle of illusion was, of course, applied by Coleridge, not only to explain our attitude toward scenes upon the stage, but to account for our acceptance of ideal or supernatural elements in poetry in general". In Coleridge's poem *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, the reader's disbelief is suspended in an atmosphere of the supernatural, in a world parallel to the *real* world of the poem, which is the joyous and festive occasion of a wedding. Although "[d]eceptively simple at one level", Creed (1960: 215) mentions "a great deal of critical talk [...] spent arguing about just where the richness and the power [of the poem] lie". The Wedding Guest, who at the beginning shows no inclination to even talk to the Mariner, is strangely captivated by his sinister story that absorbs his attention completely. The reader witnesses inexplicable occurrences that succeed themselves in a row – the Mariner's seemingly unmotivated appearance, as if from nowhere, then his unrelenting urge to tell the story that both puzzles and rivets the reader, as well as the Mariner singling out a particular guest at the wedding to tell him the

story. We can argue that the poem features two imaginary layers: the real world of the poem, with the wedding taking place, and the supernatural realm, imaginary to this real world. The reader of the poem interacts with both. Such doubleness provides a unique platform for examining what Coleridge defines as the willing suspension of disbelief, as the poem *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* implies two realities – the reality of the Wedding Guest, who encounters the ancient Mariner who, then, takes the Wedding Guest to the realm of the supernatural through a story the Wedding Guest is so compulsively drawn to hear, and the reality of the reader, who interacts with the Coleridge’s poem with the same degree of captivation as the Wedding Guest does with the ancient Mariner’s tale. The Ancient Mariner, “with his glittering eye”, or “the ‘inward eye’ of the imagination, we may conclude, which sees *really* and not *merely*” (Creed 1960: 220), holds the attention of both audiences with the same intensity:

[...] The Wedding-Guest stood still,  
And listens like a three years’ child:  
The Mariner hath his will.  
[...]  
He cannot choose but hear;

The Ancient Mariner’s glittering eye and the inward eye of Coleridge’s imagination are inviting both audiences, the Wedding Guest and the reader, to go beyond the rational in their perception and understanding. One of the first reactions that the poetic voice attributes to the Wedding Guest is the impression of the ancient Mariner as nothing more than a “grey-bearded loon”, implying that his appearance is out of place and even offensive, further implying that the story he is so intent upon telling cannot possibly be *of any consequence*. We may identify this detail as a sort of metafictional commentary; just as the imaginary worlds of literature and theater performances may seem inconsequential to anyone rationally approaching the matter of the real and the imaginary, so does, at first, the story of a “grey-bearded loon” seem to strike the unsuspecting Wedding Guest, and literary critics too - it is interesting to note that in his essay “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner: A Rereading”, Creed (1960: 217) cites I. A. Richards and his 1950 work *The Portable Coleridge* that sees the “absence of a moral or intellectual core” in the poem, suggesting that “the more comprehending parts of our minds should go to sleep” while we read. And yet, the more imaginary parts of our minds become fully engaged. The eerie presence of the Mariner and his story, progressive in its intensity, captures the Wedding Guest’s and reader’s attentions and keeps them suspended until the very end of the poem. After drawing the Wedding Guest’s attention, the Mariner’s ghostly, oneiric story begins only to be paused shortly afterwards; the poetic voice abruptly interrupts the trance which both the Wedding Guest and the reader seem to be sliding into, with:

The Wedding-Guest here beat his breast,  
For he heard the loud bassoon.  
[...]  
The Wedding-Guest he beat his breast,  
Yet he cannot choose but hear;

The interruptions are predominantly executed by the Wedding Guest, with his repetitive reactions of surprise and horror, such as in the first lines of Part 4: “I

fear thee, ancient Mariner! / I fear thy skinny hand!” The Wedding Guest’s sudden reactions stir the reader from the trance that sustains itself upon the Mariner’s rime. In the essay focusing on the willing suspension of disbelief in Coleridge and its application in the works of Poe, McGann (2004: 727) quotes Coleridge’s view of his own poetic work as an endeavor “to procure for [the] shadows of [his] imagination that willing suspension of disbelief for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith.” Coleridge talks about his poetry as shadows in a way that implies that the spectator/reader knows the shadows’ authenticity needs to remain unquestioned for a certain period, so that “poetic faith” can be constituted. Every time the Wedding Guest unexpectedly utters “I fear thee, ancient Mariner”, the utterance reinforces a *disbelief* issuing from the ominous elements of the Mariner’s story. The presence of the supernatural repels, and, at the same time, compels the Wedding Guest as well as the reader of *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* to listen – they are repelled by disbelief, but also compelled by the poetic force of the Mariner’s tale that suspends their disbelief. The “poetic faith” is thereby created at both levels, in the imaginary realm of the Wedding Guest’s and Mariner’s reality and the reality of the reader engaging with the poem.

As the poem develops, we are introduced to the consequences of a moment of ancient Mariner’s inexplicable irrationality when killing an albatross, ultimately leading to a state of loneliness issuing from his actions. We are not presented with reasonable grounds for the Mariner’s murderous act. The poem’s structure leads to a gradual rise of tension and suspense, entangling both the Wedding Guest and the reader in a net of unexpected, dreamlike occurrences that are supernatural in its substance, but are in every respect “harmonious and in keeping” (Fogle 1960: 43), thus creating a basis for a context in which disbelief in the fantastic can be suspended. The ancient Mariner’s rime depicts events that develop as if they were being produced at some feverish, subliminal level of dreams, and comparison to dreams is a concept Coleridge uses in his critical approach to the willing suspension of disbelief. Commenting on this idea in Coleridge’s critical work and referring particularly to its application in the context of theater, Morrill says:

In a word, then, the state of mind of an audience in the theater is likened to the condition of the mind in a dream. Dramatic illusion consists in our being placed for the time being, as it were, in a dream in which we take no account of space or time. All that is necessary for the dramatic poet is that he be able to carry us with him throughout the course of his action, and that he make clear to us the sequence of cause and effect (Morrill 1927: 440).

In his story, the Mariner refers repeatedly to dreams and dreaming, for instance, “But swift as dreams, myself I found / Within the Pilot’s boat”, as well as to nightmarish visions in which he speaks about “the slimy things” that “crawl with legs / Upon the slimy sea” that he, out of his mind, “blessed [them] unaware”, about “Four times fifty living men” that “With heavy thump, a lifeless lump, [they] dropped down one by one”, about “The dead men” who

[...] groaned, stirred, [they] all uprose,  
Nor spake, nor moved their eyes;  
It had been strange, even in a dream,  
To have those dead men rise.

The poet equally introduces several powerful images of despair and inner torture bordering with insanity:

The many men, so beautiful!  
 And they all dead did lie;  
 And a thousand thousand slimy things  
 Lived on; and so did I.

Towards to the end of Part 2 of the poem, “the Spirit” is mentioned in a context of dreams, in which some of the sailors claim to see it:

And some in dreams assured were  
 Of the Spirit that plagued us so;  
 Nine fathom deep he had followed us  
 From the land of mist and snow.

Also, the Mariner refers to himself at one point as to “a blessed ghost”, with death and sleep present in the same image. In his defense of the idea that “[c]ontrary to the opinion of the vulgar, the unusual is not of itself unnatural” (Fogle 1960: 41), Coleridge refers to the case of Hamlet and the apparition of the Ghost in Shakespeare’s play, and the disposition of the character of Hamlet “to escape from his own feelings of the overwhelming and supernatural by a wild transition to the ludicrous, - a sort of cunning bravado, bordering on the heights of delirium” (Coleridge qtd. in Fogle 1960: 41). This is one of the moments where the impossible is intensified to the extreme, by means of which, as Coleridge argues, the illusion itself is further intensified.

#### 4. Conclusion

Discussing Coleridge’s understanding of the *willing suspension of disbelief*, McFarland (1990: 337) points to “the almost incredible resonance of this phrase, from Plato to T. S. Eliot”, which “lives immortally and reverberates endlessly, because it exactly formulates and provides basis for, not just the efforts of playwrights, but all the achievements of culture itself”. In the cases where a work of art exceeds the limits of what is perceived as realistic, Coleridge argues that it is in the *supernatural* and not the *unnatural* where the spectator’s or the reader’s capacity of recognizing logical patterns lies. It is the dreamlike quality that makes the reader disbelieve, but its poetic force rivets the reader until the end. The illusion of the supernatural is reinforced, the improbability heightened, and the audience, although aware that what is presented does not belong to the domain of the real, arrests their rational judgment; identifying the domain as probable, although not possible, the willing suspension of disbelief allows the poetic message to be fully communicated.

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