

# “Suspension of disbelief” vs. “Secondary Belief”: fictional worlds in Coleridge e Tolkien

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## Abstract

This article aims to analyse S.T. Coleridge’s theory of suspension of disbelief and poetic faith, which seems to overshadow a conception of the literary work as displaying a “separate universe” capable of reconfiguring the experience of everyday reality. This theory, particularly through the mediation of Owen Barfield, exerts a considerable influence on J.R.R. Tolkien’s essay *On Fairy-stories*, which enters subtle controversy with Coleridge and opposes and opposes the suspension of disbelief with his “Secondary Belief”. The difference between the two authors can shed light on dissimilar conceptions of the ontological status of the fictional worlds.

## Keywords

Fictional worlds, Suspension of disbelief, Poetic faith, Secondary Worlds, Secondary Belief

# "Suspension of disbelief" vs. "Secondary Belief": fictional worlds in Coleridge e Tolkien

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## Introduction

In the last decades, literary studies have developed the idea of literature as a creation of fictional worlds, to the point that much of the attention has shifted from the concept, hitherto considered fundamental, of "story" to that of "narrative world" endowed with the potential generate stories<sup>1</sup>. Fictional worlds – a particular typology of the possible worlds already theorized by modal logic, philosophy, historiography, and natural sciences – are «aesthetic artifacts constructed, preserved, and circulating in the medium of fictional texts» (Doležel 1998: 16). They are untied from the categories of verisimilitude or plausibility and open to the perspective of different orders of reality endowed with distinct ontological, logical, and semantic statutes that act on each other.

From this point of view, it seems useful to compare the new theoretical acquisitions of literary studies with S.T. Coleridge's theory of suspension of disbelief, which has been defined «the single most famous critical formulation in all of English literature» (McFarland 1987: 118). This theoretical construction suggests a conception of the literary work as displaying a "separate universe". Furthermore, it exerts considerable influence on J.R.R. Tolkien, who however criticizes it in the essay *On Fairy-Stories* and opposes it with his own theory of "Secondary Belief".

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<sup>1</sup> See Doležel 1998, Pavel 1986.

## Coleridge: from suspension of disbelief to poetic faith

### Suspension of disbelief and the critics

The concept of suspension of disbelief has achieved a success even disproportionate if compared to the concision of its enunciation. However, transiting «from high intellectual discourse to pop culture» (Tomko 2016: 1), it has suffered an inevitable trivialization. Even in the academia, it has been taken up mostly by neglecting the underlying literary and philosophical thought of the author which, according to some scholars, would constitute an irrelevant subject and even an obstacle to its comprehension<sup>2</sup>. Thus, it is necessary to return to Coleridge's formulation in *Biographia Literaria* (1817). First, it should be noted that this text, although offering many glimpses on the author's mature thought, does not present a comprehensive illustration of his literary theory. In fact, its most speculative chapters (XII and XIII) are interrupted with a «letter from a friend» who advises Coleridge to reserve this matter «for [his] announced treatises on the Logos or communicative intellect in Man and Deity» (Coleridge 1983 I: 302) which has never been written. After this interruption, the author (XIV) delves into the genesis of the *Lyrical Ballads*:

it was agreed [with William Wordsworth], that my endeavours should be directed to persons and characters supernatural, or at least romantic; yet so as to transfer from our inward nature a human interest and a semblance of truth sufficient to procure for these shadows of imagination that willing suspension of disbelief for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith. (Coleridge 1983 II: 6)

Valid attempts have been made to reconstruct the background of Coleridge's formulation. For example, Chandler (1996) has hypothesized a model in Cicero's *Academica*<sup>3</sup>, where an «adsensionis retentio» (II, xviii, 59) is mentioned. However, this expression refers to the practice of the sceptical philosophers to suspend their judgments on non-evident matters about physical phenomena, while Coleridge talks about the readers' attitude towards the literary work.

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<sup>2</sup> Cfr. Richards 1960: 10.

<sup>3</sup> This text was certainly known to Coleridge through the English translation of J.J. Brucker's *Historia critica philosophiæ* (1747-1756). See Whalley 1949.

Among twentieth-century scholars, Griggs explains the suspension of disbelief in these terms:

The "willing suspension of disbelief" or "dramatic illusion" describes a state of mind in which the reader or spectator voluntarily relinquishes his usual propensity to judge in terms of possibility and reality. Whatever is presented to him must seem, therefore, to be probable while it is before him. Such a suspension of the will and comparative power, however, presupposes a state of excitement induced by the poet and must be won gradually and sustained by his art and craftsmanship. (1945: 279)

This interpretation does not add much, but it hits the mark by pinpointing the object of the suspension in the reader's aptitude to evaluate the literary work in terms of *probability*. Unfortunately, much of the subsequent criticism has focused on the concept more in an ideological than theoretical sense. For example, Richards asserts that the modern scientific knowledge has weakened the «pseudo-statements» of pre-modern poetry «about God, about the universe, about human nature, the relations of mind to mind, about the soul, its rank and destiny» (1926: 60) and prescribes a version of the suspension of disbelief in which «we cut our pseudo-statements free from belief, and yet retain them, in this released state, as the main instruments by which we order our attitudes to one another and to the world» (*Ibid.*: 61). On the other hand, Abrams claims that the readers «suspend [their] disbelief so as to go along in imagination with express judgments and doctrines from which [they] would ordinarily dissent» (1958: viii). In these cases, however, the suspension of disbelief appears only as a quite patronising compliance of the modern, "shrewd" readers towards the outdated, "naïve" author. Even clearer objections come from the New Historicism, whose exponents maintain that Coleridge's formulation would prevent the readers from relating to the literary work with a "vigilant" approach. However, the idea that the readers should assume a «critical vantage» (McGann 1983: 12) to unmask the author's ideology or an «ironic credulity» (Gallagher – Greenblatt 2000: 346) to enter a «passive mode without risk» (*Ibid.*: 348) seems to propose a postmodern version of the suspension of disbelief as a sort of "defensive scepticism".

The analysis of Monta is more oriented on theory: focusing on *disbelief* as the negation of *belief*, she points out the lack of a positive quality in Coleridge's formulation, which would therefore indicate the readers'

«temporary willingness *not* to disbelief», that is, a suspension of everyone's normal condition of «quotidian skepticism» (2011: 115). Coleridge's formulation would therefore be less comprehensive than the «imaginary commitment» elicited, for example, by Shakespearean theatre, which appeals to the spectators' imaginative capacity to fill the intrinsic deficiencies of the representation (just think of *Henry V*, Prol., 23: «Piece out our imperfections with your thoughts», or *The Winter's Tale*, V, 5,3 in which Paulina tells the bystanders «It is requir'd / You do awake your faith»). Therefore, the limit of the suspension of disbelief should be seen in the fact that it constitutes a «*via media*» (McCoy 2013: 16) between the full aesthetic participation and the scepticism. In conclusion, Coleridge would be incapable of granting literature a status that does not depend on a double negation: “*not to disbelieve*”.

### Suspension of disbelief in the light of Coleridge's thought

Upon closer inspection, an essential contribution to understanding the suspension of disbelief comes from Coleridge himself. In a letter from 1816, in fact, the author illustrates a *Theory of Stage Illusion* that is

equally distant from the absurd notion of the French Critics, who ground their principles on the presumption of an absolute *Delusion*, and of Dr [Samuel] Johnson who would persuade us that our Judgements are as broad awake during the most masterly representation of the deepest scenes of Othello, as a philosopher would be during the exhibition of a Magic Lanthorn. (Coleridge 1956-71 IV: 642)

According to Coleridge, the «French Critics» (such as Boileau and Corneille) presuppose the need for the theatre to achieve a complete *delusion* of the spectator; on the contrary, Johnson maintains that the spectators are always aware that what happens in front of them is just a fiction. Coleridge credits Johnson with having dismantled the rigid theories of French neoclassicism but complains that he left no room for an «intermediate state» between deception and scepticism: *illusion* (1987 II: 265 ff.). Thus, on the one hand, the *mere belief* in the theatrical delusion ensures that the spectators are captivated by the representation but, giving excessive power to the work, remain unable to look through it and reach its deeper meaning («*It only means so and so!*», Coleridge 1972: 44); on the other hand, the *anti-belief* denies the dramatic work any power in the name of an excessive critical detachment and compromises the aesthetic participation of the

spectators themselves («nothing but words», 1969b I: 142)<sup>4</sup>. First and foremost, Coleridge intends to preserve human free will in front of the artistic artifice; therefore, theatre must produce in the spectators «a sort of temporary Half-Faith» that they must support through «a voluntary contribution on [their] own part» (1987 I: 134). The point is the spectators' awareness of being faced with a fiction. This awareness would cause a *delusion* to fail but is necessary for an *illusion* to work: in this case, the spectators choose «to be deceived» (*Ibid.* II: 266).

Not only theatrical representations, however, can achieve such effects. Coleridge also investigates the manifestations of the natural sublime (1956-71 II: 257) and the visions in dreams, which can suspend the «power of comparison» of the mind (i.e., its ability to judge between real and unreal) and absorb the consciousness. The literary impact of these experiences is of particular interest:

Our state while we are dreaming differs from that in which we are in the perusal of a deeply interesting novel in the degree rather than in the Kind. (Coleridge 1980-2001 IV: 781)

The picture is becoming clearer, but so far only the suspension of disbelief has been analysed, leaving aside the poetic faith alluded to in *Biographia Literaria*. It must be noted that critics have mostly considered the two concepts as equivalent. McCoy, for example, prefers to deal with poetic faith but does not distinguish it from suspension of disbelief and states that it is «conditional, tentative, and skeptical» (2013: 4) in opposition to religious faith. It goes without saying that confusing the two concepts and delivering a "secularized" version of Coleridge<sup>5</sup> gives no reward. Not to mention that McCoy is unable to elude the double negation: his version of the poetic faith results in a "not faithlessness" which brings the question back at the start.

It is necessary to follow Coleridge's formulation more precisely. In fact, when he states that the willing suspension of disbelief «constitutes poetic faith», he does not seem to imply that it *is* but rather that it *gives shape* to poetic faith. Therefore, the difference between the two concepts can only be understood by reflecting on some fundamental notions of Coleridge's thought. The author counters the empiricist associationism that the mind

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<sup>4</sup> On *mere belief* and *anti-belief* see Tomko 2016: 91.

<sup>5</sup> On Coleridge's theology see Muirhead 1930, Abrams 1971, Hedley 2000.

is not a passive recorder of the data provided by the senses («a lazy Looker-on on an external World», 1956-71 II: 709). He rather follows Christian Platonism (Cudworth) and Idealism (Kant, Schelling) in differentiating the *empirical knowledge*, in which «we think of ourselves as separated beings, and place nature in antithesis to the mind, as object to subject, thing to thought, death to life», and the *intuition of things*, «which arises when we possess ourselves, as one with the whole» (1969b I: 520). Therefore, the deepest form of knowledge «rests on the coincidence of an object with a subject» (1983 I: 252). As Hill notes,

The germinal potency of Coleridge's theory of Imagination lies in his rejection of passive perception, his recognition of perception as integrative, poietic, and necessarily correlative with feeling, and his understanding that the poetic Imagination grows out of a seamless bond between perception, memory, association, feeling, intellect, and a sense of language as being in some way autonomous. (1978: 3)

From this assumption, Coleridge makes a further distinction between two forms of imagination. *Primary Imagination* is «the living power and prime agent of all human perception, and as a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM» (1983 I: 304). Being present in all men, it connects sensitivity and intellect and orders, modifies, and unites perceptions, images, feelings, and ideas, allowing the mind to penetrate the identity between object and subject and to grasp the symbolic signs of divinity in Nature. *Secondary Imagination* is «an echo of the former, co-existing with the conscious will, yet still as identical with the primary in the kind of its agency, and differing only in degree, and in the mode of its operation» (*Ibid.*). Being voluntary and conscious, it is not equally distributed among men and appears particularly developed in poets. In fact, it «dissolves, diffuses, dissipates» the reality «in order to recreate» (*Ibid.*) it in a way radically different from common experience<sup>6</sup>. As Jonathan Wordsworth notes,

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<sup>6</sup> Primary and Secondary Imagination differ from *Fancy*, which is «no other than a mode of memory emancipated from the order of time and space while it is blended with, and modified by that empirical phenomenon of the will, which we express by the word Choice» (Coleridge 1983 I: 305). The author criticizes the 18th century theories – expressed for example in Johnson's *Dictionary of the English Language* (1755) – which tended to identify Imagination and Fantasy.

The primary imagination at its highest is the supreme human achievement of oneness with God; the secondary, though limited by comparison, contains the hope that *in the act of writing* the poet may attain to a similar power. (1985: 50)

Then, Coleridge examines the activities of *Reason* and *Intellect*, both connected to Imagination. His reprise of Kant's categories of *Vernunft* and *Verstand* implies their rereading *sub specie theologiae*<sup>7</sup>. As in the German philosopher, Intellect is the faculty that discursively organizes the sense-data and then judges, compares, and classifies them; but Reason is raised by Coleridge to a spiritual principle through which man can reach the intellection of Ideas in the divine mind. In this sense, it tends to coincide with faith, which the author considers «the Synthesis of the Reason and the Individual Will» (1969a II: 844). As Tomko notes,

By aligning "Faith" with the "form of reason itself", Coleridge's system continues to accrue attributes to this faculty, which should be seen as holistic, active, illuminating, intuitive, and elevated. [...] Coleridge asserts that this is an animating faculty, which gives life or spirit to the raw material of existence. As such, it mirrors the divine on the human level. (Tomko 2016: 82)<sup>8</sup>

It finally seems possible to make a clearer distinction between the suspension of disbelief and poetic faith. Coleridge opposes *faith* to *unbelief* and *disbelief* to *belief*, the latter consisting in an «absent of the fancy and understanding to certain words and propositions» completely distinct from an «act of Faith» (1980-2001 II: 300). It follows that the suspension of disbelief and poetic faith, far from being equivalent, instead constitute a dyad that

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<sup>7</sup> Cfr. Carlyle 1904: 59 e Wellek 1931: 88. As Tomko (2016: 80) notes: «Apart from their dismissiveness, however, both these critiques are not incorrect in their account of Coleridge's thought. Kant's distinction, theologically remodeled, is both ubiquitous and panacean in Coleridge's philosophy».

<sup>8</sup> This does not imply that Coleridge nullifies reason in faith: «whatever is against right reason, that no faith can oblige us to believe» (1993: 339). For the author, faith is «a total, not partial, a continuous, not a desultory, or occasional, Energy» (1969a II: 844). It is therefore impossible to conclude that with poetic faith he alludes to a "secularized" version of religious faith: «"poetic faith" needs to be more like, perhaps even congruent with, its religious analogue in order to be fully realized» (Tomko 2016: 89).



designates two different modalities of the relationship between the readers and the literary work. The suspension of disbelief, connected exclusively with the Intellect (whose domain is the materiality of the work of art), consists in the momentary and voluntary relaxation of the «power of comparison» and, therefore, in an attitude of «doubting delight» (Tomko 2016: 89) which allows the readers a first and limited access to the fictional world. Only in these terms is it possible to understand it as the «temporary Half-Faith» that Coleridge spoke of regarding theatrical representation and to affirm that it «constitutes» (i.e., *gives shape to*) poetic faith, which is a subsequent and higher way of adhering to the fictional world. Just like religious faith, in fact, poetic faith

entails a robust commitment that engages the whole person. This engagement is not just a confessional belonging or even a doctrinal assent, but an entry into a way of being that illumines and animates. (Tomko 2016: 87)

It becomes clear that poetic faith is much more than any «temporary Half-Faith». To arouse it, however, the literary work must appeal to the readers' imagination. Hence, it must not produce a mere copy of reality, since a total abolition of the difference between the real and the fictional world would break any possibility of illusion («the fiction will appear, and unfortunately not as fictitious but as false», Coleridge 1983 II: 133). Rather, it must re-create reality through symbolic images and, in any case, maintain a certain degree of improbability that keeps the fictional world distinct from reality itself. Herder's idea of the literary work as a «separated universe [*einzelnes Weltall*]»<sup>9</sup> seems to recur here. In this regard, it must be kept in mind that *Biographia Literaria* explicitly ascribes both suspension of disbelief and poetic faith to literary works such as *The Ancient Mariner*, *The Dark Ladie* and *Christabel*, where the «supernatural, or at least romantic» elements separate the real and fictional world by delegating the latter to an oneiric and alogical dimension, where surprise and estrangement count more than anything else<sup>10</sup>. With respect to this, only through an «act of Faith» will the readers be able to start a hermeneutic process based on participation in the emotions (*Sympathy*) of the author, who is indeed the «Deus minor in his work» (1957-2002 II : 2326) but requires a «friend»

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<sup>9</sup> Cfr. Herder 1984: 540.

<sup>10</sup> Cfr. Simonelli 2015: 136.

(*Ibid.* III: 3325) or a «fellow labourer» (1969b I: 21) who collaborates with him in artistic creation.

In this way, the readers should follow *in reverse* the pathway of the author: the latter perceives the multiplicity of the world (Intellect), intuits its unity and through this comes to the contemplation of the Ideas in the divine mind (Reason), then returns these Ideas in the symbolic form of the re-created fictional world (Secondary Imagination); on their hand, thanks to the poetic faith, the readers can move from the literary work to the Ideas and the perception of the unity of the world, reconfiguring their own way of seeing reality.

### ***A trait d'union between Coleridge and Tolkien: Owen Barfield***

#### **Barfield's theory on thought, language, and myth**

Before discussing Tolkien's criticism of Coleridge's theory, it is necessary to briefly deal with Owen Barfield, who in more than one way constitutes the *trait d'union* between the two authors. In fact, Barfield was a close friend of Tolkien and participated for several years in the meetings of the literary discussion group known as the Inklings<sup>11</sup>: there he expounded his theories on thought, language, and myth and influenced many of its members with them, above all Tolkien himself and C.S. Lewis.

Barfield's theory is strongly linked to Coleridge's thought and, by summarizing it with the results of German Comparative Philology, draws the idea that the phenomena of the world are essentially brought into being by the subject through consciousness and language. Starting from these assumptions, Barfield resolutely rejects the theory of Friedrich Max Müller, the founder of Comparative Mythology<sup>12</sup>, who maintained that language was originally made up of etymological "roots" purely perceptive and endowed with simple and effective references, whose meanings would then be extended metaphorically to designate abstract concepts. While not denying the existence of the "roots" or their ancient correlation with the phenomena of the physical world, Barfield disputes that these "roots" were born with exclusively concrete meanings and then took on metaphorical

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<sup>11</sup> See Carpenter 1979.

<sup>12</sup> On Müller and the philology of his time see Davis - Nicholls 2018.

ones. If anything, they contained *ab origine* «a potential rather than an actual meaning» (Barfield 1984: 124) and must be considered as “semantic potentialities”, since «the poetic, and apparently ‘metaphorical’ values were latent in meaning from the beginning» (2010: 77 ff.).

This brings to the question of myths. While Müller disqualified them as the result of a misunderstanding of the metaphorical meanings that the “roots” have assumed over time («Mythology [...] is in truth a disease of language», 2013: 11), Barfield refers to Coleridge’s thought and to the theories of the *mytische Schule* of Göttingen and maintains that myths were “tools” used by ancient humanity – still incapable of abstract thought but endowed with imagination – to interpret reality and symbolically express elevated truths. Barfield counters Müller that myth is intimately linked to the ancient unity between perception of the world and language:

Mythology is the ghost of concrete meaning. Connections between discrete phenomena, connections which are now apprehended as metaphor, were once perceived as immediate realities. As such the poet strives, by his own efforts, to see them, and to make others see them, again. (Barfield 2010: 84 ff.)

According to Barfield, therefore, ancient humanity crystallized in myth its intuition of a world with which it felt in unity; a world that included elements that the modern man would define as both natural and supernatural<sup>13</sup>. The early language did not make distinctions between concrete and abstract, between “literal” and “metaphorical” sense: «all diction was literal, giving direct voice to the perception of phenomena and humanity’s intuitive mythic participation in them» (Flieger 2002: 38). However, the development of human consciousness led to a fragmentation of the perception of the world which, in turn, broke the original semantic unity of the “roots” into a multiplicity of separate concepts, with a firm distinction between “literal” and “metaphorical” meanings. In this process Barfield identifies the operation of two opposing principles: the *λογίζεiv*, the intellect which splits unitary meanings into separate concepts (and which, in a diachronic sense, has become predominant) and the *ποιεiv*, the principle of living unity:

Considered subjectively, [this principle] observes the resemblances between things, whereas the first principle marks the differences,

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<sup>13</sup> Cfr. Donald 1991: 267.

is interested in knowing what things *are*, whereas the first discerns what they are not. Accordingly, at a later stage in the evolution of consciousness, we find it operative in individual poets, enabling them (τὸ ποιεῖν) to intuit relationships which their fellows have forgotten – relationships which they must *now* express as metaphor. Reality, once self-evident, and therefore not conceptually experienced, but which can *now* only be reached by an effort of the individual mind – this is what is contained in a true poetic metaphor; and every metaphor is 'true' only in so far as it contains such a reality, or hints at it. (Barfield 2010: 80)

Originally, therefore, the relationship between λόγος and μύθος was not of opposition but of correlation while, over time, it became unbalanced in favour of λόγος. However, ποιεῖν remains virtually accessible to poets of all times who, in creating new metaphors, recover at least in part the radically primordial instance of language.

### Barfield's thought in Tolkien

An echo of Barfield's theories can be heard in Tolkien's early poem *Mythopoeia* (1931), where the author ("Philomythus", myth-lover) counters his friend C.S. Lewis ("Misomythus", myth-hater) that in myths truths can be found even beyond the reach of the intellect:

You look at trees and label them just so,  
(for trees are 'trees', and growing is 'to grow');  
you walk the earth and tread with solemn pace  
one of the many minor globes of Space:  
5 a star's a star, some matter in a ball  
compelled to courses mathematical  
amid the regimented, cold, Inane,  
where destined atoms are each moment slain.

The object of Tolkien's critic is an intellect that (just like Barfield's λογίζεῖν) considers the phenomena of the world as «a set of simple and separate – but easily generalisable – entities distinguished by clear and distinct attributes» (Medcalf 1999: 36). As for Barfield, also for Tolkien man is condemned to not be able to know the actual reality if he does not participate in it *creatively* through poetry and myth:

Yet trees are not 'trees', until so named and seen –  
30 and never were so named, till those had been

who speech's involuted breath unfurled,  
faint echo and dim picture of the world,  
[...]

45 He sees no stars who does not see them first  
of living silver made that sudden burst  
to flame like flowers beneath an ancient song,  
whose very echo after-music long  
has since pursued. There is no firmament,  
50 only a void, unless a jewelled tent  
myth-woven and elf-patterned; and no earth,  
unless the mother's womb whence all have birth.

What emerges, therefore, is the role towards the world that man assumed in remote times (and that could also assume today):

Tolkien's thought is both Barfieldian and, like Barfield's, Coleridgean. All objects, says Coleridge in his *Biographia Literaria*, as objects are essentially dull and dead, and only achieve full existence because there is an echo, in human consciousness, of the creativity of God, Who sees and creates in one act. (Medcalf 1999: 37)

Here, however, Tolkien's thought appears even more radical than Barfield's and very different from Coleridge's. In fact, he states that true Art is not a *re-creation* that aims to imitate God's act of Creation in the separate world of literary fiction, but rather a *sub-creation* that intends to integrate and complete the Creation in the secondary domain of myths and stories. From this point of view, man, although "decayed", has not lost the *power* and the *right* to sub-create:

The heart of man is not compound of lies,  
but draws some wisdom from the only Wise,  
55 and still recalls him. Though now long estranged,  
man is not wholly lost nor wholly changed.  
Dis-graced he may be, yet is not dethroned,  
and keeps the rags of lordship once he owned,  
his world-dominion by creative act:  
60 not his to worship the great Artefact,  
man, sub-creator, the refracted light  
through whom is splintered from a single White  
to many hues, and endlessly combined  
in living shapes that move from mind to mind.  
65 Though all the crannies of the world we filled

with elves and goblins, though we dared to build  
gods and their houses out of dark and light,  
and sow the seed of dragons, 'twas our right  
(used or misused). The right has not decayed.

<sup>70</sup> We make still by the law in which we're made.<sup>14</sup> (vv. 53-70)

## Tolkien: myth, fairy-stories, and Secondary Worlds

### Fairy-stories and their fictional world

Tolkien's most extensive reflection on these issues is developed in *On Fairy-Stories*: this essay, originally a lecture given by Tolkien at the University of St. Andrews in March 1939, constitutes the «defining study of and the centre-point in his thinking about the genre, as well as being the theoretical basis for his fiction» (Flieger - Anderson 2008: 9). The essay starts from Müller's philological and Andrew Lang's anthropological theories on myths and folklore<sup>15</sup> but appears as distant from one as from the other. Tolkien's approach, although based on Comparative Philology, is primarily aesthetic and moves from the idea that fairy-stories are not «stories about fairies or elves» but rather stories about a fictional world «that is *Faërie*, the realm or state in which fairies have their being» (Tolkien 2008: 32). It follows that a fairy-story does not depend «on any definition or historical account of elf or fairy», but only «upon the nature of *Faërie*» (*Ibid.*). Then, Tolkien explains,

*Faërie* contains many things besides elves and fays, and besides dwarfs, witches, trolls, giants, or dragons: it holds the seas, the sun,

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<sup>14</sup> As Flieger (2002: 43) notes, «Tolkien emphasizes the *right* to sub-create—not just to make, but to make by “the law in which we're made.” The preposition is important; we are not made *by* a law but *in* that law. We are part of it not just products of it. That law is the word, the Logos, the highest expression of Barfield's ancient semantic unity, the whole vision shattered as we have fallen and as our perceptions have fragmented».

<sup>15</sup> In fact, Lang himself disagreed with Müller (see Lang 1884) but «he was not averse to his methods» (Flieger 2005: 22). Furthermore, just as Müller traced the origin of myths in the above-mentioned «disease of language», Lang related them (and fairy-stories too) to rituals and taboo of the “primitive” humanity.

the moon, the sky; and the earth, and all things that are in it: tree and bird, water and stone, wine and bread, and ourselves, mortal men, when we are enchanted. (*Ibid.*)

The deliberate ambiguity of the conclusion alludes to the full aesthetic participation in the fictional world experienced both by the ancient humanity with myths as well as (at least virtually) by today's readers with a literary work. According to Tolkien, "enchantment" is the only possible approach to fairy-stories (and, of course, to fictional worlds in general). On the contrary, philologists and folklorists use fairy-stories «as a quarry from which to dig evidence, or information, about matters in which they are interested» (*Ibid.*: 38) and make themselves incapable of understanding their *effect*, which, for Tolkien, is more important than their *origins*. In fact, the author states that questioning the origin of stories «is to ask what is the origin of language and of the mind» (*Ibid.*)<sup>16</sup>. Interestingly, the relationship between thought, language, and stories is presented as simultaneous and recursive: «the incarnate mind, the tongue, and the tale are in our world coeval» (*Ibid.*: 41). Under this point of view, Tolkien refers to the linguistic theory of Sapir and Whorf, also treated by Barfield<sup>17</sup>, but reinterprets it in an original way: in fact, to explain the relationships between environment, perception, language, and mythmaking, he repropose his own version of G.W. Dasent's<sup>18</sup> allegory of the "Cauldron of Story" and the "Pot of Soup". History, folktale, legend, and myths are all thrown, albeit at different times, into the "Cauldron" and what is served at a given time is a single portion, a *story*. Through this allegory, on the one hand, Tolkien shows the tradition (both oral and literary) of the stories as a living repertoire of disparate sources that change over time: they do not remain "raw" but are transformed by the "cooking", each taking on the taste of the other and giving the "Soup" its "flavour"<sup>19</sup>. On the

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<sup>16</sup> This is one of Tolkien's most long-standing beliefs, as he himself states: «It was just as the 1914 War burst on me that I made the discovery that 'legends' depend on the language to which they belong; but a living language depends equally on the 'legends' which it conveys by tradition. [...] Volapük, Esperanto, Ido, Novial, &c &c are dead, far deader than ancient unused languages, because their authors never invented any Esperanto legends». (Tolkien 1981: 192)

<sup>17</sup> See Whorf 1956 and Sapir 1921, 1983.

<sup>18</sup> Cfr. Dasent 1888: XVIII.

<sup>19</sup> As Seppilli (2011: 314) notes: «Il mito è sollecitato dunque, per la su stessa natura, ad attrarre a sé qualunque episodio che noi diremmo storico, personale o

other hand, he maintains the active role of the story-makers, the "cooks", who «do not dip in the ladle quite blindly» (*Ibid.*: 47). Their selection of the "ingredients" is fundamental and ultimately depends on the pure literary value of the stories themselves:

The ancient elements can be knocked out, or forgotten and dropped out, or replaced by other ingredients with the greatest ease: as any comparison of a story with closely related variants will show. The things that are there must often have been retained (or inserted) because the oral narrators, instinctively or consciously, felt their literary 'significance'. (*Ibid.*: 49)

Hence, even if one wanted to agree with Lang's anthropological approach and trace the invention of myths and fairy-stories to a narrative explanation of ancient rituals or taboo, things would not change, as myths and fairy-stories acquire their form and eventually survive in time only because of their narrative values<sup>20</sup>.

It seems that, after an initial dependence on Barfield's theories, Tolkien's reflection on language and stories becomes clarified in the light of G.K. Chesterton's thought: in *On Fairy-Stories* an echo can be heard of the introduction, written by Maisie Ward, to *The Coloured Lands* (1938), in which the idea is expressed that «in storytelling we co-operate with God in the enrichment of creation» (Edwards 2014: 225)<sup>21</sup>. The stories and their fictional worlds, therefore, do not re-create reality (as Coleridge would like) but rather fill the gaps, the "blank spaces" in reality itself, giving it meaning.

## Tolkien's controversy with Coleridge

*On fairy-stories* progressively shifts the focus from Barfield to Coleridge to enter a subtle controversy with his literary theory. Contrary

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sociale che sia, e che in qualche modo vi corrisponda. Ne segue che ogni episodio storico tenderà a definirsi secondo i motivi del mito, trasformandosi in tal guisa, ma, naturalmente, a sua volta esercitando una qualche azione trasformatrice sulle forme del mito stesso».

<sup>20</sup> Cfr. Seppilli 1962: 266 ff. and 302.

<sup>21</sup> Strangely, in the essay Tolkien does not mention Chesterton's *Orthodoxy*, where the idea is expressed that fairy-stories exist «to echo an almost pre-natal leap of interest and amazement. These tales say that apples were golden only to refresh the forgotten moment when we found that they were green» (1986, p. 257).



to him, in fact, Tolkien maintains that a story dealing with marvels must present itself as “true”: therefore, «it cannot tolerate any frame or machinery suggesting that the whole story in which they occur is a figment or illusion» (*Ibid.*: 35). In the case of the *Ancient Mariner*, for example, the «frame» is “the story-within-the-story” structure of the poem, which presents the supernatural element *de relato*: this leaves the readers uncertain whether the «ghastly tale» is “real” or just a hallucination of the protagonist or, to put it better, it “frees” them from the need to choose between one possibility and the other. On the contrary, Tolkien maintains that Art must not differentiate the fictional worlds from the real one only by introducing a certain degree of improbability in them. The story-maker is not a «Deus minor in his work» but, as said, a sub-creator; hence, his power is more demiurgic than purely creative and does not directly affect what Tolkien calls the *Primary World* (i.e., actual reality); rather, it gives life to a *Secondary World* capable of inducing in the reader neither Coleridge’s suspension of disbelief nor poetic faith but rather a *Secondary* or *Literary Belief* similar in the modality of its operation, but not in the degree nor in the object, to the *Primary Belief* addressed to the Primary World, the Creation of God. Inside the Secondary World, what the sub-creator relates is “true” because «it accords with the laws of that world» (*Ibid.*: 52). Therefore, the reader must not be asked to suspend his disbelief or even to make an «act of Faith»: the moment the disbelief arises, even if only to be suspended, «the spell is broken; the magic, or rather art, has failed. You are then out in the Primary World again, looking at the little abortive Secondary World from outside» (*Ibid.*). In conclusion, the reader must not choose «to be deceived», as Coleridge would like, but rather be “enchanted” by the story and, therefore, believe it to be “true”.

Nonetheless, the Secondary World must possess «the inner consistency of reality» (*Ibid.*: 59). This means, on the one hand, that it must have laws established and made – unlike in Coleridge – “credible” by its author and, on the other, that it must not produce images that are too dissimilar from those of the Primary World:

To make a Secondary World inside which the green sun will be credible, commanding Secondary Belief, will probably require labour and thought, and will certainly demand a special skill, a kind of elvish craft. (*Ibid.*: 61)<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Cfr. Pavel 1986: 49: «The image of Sherlock Holmes drawing square circles

The secondary world, therefore, *derives* from but does not *depend* on the Primary World and, above all, cannot "encroach" on it without suffering a fatal degradation:

In *Macbeth*, when it is read, I find the witches tolerable: they have a narrative function and some hint of dark significance; though they are vulgarised, poor things of their kind. They are almost intolerable in the play. They would be quite intolerable, if I were not fortified by some memory of them as they are in the story as read. I am told that I should feel differently if I had the mind of the period, with its witch-hunts and witch-trials. But that is to say: if I regarded the witches as possible, indeed likely, in the Primary World; in other words, if they ceased to be 'Fantasy'. That argument concedes the point. To be dissolved, or to be degraded, is the likely fate of Fantasy when a dramatist tries to use it, even such a dramatist as Shakespeare. *Macbeth* is indeed a work by a playwright who ought, at least on this occasion, to have written a story, if he had the skill or patience for that art. (*Ibid.*: 62)

Now it is possible to understand how and why Tolkien considers Coleridge's suspension of disbelief as an insufficient formulation. As for Monta, even for Tolkien it can only arise *because of the disbelief* and rely on the readers' effort "*not to disbelieve*"; but, unlike Monta, Tolkien assumes that disbelief does not depend solely on everyone's «quotidian skepticism» but on the inability of the literary work to allow the readers full aesthetic participation. Therefore, suspension of disbelief appears as «a substitute for the genuine thing» (i.e., a full aesthetic experience) and «a subterfuge we use when condescending to games or make-believe, or when trying (more or less willingly) to find what virtue we can in the work of an art that has for us failed» (*Ibid.*: 52). It follows that suspension of disbelief can *only* be exercised when the literary work has already failed its objective,

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undisturbed by geometric constraints is [...] worrisome, since contradictory objects indeed occur in fiction, sometimes only marginally but sometimes centrally, as in Borges' metaphysical stories or in contemporary science fiction. The presence of contradiction effectively prevents us from considering fictional worlds as genuine possible worlds and from reducing the theory of fiction to a Kripkean theory of modality. Contradictory objects nevertheless provide insufficient evidence against the notion of *world*, since nothing prevents the theory of fiction from speaking, as some philosophers do, about impossible or erratic worlds. Contradictory worlds are not so remote as one might expect».

the “enchantment” of the reader. Therefore, it is «somewhat tired, shabby, or sentimental state of mind, and so lean to the ‘adult’» (*Ibid.*: 53). As has been said, Tolkien’s point of view is essentially aesthetic: eventually, what determines the “success” of sub-creation is not some intrinsic criterion of credibility of the literary work but only the degree of aesthetic participation that it is able to arouse in readers: «if they really liked it, for itself, they would not have to suspend disbelief: they would believe» (*Ibid.*). This is particularly consonant with Doležel’s later theorization, according to which «fictional fact is a possible entity authenticated by a felicitous literary speech act» (1998: 146).

If Tolkien considers the suspension of disbelief insufficient, Coleridge’s poetic faith must appear to him even too pretentious. As said, the author cannot be considered a creator in the full sense but a sub-creator who cooperates in Creation. Therefore, the readers cannot be neither forced nor invited to make an «act of Faith», to profess a *credo quia absurdum* sufficient to make them feel “estranged” from the Primary World but not to fully introduce them to the Secondary World. Rather, they must experience through the aesthetic participation an authentic reality in the literary work. This will allow them, moreover, to grasp those truths of which myths and fairy-stories, as sub-creations, «are largely made of», and that «can only be received in this mode» (Tolkien 1981: 125)<sup>23</sup>. Art can (and must) not go further: to accord more than Secondary Belief to the Secondary World, to confuse it with Primary Worlds leads only to delusion.

This does not mean that the power of Art is limited: in fact, stories have an impact, albeit indirect, on the Primary World, their aim being the Recovery or the «regaining of a clear view»: this does not mean «‘seeing things as they are’» but rather «‘seeing things as we are (or were) meant to see them’ – as things apart from ourselves» (Tolkien 2008: 67). With this expression, Tolkien intends to emphasize once for all the ontological difference between the Primary and Secondary World: what belongs to the Primary World exists independently of human consciousness, but stories create Secondary Worlds that complete and imbue the Primary World itself with meaning. Therefore, it seems that between *Mythopoeia* and *On Fairy-Stories* Tolkien has ceased to follow Barfield – and, of course,

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<sup>23</sup> Cfr. *Ibid.*: 193: «I think that fairy story has its own mode of reflecting ‘truth’, different from allegory, or (sustained) satire, or ‘realism’, and in some ways more powerful. But first of all it must succeed just as a tale, excite, please, and even on occasion move, and within its own imagined world be accorded (literary) belief».

Coleridge – in considering that «objects are partly constituted by our awareness of them» (Medcalf 1999: 42). Thanks to the power of Recovery man can be freed «from the drab blur of triteness or familiarity – from possessiveness» (Tolkien 2008: 67) and look at the world with new eyes. In this way, something like Barfield's recovery of semantic unity happens, «but it is not importantly a felt change of consciousness to a more archaic state, rather a recovery of the true "potency of the words and the wonder of the things"» (Medcalf 1999: 44).

## Conclusions

In these pages, an attempt has been made to delve into the literary theories of Coleridge and Tolkien, highlighting their similarities and divergences. The characteristics of Coleridge's re-creation and Tolkien's sub-creation do not only concern a different consideration of the literary work *per se* but, most importantly, also a different conception of the relationships between the literary work and the readers, as well as between the fictional and the real world.

As has been said, Coleridge's aim is to preserve the readers' free will in front of the artistic artifice: this not only implies that they are perfectly aware that the world of the literary work is «fictitious» (nonetheless, Coleridge warns, not «false»), but that they actively and voluntarily collaborate with the author in creating the illusion. In this respect, Coleridge's formulation seems to anticipate many contemporary theories which underline the importance of the readers' contribution not only to the act of reading, but also to the very meaning of the work. Tolkien, differently, speaks of the artistic artifice in terms of an "enchantment" even capable of «commanding Secondary Belief»: this peremptory expression seems to bring out a cogent conception of the literary work, in front of which the readers are apparently granted less freedom and a lesser degree of participation than in Coleridge. It is fundamental, however, to note that the interest that emerges from *On fairy-stories* is essentially aimed at the fictional world and the definition of its ontological status – as Doležal points out, outside formal logic the possible worlds «cannot preserve ontological innocence» (1998: 13) –. Because of this, Tolkien cannot be satisfied with a fiction that re-creates (and partially overlaps, if not confuses, with) the actual reality and, therefore, in a dependence of the fictional world on the real world, at most attenuated by an alienating "frame" or by the presence of «supernatural, or at least romantic» elements. In fact,

in the *Ancient Mariner*, the alethic contrast between natural and supernatural is subordinated to the interpretation of the protagonist's tale: if it is judged "true", one can speak of a separate, fictional world (in which supernatural is possible), if it is judged as the result of a hallucination, one can rather speak of an "intermediate world", that of delirium, which belongs to actual reality.

What Tolkien objects to Coleridge is precisely the lack of a clearcut boundary between the Primary and Secondary World: a boundary which, obviously, does not prevent the presence of "immigrant" or "surrogate" elements of actual reality in the fictional world<sup>24</sup> but, separating one world from the other, guarantees that they are both real in different ontological domains. Tolkien suggests that, due to the lack of this boundary, a confusion arises between the two worlds that risks invalidating both and requires to be "resolved" by the intervention of the readers, who must judge the fictional world in terms of *probability* (i.e. referentiality towards actual reality). This causes, according to Tolkien, the failure of the literary work *per se*. The author maintains that the Secondary World, sub-created by the artist, cannot depend directly on the Primary World, created by God: it should, instead, be distinct from it, possess some sort of reality on his own as well as «a special truth-conditional status» (Doležel 1998: 28), and maintain an intimate internal coherence that allows readers to enter it without effort. Above all, it must not be judged in terms of probability but rather in terms of *reality* and *possibility*: that is, it is "real" in the context of a *non-actualized possibility*. In this respect, Tolkien proposes an intermediate way between *possibilism* (i.e. the actual world *does not have* a different status among possible worlds) and *actualism* (i.e. the actual world *is outside* the system of possible worlds). The Secondary World theorized by the author, on the one hand, holds its own degree of existence but, on the other, does not hold the same ontological status as the Primary World. So much so that Tolkien states, as has been said, that only a Secondary or Literary Belief can be granted to the Secondary World.

Having clearly delineated the boundaries between the two ontological domains, Tolkien can finally focus on the effects that the fruition of the Secondary World has on the Primary World. He, therefore, like Coleridge, intends to preserve the freedom of readers, with the fundamental difference that, in his theory, this freedom is not exercised, so to speak, "upstream", in relation to the literary work and its fictional world, but rather

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<sup>24</sup> Cfr. Pavel 1986: 29 ff.

"downstream", in relation to the Primary World of which a «clear view» has been "recovered".

It follows, in conclusion, that the contrast between the two authors is not only useful for a better understanding of their respective works but can appropriately shed light on the ontological status of the fictional worlds in literature.

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