(1) The idea that the ‘willing suspension of disbelief’ must have some role to play in the analysis of our response to fiction is a familiar one, endorsed in one form or another by a good many people. One of the main points in its favour is, it seems, that it helps us to resolve, or dissolve, a puzzle allegedly raised by that response to fiction: unless disbelief were suspended, we could not avoid the puzzle resulting from being moved by what we do not believe ever really happened or ever existed. I want to suggest, however, that the notion of suspension of disbelief cannot coherently be used to explain or account for our reactions to fictional characters and events, and that in any case it is unnecessary to the solution of the alleged paradox. I take fiction here to cover art works in which a story is told, presented or represented, i.e., novels, short stories, plays, certain kinds of painting and sculpture and dance—any works in fact in connection with which it makes sense to speak of characters appearing and events taking place in them.

(2) The puzzle which suspension of disbelief is called in to resolve must be supposed to arise in this way. In the general context of belief and emotional responses, two things seem uncontroversial: (A) knowing entails believing, and (B) an emotional response presupposes some beliefs (whether true or false) about that to which one responds. (Whatever dispute there may be on point (A) is irrelevant to this discussion.)

Clearly we know of at least some characters in fiction that their counterparts in real life do not exist and never have existed, and that the events in which they are caught up never occurred. And so we must have beliefs to that effect (from A); yet we are, at least sometimes, genuinely moved by these characters and what happens to them, and so it appears (from B) we must hold beliefs that certain people are caught up in certain events—beliefs which are as a matter of fact false. So long, then, as we maintain both (A) and (B) it seems that either we are committed to holding contradictory beliefs about characters and events in fiction or we must deny that we can, logically, be moved by fictional events or characters. That people can hold contradictory beliefs is not of course in itself all that puzzling. But the kind of cases we might think of do not seem to fit here. It would be altogether too unsatisfactory an account of our response to fiction to settle
simply for an account in terms of contradictory beliefs. On the other hand to deny that we can be moved by fictional events flies in the face of what we might call the facts of experience: that sometimes we undoubtedly are deeply moved.

(3) The second alternative certainly has its attractions. It could be argued, for example, that since (A) and (B) are clearly correct, then appearance to the contrary the fact of common experience, that we are sometimes moved by characters and events in fiction, is not a fact, or at least that what ‘being moved by characters and events in fictions’ purports to indicate must be misdescribed: we are not really moved. For whatever the nature of our response to fiction may be, this must be different from the nature of our response to real-life events and people. It is indeed sometimes made a constitutive element in accounts of the correct attitude to works of fiction that the response is different—that we are not, as the phrase goes, ‘personally involved’. In one way this suggestion is platitudinous but unhelpful; in another it is false. No one, presumably, wishes to deny that our response to art has dimensions which are of a different order from our response to life, and vice versa: that is not the point at issue. It is the respects in which our response to art seems to ‘match’ our response to life that concerns us now. It would be pointless to restrict ‘being moved’ to ‘being moved by real life situations’ simply because those dimensional differences exist. So much for the unhelpful aspect of the suggestion. Seen in another way, however, the suggestion might be that when it is said that we are ‘not really moved’ this must be taken to imply that we are under the illusion of being moved. This seems to just be false. The claim here may be that since we know we are dealing with fiction which presents events as if they were happening or had happened, and persons as if they exist or had existed, we are not in fact really moved by them but only behave emotionally as if we were. But whilst this claim leaves (A) and (B) intact in asserting that we are not really moved, presumably because we cannot be, there must surely be something wrong with the redescriptions of the ‘fact’ which amounts to denying that emotional responses to fiction such as anger, horror, fear, dismay, outrage, pity, compassion an joy are possible. Nobody who merely simulates these emotions or believes that we all do so is a party to the present discussion.

(4) What is wrong with the suggestion just canvassed is the idea that our responses to fiction are not what they seem. Perhaps we ought, then, to say that the
response is what it seems—we do react as we seem to—but what this implies is not as it seems. That is to say these emotional responses amount simply to behaving as if we believed in the existence of something when in fact we do not do so. But this gets us nowhere. For what posed our problem is just how we can respond in this way even when the disclaimer is made. That emotions, the ‘emotions of life’ to use Clive Bell’s phrase, are felt is then not an illusion or misrepresentation of the facts: only the belief conditions become problematical. And in that case the alleged puzzle remains.

(5) All the same a person can behave as if something were the case without believing it, and then (supposing he is not acting in that way deliberately) we might say his behaviour is in some way irrational or inappropriate. That would be one account of how we can be moved by fiction and still retain (A) and (B): it is just a psychological fact about ourselves which remains inexplicable at least on the level or rational discourse. For what we are to say now is not that belief is a necessary condition of being moved tout court, but a necessary condition of being moved rationally or appropriately or reasonably. To be moved by fiction is to be moved irrationally, inappropriately or unreasonably.

It is of course a commonplace that people are sometimes prone to fears or premonitions for which they themselves admit to having no reasonable basis in fact. That they should make such admissions and still be prey to the fears and premonitions is, we might say, just what being irrational in these cases amounts to. But there is a large gulf between that sort of case and our response to fiction. I might reasonably try to persuade someone in real life that his fears were somehow groundless or unjustified; and indeed, within the context of a play, for instance, I might reasonably try to persuade someone that his fears with regard to the intentions of one character towards another were also groundless (because, for example, he had misconstrued the way the plot was developing). But it would not be reasonable for me to try to persuade him out of his fears or any of the ‘emotions of life’ which are felt towards characters and events in fiction simply because that is what they are: just characters and events in fiction. Such a response is not, I suggest, a deplorable state of affairs calling for elimination or cure rather than explanation.

(6) So far I have expressed dissatisfaction with a number of accounts of our response to fiction which hope to remove the puzzling element in it: suggestions about
seeing that response in terms of illusory emotions or illusory objects (3); or illusory beliefs (5) or modes of irrational behaviour (5) are equally unsatisfactory. Seen against the background of these kinds of approach, suspension of disbelief in the characters and events which confront us in fiction seems to offer us a prima facie more attractive solution of the puzzle we began with, if not the only one. For if belief, or disbelief, is not suspended, it might be argued, either we cannot genuinely be moved (B) or we hold contradictory beliefs about fictional characters and events.

(7) In discussing this solution we have first of all to resist the temptation, I think, of seeing ‘suspension of disbelief’ simply as confirming that what we are dealing with is an illusion established in fiction. For if the assumption is that ‘suspension of disbelief’ is just another way of saying that we do not believe in what is before us because what is before us is after all ‘only illusion’ then the question of belief and disbelief, suspended or otherwise, cannot arise. Suspension of disbelief, whatever it may amount to in detail, gains plausibility only if we assume that there is a requirement that being genuinely moved presupposes holding beliefs about the objects of such emotions, and the notion of suspension of disbelief meets this requirement. In order to have relevant beliefs, it is said, we must first suspend disbelief. But if we interpret the situation as involving illusion in any case, we just do not believe in the objects and the position is undermined. Equally stultifying is the reading of ‘suspension of disbelief’ as involving mere illusory beliefs (cf. (4)). Resorting to imaginary beliefs with make-believe just round the corner robs the proposition of most of its appeal.

(8) Fiction aside, the situations in which I might ordinarily suspend belief or disbelief in something would be of this kind. I suspend belief in p, say, where I begin to suspect that there is some reason for believing that not-p might be the case. Conversely, suspending disbelief in p might be the consequence of some new evidence which has come to hand for believing that p might after all be the case. Perhaps in such situations it would be more accurate to say that I suspend judgment until swayed one way or the other by the evidence. In any case suspension of disbelief does not ordinary leave knowledge claims (if any) intact: they are clearly suspended too. If I started off believing that I had £5, and this belief was grounded on my knowledge that the purse in my pocket contained that amount, then the suspicion, whilst I am walking in a crowded street, that my pocket
has just been picked makes me not only suspend my belief but also my knowledge claim until I have a chance to investigate. Conversely, my disbelieving that there is a burglar next door since I claim to know that there is nobody in the room (I looked a while ago, and the room was empty) may be suspended on hearing footsteps coming from there; but my knowledge claim too is held in abeyance until I have had another look or until I can clearly locate the footsteps as coming from downstairs.

(9) This completely unmysterious reading of suspending belief or disbelief does not help us when we come to fictional characters and events. For here, apparently, suspending disbelief is supposed to work whilst yet we know that something or other is not the case: a work of fiction, it is alleged, makes us willingly suspend our disbelief in the reality of what is presented. But if this is supposed to be the disbelief entailed by our knowing that we are dealing with fiction and that the characters and events are not real, then we do have a problem: only if I suspend the disbelief in their reality can I reasonably be moved by what happens, and only if I hold on to my knowledge of their non-reality can I avoid becoming the naïve backwoodsman who jumps onto the stage trying to stop the characters in some Jacobean drama, say, from perpetrating their evil designs. The most ardent defender of suspension of disbelief must hang on to the knowledge that he is dealing with fiction, but he has to attach a sense to his formula which does not commit him to the position of knowing something which he does not believe. Unless he wants to give up altogether the view that knowledge entails belief, ‘suspending disbelief’ cannot mean either ‘believing what we know not to be the case’ or ‘not believing what we know to be the case’. Perhaps a solution lies in investigating the entailment claim more closely. What exactly is supposed to be suspended, and what is still entailed by knowing that fictional events and characters are not real?

(10) Is it that although I know when watching a stage performance of Richard III that Richard III is not now ordering the murder of the princes in the Tower, I nevertheless, having suspended disbelief, can believe that Richard III is doing just that? If, that is, I am viewing the events with horror and apprehension, am I believing that Richard is now ordering a murder? But that would naturally be taken to imply that I was in a state of total mental confusion about what is taking place before me. For I certainly do not view with horror and apprehension the prospect of Sir John Guilgud ordering the
murder of two young extras, nor does my reaction betray a belief in the reincarnation of Richard III in Sir John. Taking my genuine horror to presuppose that kind of belief as a consequence of suspending disbelief is clearly absurd.

(11) The use of examples from the stage might be thought unnecessarily to complicate the discussion here, since we have, in addition to the spectator-work relationship, the fiction being played out by actors on the stage. So difficulties are going to arise at more than one level. But drama is the case more often cited when suspension of disbelief is discussed, and it is certainly the area where the problems I am dealing with most strikingly arise in contrast to the reading of a novel or the viewing of a narrative or representational painting. The complexity of the dramatic situation will in any case have to be taken care of in any account one gives.

(12) Amongst the many true beliefs I have when currently watching a performance of *Richard III* is the belief that Richard III is not now alive and engaged in some action; the belief that I am watching a stage play (whether or not I know who it is by); the belief that Sir John Guiltud (or whoever), or some anonymous actor, is now playing the part of Richard III. The second and third of the beliefs no doubt entail the first, and all three are entailed by the knowledge that we are dealing with fiction and presuppose some familiarity with dramatic conventions in some cultural setting. These and other true beliefs of a similar nature can all be expressed, if desired, in terms of disbelief: *i.e.* disbelief that Richard III is now alive, that fifteenth-century events are taking place before us, that the historical King Richard is on a stage, and so on. But if these are the disbeliefs to be suspended, then so far from removing our puzzle it compounds it. For these are all beliefs or disbeliefs which are entailed by what we not only justly *claim* to know, but *must* know in order to have any appropriate response to the work at all. To give up or temporarily set aside these knowledge claims and their entailed beliefs (or disbeliefs) would be to attribute to the observer an attitude so naive or childlike as scarcely to be describable in terms of his being genuinely moved by fictional events and characters in any sense that could seriously engage our attention: he could simply be described as being easily taken in. (And when the delusion is removed, such a person would presumably no longer want to be described as having been genuinely moved at all.) It must be clear, I hope, that these very knowledge claims have to be left
intact for the situation to be properly described as one in which the willing suspension of disbelief could be considered at all as some kind of short-hand explanation or one step in a truncated justificatory argument. But so far I have not been able to give it a sense which escapes logical absurdity, not even one compensating for that by some gain in psychological plausibility.

(13) In case my remarks so far seem unduly laboured, it might be useful to interpolate some remarks about H. H. Price’s treatment of beliefs in aesthetic contexts. ‘It would be generally agreed,’ Price says, ‘that if we are to appreciate a novel or a play there must be what Coleridge calls a ‘willing suspension of disbelief’” (Belief, p.307). He provides no discussion or argument in support of this claim, but apparently thinks it at least an ‘intelligent’ attitude to fiction. But clearly he is not happy with it, no doubt because he feels, though obscurely, the pressure of the puzzle I began with. There are some people, he says, for whom this suspension of disbelief is not enough. That is to say, many people, whom he is inclined to characterize as highly civilized or highly intelligent, are content to suspend disbelief: for them it is sufficient to follow a story with interest and attention, in a neutral state of neither belief nor disbelief, suspended between commitment either way. Other people, however, whom he describes as ‘more naïve or less hard-headed’, find this mere suspension of disbelief ‘too cold and too neutral an attitude’, which detracts from their enjoyment of the story they are reading or the play they are seeing. These people are supposed to be in a state of what he calls ‘half-belief’ which resembles belief but isn’t full belief. Behind this bit of psychology of art, perhaps, is a nod in the direction of aesthetic attitude theories which resolutely exclude ‘interest’ and concern with the emotions of life, and an awareness that this is not in fact how many people respond to art. More importantly, it betrays a conceptual discomfort. Suspension of disbelief, Price must recognize, does not allow for emotional response to art of the kind I am talking about. His ‘intelligent’ attention to fiction precludes being genuinely moved by the characters and events in fiction, and behind such a view must lie the idea that some belief conditions must surely be fulfilled for emotional engagement to be possible (cf. my (B earlier.) But when Price comes to take account of the emotional response to fiction he cannot deal with it except on the level of semi-delusion. Hence it is the more naïve or less hardheaded readers and listeners who get ‘carried away’ by
fictional happenings into a state resembling belief—apparently half-believing that they are really happening here and now, for only in that way can the emotional response be explained. Thus half-belief is not genuine belief, though someone in that state may show ‘the emotional symptoms of belief’, such as being moved to tears. Half-belief is, moreover, tenuous, quickly fading, easily ‘thrown off’ and liable to be overtaken by more normal beliefs or disbeliefs. Since they are neither real beliefs nor real disbeliefs, half-beliefs do not lead to real interference in what is half-believed in. So Price obviously recognizes that real beliefs, however temporarily, in the evens, say, on the stage as now really happening, could hardly be squared with the action-inhibited character of even the most ‘carried-away’ emotional response.

In Price’s account there is nothing to distinguish this psychological state of half-beliefs in aesthetic contexts from the half-belief which, he says, occurs in religious attitudes, superstition or children’s make-believe. The psychological account is the same. Price speaks of half-belief in whatever context as a ‘queer state’: it is a sign of a not fully integrated and fully mature personality; but then, he tells us, none of us is fully integrated or fully mature all the time. Half-beliefs are something we are reluctant to acknowledge having because we are normally half-ashamed of them.

All this, I submit, is of no help at all in trying to sort out the nature of our response to fiction. Nothing is gained by allowing suspension of disbelief to be in order but precluding an emotional response, or alternatively allowing a response but only as a pardonable yet hardly reasonable outcome of queer states in half-belief indistinguishable in psychological character from superstition and make-believe. We are not dealing with mild symptoms of mental derangement. In fact, when we turn to Price’s examples of aesthetic half-belief, we find, I think, that his discussion merely takes us to the point where my discussion began. Thus a man is said to be moved by a performance of Hamlet, and his emotions are said to be genuine and not pretended emotions, but at the same time they are said to be ‘not wholly serious’. But if we ask, what that amounts to, the only answer apparently is that they are not wholly serious simply because they are responses to fiction. And that leaves everything as it was before.

(14) Earlier I suggested that knowledge claims with their antecedent beliefs must be left standing if the situation which gives rise to the puzzle to be resolved by
suspension of disbelief is to arise at all. Price, I think, is inclined to exclude half-belief with its attendant emotional involvement from our contemplation of paintings but I, on the contrary, am inclined to say the principle involved is the same even in connection with narrative paintings. Take, for instance, Giotto’s fresco of The Slaughter of the Innocents in the Capella degli Scrovegni at Padua. Certainly we are under no illusion about what we see here: a painted wall depicting a scene. But we may nevertheless be moved, even to outrage or indignation. Being able to supply ‘Herod presiding over a massacre’ as a description of what one responds to is based moreover on certain true beliefs about the painted wall, artistic conventions and artistic intentions: all these are entailed by one’s knowing that one is facing a fresco and not a blood bath. Clearly the emotional response here does not imply that we are being naively carried away. Responses such as these, I would be prepared to argue, are indeed not only compatible with, but actually demanded by, one’s evaluation of some works as great art. It is at least conceivable—and in the case of our example perhaps even certain—that the artist intended just that kind of reaction.

(15) If, then, in this sort of way the disbeliefs entailed by the knowledge that one is watching a play, viewing a fresco or, let’s ad, reading a novel, are to be held in suspense, we could not describe what we are being moved by in terms which are at all appropriate. If on the other hand we take it that it is as a consequence of the beliefs involved in our knowing that we are dealing with fiction, and not despite these beliefs, that we can adequately describe the objects of our emotion, the puzzle may disappear. The invitation, that is to say, to suspend these beliefs or disbeliefs seems to be based on a muddle. It insinuates that a genuine response must somehow be in conflict with what we actually believe or know. As against this I am inclined to think that the beliefs which one holds about the objects of our emotions in a play, a painting or a novel, and which are indeed presupposed by those emotions, are not only in conflict with the beliefs we have about its being a novel or a play and so on that we are responding to, but can arise only because these latter beliefs are held in the first place.

So my true belief that I am viewing a painted scene (and not any false belief, which would be incompatible with my better knowledge, that I am witnessing real people and real events) is what allows me to hold those beliefs necessary to my being genuinely
moved by the picture, namely that the Innocents are being massacred with Herod looking on—or, to change the example, that Lady Macbeth is consumed with remorse, that Anna Karenina drifts closer and closer to disaster, that Richard III is planning murder.* If the objection is that I now am stating as true beliefs exactly the opposite of what I know to be true unless I suspend disbelief, the answer is that this is not so: it is not the case that a belief that Anna suffers or that Lady Macbeth is in anguish or that Herod’s order has led to the cruel sufferings of guiltless infants can only be a true belief if it involves commitment to the reality of Anna or Lady Macbeth or Herod and so on. As H. L. A. Hart says (‘A Logician’s Fairy Tale’, Phil. Rev. LX, 1951): ‘Only (logical) prejudices force us to “translate” the sentence into an existential statement in order to have the dubious satisfaction of calling it false.’

(16) We need a distinction then between the kind of beliefs which are entailed by my knowing that I am dealing with fiction, and the kind of beliefs which are relevant to my being moved by what goes on in fiction. Among the former, which I might as well now call first-order beliefs, are all those true beliefs of the kind I referred to in connection with watching Richard III (cf. (12) above) on the stage; among the latter, the second-order beliefs, are the beliefs mentioned just now such as that Richard III is plotting murder, Anna Karenina is in mental anguish, Herod is supervising a massacre. These two kinds of belief, far from being contradictory, are such that the second-order beliefs could not take the form they do (that is, without existential commitment) unless the first-order beliefs obtained. It is only when they are supposed to have such commitments that those logically suspect and intuitively implausible views arise which attribute to the person moved by fiction either total confusion about the situation he finds himself in, or amazing gullibility.

(17) The only true beliefs which I must hold so that I can truly hold a number of relevant second-order beliefs about Herod or Richard are not those about the real existence of Herod or Richard, nor about the actual occurrence of murder. Rather, they are beliefs about dramatic performances, actors, books, painted canvases or walls. These first-order beliefs about plays, novels, or paintings are beliefs about them as human

* Mention of Anna Karenina enables me to record that reflection on a symposium entitled ‘How can we be moved by the fate of Anna Karenina’ (Proc. Soc. Sup 6, vol. XLIX, 1975) by Colin Radford and Michael Weston, was the immediate stimulus to the writing of this paper.
artefacts, intentionally made. It is because we know this and hold a wide variety of beliefs based on and implied by this knowledge that the question of the real existence of any nameable character or event within the work does not arise. There is therefore no problem of how such beliefs may be suspended so that others—what I have called second-order beliefs—are not contradicted by them. For beliefs which are contingent upon knowing that we are participating in fiction may be modeled on historical personages. So there is no contradiction between first- and second-order beliefs or disbeliefs in the way defenders of the suspension of disbelief must suppose. To dispel the puzzle about our response to fiction, we need to get clearer about the belief structure underlying it, in which true beliefs entailed by our knowledge of the fictional situation and the beliefs which we would mention in explaining our emotional response are not at variance but related in an intelligible way.

(18) I have said that second-order beliefs about characters and events in fiction have no existential commitment, so that they are not in Russellian fashion all uniformly false. But I do not think either that they are neither true nor false. Clearly there is a perfectly natural sense in which someone who believed, watching Richard III, that Richard was not involved in the murder of the princes, would have a false belief, just as someone who turned in the answer ‘No’ to the question ‘Was the curfew tolling the knell of parting day’ in an examination on Gray’s Elegy would be wrong. Second-order beliefs, like the first-order variety, are either true or false. Within the context of what we know to be a play, a novel, a painting and so on we have a perfectly serviceable analogue to the space-time co-ordinates which ordinarily allow for the determination of the truth value of declarative sentences. In this obvious sense, the second-order beliefs are true or false according to whether they are correctly or incorrectly identified within the analogue.

A second observation reinforces this one and takes us beyond the coordinates of the text—using ‘text’ now in the wide sense of whatever it is that provides referents for first-order beliefs about fiction and analogues of space and time for second-order beliefs. The audience at a play, the reader of a novel, the observer of a painting may have beliefs about the characters presented or depicted which he might be prepared to state in counterfactual form. What this or that character might have done but did not do, what would have made a difference, what would have been possible had their characters been
subtly different, and so on. These beliefs, to put it no higher, may not be misplaced, and are certainly highly relevant to the way in which we respond to a work of fiction. Our sadness is perhaps in part sadness for what might have been, our indignation, indignation at something that might have been avoided, our regret, regret for a wasted life.

(19) Mentioning Anna Karenina, Richard III and Herod in my examples may give rise to a misunderstanding against which I should guard. Of course there is a difference between them in that Shakespeare’s play and Giotto’s fresco use a historical figure while Tolstoy, as far as we know, does not. This difference, however, has no bearing on our problem. For the belief for example that in some parts of Richard III Shakespeare used the story of real events (whilst in others he did not) is not one of the beliefs about the character of Richard and the events he brings about and in which he gets involved. It is not and cannot be among the second-order beliefs which underlie our responses to what we see on the stage nor, for that matter, is it among the first-order beliefs about texts, canvases or performances. It may be interesting for quite different reasons, such as leading us to check on historical accounts.

My treatment of characters and events in fiction thus bears a close resemblance to the treatment of dream persons. We can dream about a real person, or dream about an imaginary person. What is conveyed in the latter case can best be put by saying ‘I dreamt of a person who… and it is not the case that there is such a person’. Adding the disclaimer is just what makes the difference between dreaming about a person whom I know on waking to exist, and just dreaming about a person. As far as their status in the dream is concerned they are on the same footing: they are something that is being dreamt of, and what difference there is between them does not affect our description of what goes on in the dream, nor presumably our involvement in the dream. So, too, the difference between Richard III and Anna Karenina is not a difference which affects those beliefs about Richard or Anna to which their actions give rise and which are involved in our responses towards them.

There are of course significant differences between dream persons and fictional ones—as there are between dreaming and constructing a publicly available work of fiction—differences which, in the case of works of fiction seen from the standpoint of the audience or reader, demand both first- and second-order beliefs in order to account for
our involvement in those works; whereas in the case of dreams a description of having been involved in them does not need, and could only be confused by, the attempt to elicit any such underlying belief structure.

(20) I have managed to get this far without once mentioning intentional objects, though of course it is the fact that our beliefs about fictional characters and events concern such objects which underlies, in my view, the reasonableness of such beliefs and the associated emotions. The view that beliefs always involve commitment to the actual existence of that about which the belief is held conflicts not only with what we might feel we know about responding to fiction. It also conflicts in general with belief situations in which the issue of actual existence does not arise because the objects of such beliefs are, as the saying is, within somebody’s intentionality.

This is not a dodge to invest fictional characters and events with the same kind of special (i.e. illusionary or imaginary) reality, nevertheless. There are many occasions outside fiction where intelligible beliefs occur uncommitted to any existence assertions. For instance: ‘A believes that the man he thought of had a frightening appearance’ or ‘B believes that baby girls he hopes for will have fair hair’. What is peculiar about the fictional context is that fictional characters and events are identifiable in a way not open to us in the case of many of the objects of hope, fear, longing, desire, and so on. The baby girl I mentioned just now cannot be identified otherwise than as what B hoped for, the man with the frightening appearance not otherwise than the man A thought of. But Anna Karenina is not simply the object of Tolstoy’s musings or other intentional acts, as some have thought, though obviously intimately connected with them. In the case of works of fiction, we have that about which what I have called first-order beliefs which share the characteristics of other beliefs in intentional objects. Beliefs about colour patches on a canvas or a wall, words on a page, musical notes in a score, actors on a stage, are what first make possible my beliefs about Herod, Anna Karenina or Richard III, for example. But, to repeat, my beliefs about these personages are not beliefs about a canvas or wall, words on a page, or actors on a stage. They are beliefs about the doings or sufferings of these characters.

(21) The proposal that they must be beliefs about such physical things, if they are to be well founded at all, stems from the idea that this is required by the truism that
events and characters in fiction have no identity outside and apart from the work in which they are mentioned or depicted. Rather than attributing imaginary or fictional existence to them, thus introducing problematic kinds of existence, it has sometimes been supposed that names and other referring expressions had to have a special use when employed in the context of fiction: that is to say, that they had to include as part of their meaning a reference to the play or whatever in which they occurred. On that view someone who believed that a certain thing is true of, say, Anna Karenina would have to include in it a specific reference to the fact that Tolstoy wrote a book of that name, or something of that sort. This I believe to be a mistake: it is not part of what someone believes in the second-order beliefs I have introduced that the meaning of the referring phrases or proper names should be special in that sense at all, any more than it is part of the meaning of the man I dreamt of or the baby I hoped for that I dreamt of him or hoped for her. We can understand what happens to Anna without assuming either than Anna exists or that our beliefs concerning her are beliefs about a text. But of course if someone is under the mistaken impression that there is someone called Anna Karenina about whom these beliefs are held, then we shall have to bring in reference to texts in order to exhibit the first-order beliefs presupposed.

My position, then, is that a name in fiction can be understood without my knowing whether the name has a reference outside fiction, and something presented in fiction can be grasped as an event to be believed in without thereby assuming that such an event has a spacetime location in the world I inhabit. Names and other referring phrases have no special use when employed in fictional contexts: they serve as usual to bring to mind what it is that is being talked about or depicted. No logically unwelcome consequences arise from the fact that what is so identified has no independent existence. Names suffice to identify what is talked about, told or depicted, and their referring role is successful when the hearer, reader or spectator takes them to refer to what has already been introduced into the story—or, if it is the first occurrence, to what is being presented as something or someone that has a place within the work or story told. Mis-identification is possible as usual and can be cleared up in the normal way, that is by showing that it was to a person of this description rather than that that the reference was made, or by retelling the story, or by re-identifying what is being talked about. I do not mind if
someone wants to say that there must also be possible another kind of identification, namely a reference to a text or something like it for the identifying of Anna, or Richard, or Herod. On the contrary, that must be true if the first-order beliefs based on our knowledge of texts, scores, performances or paintings are what first give rise to the second-order beliefs. What is to be avoided is a confusion of one with the other, so that comments about the fictional status of Anna Karenina become integral to an account of what someone believes who believes truly that Anna loves Vronsky—as they would be if what ‘Anna’ meant involved a reference to a particular work of fiction. Such comments are called for only when someone is in danger of forgetting or failing to realize exactly what that belief does and does not imply.

(22) A problem relevant to what I have been talking about, but one I can hardly do more than touch on briefly now, is that of identifying works of fiction as works of fiction. The first-order beliefs which, I have been saying, we have before we can respond to fictional characters and events already involve assumptions of a sophisticated kind about the work. That is to say, although a work of fiction may be embodied in a physical object with physical and directly perceptible qualities, we cannot ascribe to it the properties relevant to its being a work of fiction—any more than those relevant to its being a work of art anyway—unless we understand a cultural context and certain conventions. Whilst a given work may be extensionally defined by reference to physical objects, qua work of fiction it can only be intensionally defined by reference to the meaning of ‘fiction’, to which an understanding of the cultural conventions and expectations is essential. These intensional constraints on identifying things as works of fiction of the culture-relative type are usually taken for granted to the point what we assume them as given when we go to the theatre or an art gallery, or when we read a play or a novel. Nevertheless, when we are in situations like this we have already accepted that when we identify something as a work of fiction we do so under descriptions which meet these requirements. To discuss how that comes about would be to engage in an inquiry about the status of works of art, including works of fiction, in relation to certain kinds of institution—the ‘art work’ of much recent debate. All I can do here is acknowledge that constraints are necessary.
(23) I have argued, then, that emotional responses to fictional characters and events would not be rational without beliefs about what they are and undergo; but that to hold these beliefs is not to commit oneself to the actual existence of those characters and events. Responding to what these characters are, do and suffer in the unfolding of the depicted events is, of course, rarely based on just one belief or even a few isolated beliefs. Beliefs here, as generally, interlock and ramify into whole networks. But unless some of them could be correctly described as beliefs about what happens in a given work of fiction, emotional responses to such works would remain baffling. The relevant beliefs about objects of compassion, grief, indignation or sadness are the second-order beliefs which not only do not conflict with any first-order beliefs which are entailed by our knowledge that we are dealing with a fiction, but are actually made possible by them. Thus far from there being disbeliefs to suspend—which would indeed lead to a paradoxical situation in respect of our undoubted knowledge claims about fiction—we need beliefs and the converse disbeliefs about fiction if we are to have those beliefs about characters and events in fiction which are alone involved in our emotional response to what goes on.

So our initial assumptions that knowing entails believing, and that emotionally responding to something presupposes beliefs about that to which one responds, are untouched. The beliefs activating our responses are not beliefs instated only after other beliefs are suspended. Rather, to have true beliefs about characters and events in fiction and thus remove our responses from the sphere of irrational or unintelligible behaviour is to acknowledge the necessity of first-order beliefs entailed by knowing that what we are dealing with is fiction. ‘Suspension of disbelief’ is therefore not only in itself an inherently paradoxical notion; it is also quite unnecessary in an account of the way we respond to fiction.