

The Subjunctive Grammar of Hope

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WE ARE LIVING IN A WORLD and a time inhospitable to utopian thought, a time when all resources conducive to such thought are to be valued. Some of these resources are, fortunately, borne within language itself. These resources include the currently threatened devices of the subjunctive, that grammatical mood encouraging to the formation and expression of alternate social possibilities. In English, the subjunctive has been declining since the medieval period, and this essay returns to the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries in order to observe the subjunctive in a moment of relative flourishing, as a continuing and renewable source of imaginative refreshment and transformative social possibility.

But what is this utopian mode of which I speak? Karl Mannheim—a Weimar theoretician of onetime repute and continuing pertinence—says that “A state of mind is utopian when it is incongruous with the state of reality in which it occurs.”¹ This state of mind “is oriented toward objects which do not exist in the actual situation.” He then sets a high standard for utopian thinking, limiting it to orientations

which “shatter . . . the order of things prevailing at the time.” But, in keeping with the diminished social imaginary of our own time, I’m ready to settle for something smaller in scale, a less demanding conceptual altitude, and to seek forms of expression that result in the construction of what may be called “micro” rather than “macro” utopias. These would be utopias that settle for small or temporary or wishful adjustments in the prevailing situation; with ambitions that might fall short of radical transformations, but are nevertheless revisionary of the situation at hand. (I’m thinking of Mannheim as, perhaps, Erving Goffman would have rewritten him, with attention to small adjustments and local effects.)

Which returns us to grammar, and sentence-level grammar, in fact. I am particularly interested in grammatical features that permit the construction of non-factual sentences, thus allowing the expression of wishes and hopes that are utopian, in the sense that they revolve around matters not yet realized or achieved in the world. Thomas Visser describes such sentences as possessing a “modality of non-fact,” concerning such matters as wishes, imagination, contingency, doubt, uncertainty, supposition, potentiality, and

¹ Karl Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia* (New York, 1968), p. 192.

other states of non-reality.² Linguists often, in a usage by which I (no linguist) am rather charmed, describe these formations as consisting in “an *irrealis* mood.” The linguist Ingve Olssen underscores the utopian potential of these formations by attaching them to what she calls *nondum*-situations, the not-yet-realized or experienced, as contrasted with *iam*-situations, already realized or incorporated in the experience of the speaker.³ Non-factual/factual, *irrealis/realis, nondum/iam*: all offer ways of distinguishing between two modalities. One concerns the imagined, hypothetical, or unrealized; the other the observable, the verifiable, the already-achieved.

The subjunctive mood remains among our grammatical resources for the expression of non-factual or utopian utterance, and constitutes a primary resource of the alternate imagination. But, with the English subjunctive in decline since its Old English heyday, we would be in serious difficulty had it not been successively reinforced by other *irrealis* devices with which it is often associated, and that supplement its expression of the non-factual. Joining the subjunctive as ways of expressing unrealized or unproven possibilities are such devices as the use of modal auxiliaries (*may, might, should*); modal conjunctions (such as *if* or *as if*);

2 F. Th. Visser, *An Historical Syntax of the English Language*, Part II: Syntactical Units with One Verb (Leiden: 1966), p. 786.

3 Yngve Olsson, “The English Verb in Its Context,” *English Studies*, 40 (1959), 358-67 refers to the modally marked and modally zero forms in terms of speech situation: “There are cases in which the situation referred to by a sentence is something which has not yet been incorporated with the experience of the speaker [“God help you”] and there are others in which the situation already has [“Statistics often fails”]. We shall call the first type NONDUM-situations and the second type, IAM-situations . . . This classification is not simply the old distinction between “the subjunctive” and “the indicative”: it does not apply to the verb alone, but to the verb as connected with *the whole sentence*, and it is made in terms of *speech-situation* (p. 362).

modal adverbs (*perhaps, probably*); introductory formulae (*I desire that . . .*).⁴ All these devices, independently or in concert, wrest our attention from the here and now, and redirect our attention to the non-present or, more tendentially, the “not-yet.” But let me start with the subjunctive itself, in a moment of its flourishing, as it serves to reformulate the oppressive world of actual circumstance.

David Lindsay’s sixteenth-century *Satyre of the Thrie Estaitis* suggests some of the ways in which a late medieval/early modern visionary and reformist agenda can be fostered by the subjunctive mood, and also by the use of that mood in coordination with other conditional formations.⁵ The play—a late medieval “morality play” in one of its fullest stages of elaboration—opens upon a society, and especially its least prosperous members, fallen victim to a rapacious church. Its well-intentioned but bumbling king is deceived and enthralled by lightly-disguised figures of vice and sensuous enticement. Just voices, such as Verity and Chastity, are isolated and in disarray. King Correction, the voice of Reformation, is awaited from abroad, but

4 Otto Jespersen, *The Philosophy of Grammar* (New York, 1965), pp. 265-68. For examples see Visser, *Historical Syntax*, vol. 2, pp. 761, 843; I have taken additional inspiration from Visser’s similar enumeration, *Historical Syntax*, vol. 2, p. 789. I believe Jespersen to be correct in his assertion that none of these devices is precisely “equivalent” to the subjunctive (p. 267), but they may be considered as alternative and roughly equivalent means to the same end. Already within the Old English period some of these devices were giving the subjunctive a serious run for its money. Quirk and Wrenn observed that in Old English “the subjunctive [by which, I take it, they mean a ‘subjunctive sense’] came to be expressed more and more by means of the ‘modal auxiliaries’, *willan, sculan, magan*.” *An Old English Grammar* (London, 1955), p. 84. They make an additional point, important to my following analysis, which is that various devices expressive of unrealized or conditional situations may be used in coordination with the subjunctive, in order to supplement or enhance a conditional sense.

5 David Lindsay, “Ane Satyre of the Thrie Estates,” *Medieval Drama: An Anthology*, ed. Greg Walker (Oxford, 2000).

must, upon arrival, seek for virtuous followers and recruit support from moribund institutions of governance and the demoralized estates of the realm. Extracted from the specifics of history, this text references a proto- or pre-comic situation of the sort Northrop Frye described so well in his essay on the “Mythos of Spring,” in which repression prevails, and the stifling hand of an aged society prevents insurgency or innovation.⁶ Vital to this society’s comic regeneration is a place, and a means, for the expression of imagined transformation. Within this vexed situation arises Johnne the Common-Weill, as the voice of indigenous reform. In a series of visionary speeches, he expounds a series of steps to be taken, beginning with an end to common thievery, even if practiced by an entrenched elite:

*War [were] I ane king, my Lord, be Gods wounds,
 Quha [Who] ever held common theifis within
 thair bounds,
 Quhairthrow [By which] that dayly leilmen
 nicht be wrangit [wronged],
 Without remeid [remedy] thair chiftanis suld
 [should] be hangit,
 Quhiddel [whether] he war ane kniche, ane
 lord, or laird . . .
 (ll. 2592-96).*

This speech begins with an inversion, *War I for if I war*. This inversion implies the modal conjunction *if*, and does its work without requiring its presence. Such inversions are preferred for counterfactual, or at least extremely conjectural, situations, as this one most certainly is. The tenuousness or counter-factuality of the situation is enhanced by two additional devices. When used with the singular subject *I*, *war* is a subjunctive expression of a non-fact. One could imagine Richard II in 1399 or Henry VI in 1461 saying, in the indicative, *am I a king?* or *was I a king?* since his objective situation

admits of some doubt in the matter. But the wholly imaginary character of Johnne’s kingship—he is certainly no king—is obviously better served by the subjunctive.

Johnne’s speech depends on three different and conjoined devices: (1) inversion, (2) the creation of a conditional sentence, (3) employment of the subjunctive *war* in its apodosis or main clause. [The past tense of *war* also has subjunctive rather than temporal force, but I’ll say more about that presently.] Together, these devices convey a hypothetical state of mind that, in its extreme conditionality, frees him to “think like a king,” to imagine innovative regal action and possibility. Carrying on, in the next line, he imagines a situation in which a lord *held* or protected common thieves—the subjunctivity of *held* is signaled by its use of the past form to express a present condition. He then extends the hypothetical character of his utterance by means of two modal auxiliaries—expressing the possibility that loyal men *nicht* be wronged and the hope that the malefactors *suld* be hanged—*suld*, in this instance, signaling a consequence as yet unrealized but earnestly desired to happen. Finally, he returns to the subjunctive, to express an unlikely but desirable outcome, that punishment would be obtained irrespective of social class, whether the abusing party *war* a knight or lord or laird. Here we have, in short, a visionary moment—its idealized character thoroughly signaled by the rich array of subjunctives and complementary devices in which it is framed.

A few exchanges later he is at it again, this time employing the same inversion, bolstered by a preterite subjunctive, introducing a conditional sentence in which he imagines a denial of contributions to Rome. Here he follows with two modal auxiliaries, the first *sould* expressing a sense of determination, of what he “ought” to do, and the second *sould* a sense of necessity,

⁶ Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton, 1957), pp. 163-85.

that in this instance no penny get to Rome:

*Ware I ane king, sir, be Coks Passioun,
I sould gar mak [should certainly make] ane
proclamatoun,
That never ane penny sould go to Rome at all.
(2846-48)*

Pauper, a representative of Scotland's beleaguered poor, now seconds his anti-clerical views, and in a similar manner. Already reduced to poverty by Church exactions, Pauper refuses to tithe to a Parson who does not preach. The Parson asks if he expects to be relieved of his obligation to tithe, and Pauper replies,

*Ye, be Gods breid [bread], war I ane king.
(l. 2956)*

Asked whether his intention is to deprive the prelates, he replies that he would allow them to keep their foundation, but then turns to a critique of worldly kings who do not meet their obligation to restrain the clergy:

*Ware I ane king, be Coks deir Passioun,
I sould richt sone mak reformatioun.
(ll. 2961-62)*

One further observation: In each of these instances, Johne's and Pauper's conditional self-insertion into the position of imaginary kingship is accompanied by blasphemy: "be Gods wounds" . . . "be Coks Passioun" . . . "be Gods breid" . . . "be Coks Passioun." I suppose these blasphemies might express nothing more than pent-up exasperation, in the vein of modern English "for God's sake," but some other explanation seems necessary to explain the invariability of this association of rough oath and wishful dream. In each instance, the speaker has employed the subjunctive to forecast a desired state of affairs, and thus casts himself as a kind of imaginative petitioner. But his petition remains

unattached, unsecured by address to anybody in particular. Language allows these petitions to be effectively—borrowing a grammatical term—"intransitive," to possess or pass over to no object beyond themselves. (Suspending their illocutionary force or necessary consequence, they don't expect an answer.) Yet petitions surely work better if they have an object, and so these rough oaths—although accompanied by, or excused by, rough negation—posit a phantom object, a divinity somewhere on the scene. Perhaps this stretches a point, but it seems to me that the prevalence of sacrilegious oaths in proximity to utopian imaginings represents an attempt to take a wish generated within a language system and to attach it to something extra-linguistic and "real." In this conception, the wounds of Christ are invoked (under the excuse of negation) as a pledge of wishes' possible fulfillment.

The *Satyre* will finally grant these wishes, not from below but, indeed, as an exceptional and divine gift. The twin agencies of imagining and wishing, within grammatically-enabled structure, have created a pressure of expectation within the play, leading to a future deliverance. (Which, at the end of this play, will indeed occur with the arrival of Divyne Correctioun and the institution of a new and regenerated regime.)

**All these devices wrest
our attention from the
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the 'not yet.'**

“Were I a king” introduces a host of wishful literary projections of a transformed present or—pretty much the same thing—an ideal future. Sancho Panza’s island comes to mind, as an alternate rendition of regenerative top-down rule. There is, of course, a frailty in such imaginings, traceable, perhaps, to the grammatical forms of non-fact or counter-fact within which they are hatched and upon which they rely, and they often necessarily cancel or undo themselves prior to any kind of concrete realization. Think of that mini-utopia in *The Tempest* when the good Gonzalo allows himself a subjunctively-couched dream:

*Had I plantation of this isle, my lord . . .
 And were the king on't, what would I do? . . .
 I' the commonwealth I would by contraries
 Execute all things; for no kind of traffic
 Would I admit; no name of magistrate;
 Letters should not be known; riches, poverty,
 And use of service, none; contract, succession,
 Bourn, bound of land, tilth, vineyard, none;
 No use of metal, corn, or wine, or oil;
 No occupation, all men idle, all;
 And women too, but innocent and pure;
 No sovereignty—
 Sebastian. Yet he would be king on't.
 Antonio. The latter end of his
 commonwealth forgets the beginning.
 (II, 1, ll. 144-59)⁷*

These jibers have a point. In his flights, including the self-abolition of his own post, Gonzalo does indeed forget his beginning, that condition of imaginatively untrammelled power that allows him to think hypothetically in the first place, that condition of “subjunctive kingship.” But remember too that Gonzalo, giving himself over to the magical conditions of an isle

⁷ *The Tempest* (Riverside Shakespeare, 1974).

that will not allow him to “believe things certain,” is included among the circle of those finally blessed.

I haven’t paused over what is perhaps the most striking aspect of the constructions seen so far: their modal use of the past tense, the predicative force of *were/war*. Part of the meaning here is derived from the totality of the statement; it would retain a hypothetical character even if the indicative “was” were substituted for the subjunctive “were”: “was I a king” or “if I was a king.” Think about the popular song, “If I were a carpenter and you were a lady/ Would you marry me anyway, would you have my baby?” In conditions of performance, it is often sung, “If I was a carpenter,” without complete loss of hypothetical effect. Even when the indicative “was” is substituted for the subjunctive “were,” the unexpected past tense continues to cast the statement in an *irrealis* and effectively subjunctive mode.⁸

The importance of introducing the past tense into these present-time situations—whether marked as “were” or “was”—is exactly that it makes no sense. He’s not saying, after all, that he *used to be* a carpenter; he’s saying, should he be revealed to be, or should he decide to become one. The “were”/“was” here functions merely to disrupt the statement’s temporal coherence. But what is the virtue, or the importance, of this disruption to the initiation of visionary or alternative thought? The answer rests in the fact that the disclosure of hypothetical or future possibility is abetted by anything that unsettles a statement’s temporal coherence.

⁸ In a debate that reaches beyond my own expertise, some grammarians have doubted that the introduction of a discordant past tense to refer to a present or future action constitutes a subjunctive construction. See Sylvia Chalker and Edmund Weiner, *The Oxford Dictionary of English Grammar* (Oxford, 1994). All I can say is that it works for me.

But *why*? How is it that *irrealis* modes advance their purposes by messing time around, destroying our sense of time's coherence or orderly flow?

We sometimes permit ourselves the illusion that time moves in an orderly and chronological flow, from left to right, and past to future, with the past irrevocably over and the future having not yet arrived. This sense of time carries us toward the future, but also seals us from the future, which, after all, hasn't happened yet. But this seal can be broken, and access to the future facilitated, by a view of time that treats past, present, and future as simultaneously present, as rattling around and contending in the disordered moment of the "now." Nobody has explained this view of temporality better than Augustine, with his reminder that, not only may past and future be discovered within the present, but that our *only* access to future, or to past, is within the fleeting moment of the present:

... It is incorrect to say, "There are three times, past, present, and future." Perhaps ["fortasse"] it would be more appropriate to say, "There are three times: the present of the past, the present of the present, and the present of the future." ["*praesens de praeteritis, praesens de praesentibus, praesens de futuris.*"]⁹

Augustine goes on to assault the linearity of time and tense, arguing that the past and the future are accessed only within a "now" that is so ephemeral as itself to permit no secure access.

Dislocations of ordered temporal succession serve as reminders of the heterogeneity and temporal incoherence of the now, and they also enhance the possibility of access to the future and the past within the moment of the now. The

⁹ Augustine, *Confessions*, Book 11 (Cambridge, Mass: Loeb Classics, 2016), p. 230.

effect of a deliberately distorted temporality is, in Jespersen's terminology, "to denote unreality at the present time."¹⁰ Or, as Huddleston and Pullum put it, "to express modal remoteness as well as time"—a state of remoteness and temporal uncertainty in which anything can happen.¹¹

I'm proposing a paradoxical grammatical situation in which future access is best gained not by the use of future tenses, but rather by a deliberate jumbling of tenses, of which the most typical examples involve not the future but an inappropriate predicate. As a short example, consider the Tin Woodsman's "If I only *had* a heart." He doesn't actually want one in the past. He doesn't want to be a guy who *used to* have one. He wants one now, and in the future. His long-deferred wish comes true in the film's unfolding action, and he will get one. But he needed the subjunctive to frame his wish and stake its claim upon the future.

In Lindsay's satiric play, we see the subjunctive hard at work, opening areas of utopian possibility. In the medieval period, such work proceeds in a variety of literary works and genres, of which I'll pause to consider one more: a collection of political poems found in a manuscript also containing a version of *Piers Plowman* and popularly called "the Digby lyrics," after their seventeenth-century owner and collector, Sir Kenelm Digby.¹² These poems were composed in the first quarter of the fifteenth century, in the first conflicted years of the always-precarious Lancastrian succession following the deposition of King

¹⁰ Jespersen, *Philosophy of Grammar*, p. 266.

¹¹ Rodney Huddleston and Geoffrey Pullum, *The Cambridge Grammar of the English Language* (Cambridge: CUP, 2002) p. 88. Or, as Visser has it, employing the predicate modally and without relation to any particular time-sphere institutes a state of unreality (pp. 761-62).

¹² Quotations are from Helen Barr's authoritative edition and commentary, *The Digby Poems* (Exeter University Press, 2009).

Richard II in 1399. The poet, a committed Lancastrian, offers poetics of hopeful anticipation, which entails his frequent reliance on the subjunctive, appropriate to a set of as-yet unrealized ambitions for peace and prosperity within the realm.

Whole poems are cast in what might be considered a subjunctive spirit, in which states of hopeful wishfulness contend with lingering unease, and are imagined ultimately, but not certainly, to prevail. One such poem, apparently written upon the accession of Henry V, second of the three Lancastrian kings, is “God Kepe Oure King and Saue the Croune.” In this poem the subjunctives “kepe” and “saue” express the poem’s yearning that the still-fragile dynasty might thrive, its sense of *may* God keep the king, and *may* the crown be saved. The poem celebrates the crown as a physical object as well as a more abstract symbol of majesty, hailing it as a symbol of unity, but a unity ever threatened. Given the poem’s anxious uncertainties, the subjunctive is deployed both as a vehicle of wishes and hopes, and also of lingering unease:

*Yif sercle, and floures, and riche stones
Were each a pece fro other flet [separated],
Were the crowne broken ones,
Hit were ful hard ayen to knet [knit].*

Such a division of the crown has not happened, but the subjunctive “were . . .” allows the poet to contemplate a possibly—though not certainly—dire instance. Yet, ready to hand, the subjunctive also allows vigorous imaginative pushback, as when, later in the poem, God is called upon to unbend his bow of wrath and to preserve the king:

*Pray we God his bowe of wraththe vnbende,
And saue the king and kepe the crowne.*

Subjunctives, in the fifteenth century, are

no longer as clearly marked as in Old English or early Middle English. Subjunctive and active forms frequently intermingle, with decisions about subjunctive force resting on context and interpretation. This poem, like most of its manuscript companions, generates what might be called a subjunctive atmosphere. As in these lines about God’s stewardship of human affairs:

*God geueth his doom [judgment] to alle
kynges that be,
As a God in erthe, a kyng hath might. . .
Men do in derk, God seeth in light:
Synne, morthere [murder], derne [secret] tresoun
Not may be hyd fro Goddis sight.
To ryghtwys iuge God geueth the crowne.*

These lines may be read either subjunctively (*May* God give his judgment to all kings, *may* God give the crown to the righteous judge). Or, more encouragingly, they may be read actively or indicatively (God gives his judgment to all kings, God gives the crown to the righteous judge). My suggestion is that this indeterminacy gives us a better poem, a poem in which subjunctivity allows the poet to hover between certainty and uncertainty, the certainty that God has matters routinely in hand, versus a state of affairs in which the position of the righteous judge has yet to be secured.

Certainly, the poet’s wishes for his emerging yet still-vulnerable nation are clear, and his poem ends in a blizzard of subjunctively-couched hopes and wishes:

*God lete this kingdom neuere be lorn [lost]. . .
God yeve vs space of repentance,
Good lyf, and deuocioun.
And God kepe in thy gouerance
Oure comely king, and saue the crowne.*

Here the subjunctive underpins, and supports, a poem of balanced yet hopeful political speculation.

A final note on “were I a king.” Of

course, hypothetical kingship is not the only prologue to utopian thinking. Nor is the hypothetical thinking it enables necessarily utopian in effect. A grammatical structure is like a highway: its planners and builders don't necessarily get to say what kinds of vehicles are going to move along it. Miri Rubin has pointed out a thirteenth-century French instance to me where the thirteenth-century speaker says that he if were king he would immediately institute a pogrom. And other kinds of hypothetical recastings, some quite forlorn, can occupy the place of non-factual speculation. I'm once more thinking, for example, about Shakespeare's *Richard II*, with Richard simultaneously sure and unsure that he is a king at all. At the point of his enforced resignation, Richard laments,

*O that I were a mockery king of snow,
Standing before the sun of Bullingbrook,
To melt myself away in water-drops!*
(IV.1, ll. 260-2)

Richard is an antic truth-teller, with regard to the dissolution of his royal aura and authority, resorting to the subjunctive in order to express a wish for self-obliteration. This wish springs from a distress as great as that of Marlowe's Faustus, who opts for the imperative mood, albeit still in the expression of an unrealized (and unrealizable) self-obliterating wish:

*O soul, be chang'd into little water-drops,
And fall into the ocean—ne'er be found.*¹³

Of course, the Middle Ages had other, and differently premised, avenues of grammatical access to the future. I am thinking especially of the powers of prophecy and its enlistment of an active and indicative mood to secure its vision of

the future. When I first started looking into this subject, and the particular contributions of prophetic discourse to a regenerative social imaginary, I callowly expected to discover the voice of prophecy closely allied to the subjunctive and other *irrealis* formations. Not so. Adhering to the indicative mood, prophecy stays as far as possible from acknowledgements of the invented or the insubstantial. Prophecy, no matter how outlandish, needs to sound sure of itself, to express confidence about what will happen. The subjunctive or *irrealis* is the mood of wishes, hopes, dreams . . . many of which turn out to be impractical or unrealizable, and possessed of a charm intimately associated with their implausibility. Whereas prophecy, by contrast, is *realis* all the way, its choice of the indicative solidifying its relation to the observable, the verifiable, to that which is certain to be achieved. And so prophecies about the future are realized in simple, declarative statements, not about what *might be*, but about what *is the case*. To allow a subjunctive to creep in would undermine their very purposes.

By way of brief illustration, here is William Langland, one version of whose *Piers Plowman* shares the Digby manuscript with the political poem we have just been discussing. Here Langland imagines a reformist king, if not Christ-Roi himself, straightening things out in a local monastery:

*Ac [but] ther shal come a king and confesse
yow religiouses,
And bete yow, and the Bible telleth, for
brekyng of youre rule,
And amende monyals [nuns], monkes and chanons,
And put hem to hir penaunce.*¹⁴

¹⁴ In this case, the B rather than Digby's C text. William Langland, *The Vision of Piers Plowman*, ed. A.V.C. Schmidt (London: Everyman, 1995), X, 316-19.

¹³ www.fulltextarchive.com/pdfs/Dr-Faustus.pdf, p. 82.

No watery wishes here, but a clear and unambiguous statement of expectation of events certain to come.

Rather than discovering itself in the ruins of the time continuum, prophecy accepts the linearity of time, accepts it as a medium that it has no wish to disturb or shatter, but rather to adapt it to its own confident purposes. Without challenging the premise of continuous time, prophecy seeks, rather, to steal a march, to fast-forward through time, or to leap to a subsequent stage in its unfolding. The prophet, in other words, needs the progression of time, in order to secure its history of that which will be revealed in the future. Linear time is co-opted to serve prophecy's program of persuasion, of an inescapable progression from present to

future. Its job is to persuade us to share in its self-certitude, the certainty with which it knows things.

Other grammatically based devices for influencing the future co-exist with the subjunctive sense of future possibility and the prophetic claim to know where everything is heading. The Digby poems are, for example, simply loaded with imperatives, the most urgent of the *irrealis* modes, with their insistence on what must happen without delay. And space will not permit an investigation of the future perfect and the confidence with which it describes future states which "will have been." We need them all, these modalities of speculative and hopeful thought, the precariously-surviving subjunctive prominent among them. A