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In the Mood of Fiction

Quid agam? aut quid comminiscar? What may I do,
or what may I deuyse & imagine?

—Nicholas Udall, *Flowers or eloquent phrases* (1581)

Does Fiction Have a Mood?

I take this essay's epigraph from a text of the English humanist schoolroom. In Nicholas Udall's *Flowers or eloquent phrases of the Latine speach* (1581), "*Quid agam? aut quid comminiscar?*," originally spoken by Terence's ingenious slave in *The Self-Tormentor*, receives the following instructional gloss: "*Agam* and *comminiscar* be of the potentiall moode."¹ Invented by English grammarian Thomas Linacre at the beginning of the sixteenth century, the category of "the potential moode" includes verb forms more familiar to us as the subjunctive and related modal auxiliaries; it collects linguistic dispositions described by modern semantics as dynamic, deontic, and epistemic modalities, covering notions of capacity and necessity, permission and obligation, and a speaker's estimation of likelihood, respectively.² In *Progymnasmata* (1512), Linacre defines "the potential mode" as one that "signyfyeth a thyng as mayyng or owyng to be doone" and proceeds by enumerating its characteristic "sygnes" which "in englysshe be these, may. might. wold. or shuld."³ Linacre's shorter list of "sygnes" expands in subsequent treatments of the potential mood, as in John Brinsley's *Posing of the Parts* (1615), which records "[m]ay, can, might, would, should,

1. Nicholas Udall, *Flowers or eloquent phrases of the Latine speach* (1581), S8.

2. See F.R. Palmer, *Mood and Modality*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, Eng., 2001); Jan Nuyts, "Modality: Overview and Linguistic Issues," in *The Expression of Modality*, ed. William Frawley (Berlin, 2006), 1–26. On the interpretive value of epistemic and deontic modalities, see Lynne Magnusson, "A Play of Modals: Grammar and Potential Action in Early Shakespeare," *Shakespeare Survey* 62 (2009), 69–80.

3. Thomas Linacre, *Progymnasmata* (1512), C3.

ought or could.”⁴ Whereas modern semantics discriminates among categories of capacity, obligation, and likelihood, English humanists collected may, can, would, and should under the single banner of “the potential mood”: What am I capable of doing? What ought I to be doing? What do I want to be doing? Or, as with Terence’s Syrus: What may I devise and imagine? What should I devise and imagine? What would I devise and imagine?

The present essay takes up the potential mood as a conceptual resource for theorizing fiction in the early modern period because this grammatical category’s conflation of questions of possibility, capacity, responsibility, and desire allows us to take another turn at a set of persistent problems in the history of fiction and its theorization: How can we understand the presence of ‘what is not’ in the world?⁵ How can we traffic between ‘what is not’ and the world of ‘what is’? These are questions that Philip Sidney approaches, albeit from an oblique angle, in his argument for the superiority of poetry to history and philosophy in *The Defence of Poesy* (c.1580).⁶ In a set of passages that have proved a touchstone for scholars, Sidney claims that the historian “affirming many things, can, in the cloudy knowledge of mankind, hardly escape from many lies”: “bound to tell things as things were,” the historian’s dedication to the “bare ‘was’” places his work squarely in the indicative mood (235, 224).⁷ To the question of “What is the Indicative?” Brinsley’s student replies, “That which onely sheweth a reason true or false.”⁸ By contrast, poets “borrow nothing of what is, hath been, or shall be”: they “range, only reined with learned discretion, into the divine consideration of what may be and should be” (218). As Lynne

4. John Brinsley, *The Posing of the Parts* (1615), E4v.

5. On the potential mood, see Margreta de Grazia, “Lost Potential in Grammar and Nature: Sidney’s *Astrophil and Stella*,” *Studies in English Literature, 1500–1900* 21 (1981), 21–35; Magnusson, “Play of Modals,” and “‘What may be and should be’: Grammar Moods and the Invention of History in 1 *Henry VI*,” in *Shakespeare’s World of Words*, ed. Paul Yachnin (London, 2015), 147–70; John Leeds, “Language and Metaphysics Rejoined: Thomas Linacre and Grammar beyond the Sign,” *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 46 (2016), 213–31.

6. Philip Sidney, “The Defence of Poesy,” in *The Major Works*, ed. Katherine Duncan-Jones (Oxford, 1989), 212–50.

7. See Jacqueline T. Miller, *Poetic License: Authority and Authorship in Medieval and Renaissance Contexts* (New York, 1986), esp. 73–87; Harry Berger Jr., *Second World and Green World: Studies in Renaissance Fiction-Making* (Berkeley, 1988), esp. 3–40; Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Works and Worlds of Art* (Oxford, 1980), 106, 234; Peter J. McCormick, *Fictions, Philosophies, and the Problems of Poetics* (Ithaca, 1988), 81.

8. Brinsley, E4v. Edward Phillips defines the “Indicative mood” as “that mood which barely affirms and no more”: *The new world of English words* (1658), V1v.

Magnusson observes, when Sidney places “what may be and should be” over the entryway to poetry, he hangs the signs of the potential mood.⁹

By operating in the potential mood, the poet avoids the indicative and its more constrictive mode of affirmation. The poet therefore asks that we discard our primary criteria for evaluating knowledge claims: what the poet speaks cannot be said to be either “true” or “false” (235).¹⁰ With “what may be and should be,” Sidney draws a line between fiction and the world of ‘what is’ (218). Sidney rescues fiction from the charge that it builds “castles in the air” by emphasizing poetry’s commitment to “what . . . should be” and its affiliation with philosophical wisdom and instruction (216). If fiction’s turn away from the world of ‘what is’ threatens art with vanity, or ontological emptiness, Sidney secures the social value of fiction by emphasizing its moral purposiveness.¹¹ To be sure, Sidney insists that the poet’s art exceeds the work of both historian and philosopher by combining “the general notion with the particular example” but, in his more conservative formulations, the philosophical ideal dictates the poetic example such that “whatsoever the philosopher saith should be done,” the poet “giveth a perfect picture of it in someone by whom he presupposeth it was done” (221). Trading in the affirmations of the indicative mood for the language of supposition, poetry avoids the charge of being “wholly imaginative” by anchoring its suppositions to a moral order that both precedes and authorizes their departure from the indicative (216).

To the question of how we can understand the presence of ‘what is not’ in the world, the potential mood collects a variety of answers and trades them under its signs: fiction turns away from the “bare ‘was’” and offers a more expansive sense of possibility—‘what may be’; fiction avoids the charge of “drawing the mind to the serpent’s tail of sinful fancies,” by

9. Magnusson, “What may be and should be,” 156. See also *The Model of Poesy* (1599) in which William Scott traces the line from Sidney’s definition of poetry to its Aristotelian source in the *Poetics*: Scott, *Model of Poesy*, ed. Gavin Alexander (Cambridge, Eng., 2012), 11–12; 104 n11.21–24.

10. By contrast, Julius Caesar Scaliger also describes the poet as having narrated “fictitious events as if they were actual, and represented them as they might be or ought to be” but he maintains the connection between poetry and truth. See *Select Translations from Scaliger’s Poetics*, tr. Frederick Morgan Padelford (New York, 1905), 2.

11. On the categories of true, false, fictitious, and vain speech in Landino’s *Commentary* on Horace’s *Ars Poetica*, see Ann Moss, “Horace in the Sixteenth Century: Commentators into Critics,” in *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism*, vol. 3, ed. Glyn P. Norton (Cambridge, Eng., 1999), 67.

learning from philosophy the principled design of “what should or should not be” (234, 235). Poetry’s distinction from philosophy is then measured by its comparative rhetorical efficacy: by delighting its audience, poetry reaches the public that philosophy leaves behind. The added value of poetic pleasure—the pleasure of the poet and the pleasure of the poet’s audience—raises the specter of what Sidney called the “infected will” and the final sign of the potential mood—‘what would be’ (217).¹² From the perspective of the potential mood, the problem of fiction is the problem of art in the world: any understanding of ‘what is not’ that consists of a more expansive set of possibilities than those that characterize ‘what is’ must nonetheless grapple with the constraints of ‘what is.’ This is why Judith Dundas, writing about the characteristic phrase with which Sidney qualifies metaphors in his prose writings, understands “as it were” to be an instrument of restraint, one with which Sidney ties the “subjunctive mood” of his metaphors and the fictions they structure to “a truth” distinct “from what the world calls truth” and “that eludes the ordinary uses of language and logic.”¹³ In such accounts, fiction may show affirmation the door but it lets the evaluative criteria of ‘true’ and ‘false’ back in through a window.

I want to suggest, however, that reading fiction in the potential mood permits us to describe what fiction knows as something other than ‘true.’ Having broken with more familiar referential uses of language, the potential mood carves out a space for fiction between the historian’s indicative and, kissing cousin to the philosopher’s ‘what should be,’ the imperative mood. Discussions concerning the translation of Ecclesiastes 7:20 suggest the stakes of this negotiation. In the King James Bible, the passage reads: *For there is not a just man upon earth, that doeth good, and sinneth not.*¹⁴ Should “sinneth not” be read in the indicative mood, in which case this passage implies that all men who do good also in actuality sin, “even,” as John Alexander puts it in *Jesuitico-Quakerism examined* (1680), “in their best performances”?¹⁵ Or is this passage asserting “a bare possibility of mens sinning” in which case “sinneth not” ought to appear in the potential mood and the passage in fact read: “There is not a just man upon Earth,

12. On pleasure in Renaissance literature and criticism, see Corey McEleney, *Futile Pleasures: Early Modern Literature and the Limits of Utility* (New York, 2017).

13. Judith Dundas, “‘To Speak Metaphorically’: Sidney in the Subjunctive Mood,” *Renaissance Quarterly* 41 (1988), 268–87 (287).

14. *The Holy Bible, Containing the Old Testament and the New* (1616), 251.

15. John Alexander, *Jesuitico-Quakerism examined* (1680), 168.

that doth good, and may not Sin.”¹⁶ As Brian Cummings suggests in his discussion of God’s shifting modals in Milton’s *Paradise Lost* (1667), at stake in a distinction like that between “sinneth not” and “may not Sin” may be nothing less than the difference between “permission” and “fore-knowledge.”¹⁷ In Ecclesiastes 7:20, the difference between indicative and potential moods looks like a modal crux for debates concerning salvation, predestination, and the freedom of the will.

The distinction between potential and imperative moods is equally stark when you think about the difference between “*Give unto Cesar what is Cesars*” and “*Ye may give tribute to Cesar*.”¹⁸ The category of the potential mood is here invoked to recover what Alexander described as “bare possibility”; in this instance, “bare possibility” would serve as permission to refrain from fulfilling Jesus’ command; it throws into relief, by way of contrast, the tighter space of the imperative mood.¹⁹ “[H]ad regaining of due liberty by force been lawfull,” William Ball writes in *A caveat for subjects* (1642), “Christ might have said, *Ye may give tribute to Cesar* in the potentiall Mood (in which words no exception could have been taken).”²⁰ The problem of how to describe the presence of ‘what is not,’ of how to describe the ontology of fiction, is linked in the potential mood to the problem of how to account for the existence of “bare possibility.” The potential mood insists on a mode of existence that is distinct from actuality, the indicative mood that describes actuality, the discipline that records actuality as history, as well as the criteria of ‘true’ and ‘false.’ The potential mood also, however, insists that its mode of existence exceeds the exclusive idealism of ‘what should be’ by casting that ideal as merely one possibility among many. If the imperative mood translates philosophical wisdom into prescribed action, the potential mood lets a line of light fall between fiction

16. Alexander, 168. Alexander is responding to George Keith, who writes that the passage “may be translated in the potentiall mood, (as indeed Iunius and Tremellius truly translate it) thus, *there is no man who may not sin*, this we doe not deny, for a possibility of sinning is consistent with a perfect and sinless estate, as was the state of Adam before he fell”: Keith, *Quakerism no popery* (1675), 40. The crux has to do with how to translate the future indicative of the Hebrew. See also Robert Barclay, *An apology for the true Christian divinity* (1678), 171; Robert Gell, *An essay toward the amendment of the last English-translation of the Bible* (1659), 782; William Parker, *A Revindication* (1658), 208; William Penn, *The Christian-Quaker* (1674), 310.

17. Brian Cummings, *The Literary Culture of the Reformation: Grammar and Grace* (Oxford, 2003), 425.

18. William Ball, *A caveat for subjects* (1642), 13.

19. On whether the imperative mood entails either necessary fulfillment or the necessary failure to fulfill, see Cummings, 165–66.

20. Ball, 13.

and what René Wellek and Austin Warren, via T.S. Eliot, once described as literature as “propaganda.”²¹

Take the following lesson out of William Hickeys’s *Grammatical Drollery* (1682), a collection of “poems & songs” wherein “the rules of the nouns and verbs in the accedence are pleasantly made easie.” In one such poem, “the Moods” intend to recount a recent battle initiated by “some anomalous Verbs” or “Verbs always out of rule.” They agree that the Indicative Mood, “as being Secretary,” is “fitt’st to tell the story”: he identifies the “chief cause” of the battle and retells their rivalry.²² The Imperative Mood then “command[s] / Silence among ye all” and declares that, had he been present at the battle, “I’d a charg’d ’em all / To cease from fighting, or have made ’em fall / By my imperious hand.” When the Potential Mood speaks, he cedes “chief command” to the Imperative Mood but claims a larger share of property for himself. “[M]ore mighty both in Goods and Land,” the Potential Mood directs his audience to count “the Signes at his door”: “When others have but one, yet he has six more; / As may, can, might, could, would, should, or ought.”²³ As the Potential Mood translates this accumulation of signs into an account of his own “Potency,” he makes a surprising claim. If we were expecting the amplification of “Signes,” and capital, to lead to a celebration of abundance, we instead find the Potential Mood revising a well-known grammatical catechism. In the *Grammar*, William Lily instances the potential mood, as he does all verb forms, by conjugating the Latin for ‘to love’: “*Amem*, I may or can love.”²⁴ *Grammatical Drollery* elaborates on this exercise when it says that the Potential Mood:

cou’d say *amem*, I may or can love,
Or let it alone: for he wou’d still move
In his own Sphere; and never wou’d quarrel,
But relieve the needy, and those that are ill:
Saying, I may or do what I please herein.²⁵

21. René Wellek and Austin Warren, *Theory of Literature* (San Diego, 1942), 35–36. See T.S. Eliot, “Poetry as Propaganda,” in *The Complete Prose of T.S. Eliot: The Critical Edition: English Lion, 1930–1933*, vol. 4, ed. Jason Harding and Ronald Schuchard (Baltimore, 2015), 20–35.

22. William Hickeys, *Grammatical Drollery* (1682), 68.

23. Hickeys, 69.

24. Lily’s entry reads: “The potential mood is known by these signes, *May, can, might, would, should, could, or ought*: as *Amem, I may or can love*”: *A shorte introduction of grammar* (1673), B4v. On the choice of verb in Lily’s *Grammar*, see Lynn Enterline, *Shakespeare’s Schoolroom: Rhetoric, Discipline, Emotion* (Philadelphia, 2012), 64.

25. Hickeys, 69.

The Potential Mood is here defined by his capacity to capture the contingency of "Or." The Imperative Mood commands you to love; the Potential Mood recognizes that his capacity for love, "I may or can love," entails the possibility of its simultaneous withdrawal: "Or let it alone."

The Potential Mood's capacity to withdraw love charts the course of what he desires, or what "he wou'd": to "still move / In his own Sphere." The apparent autonomy of the Potential Mood, its distinction from both the Indicative and Imperative Moods, looks like the refusal to love or the withholding of intimacy. But, paradoxically, it is precisely the Potential Mood's capacity to withdraw love that enables the social practice of love. Why does the Potential Mood insist on "his own Sphere"? In order to "relieve the needy, and those that are ill." At the very moment at which the Potential Mood declares his independence from the world of 'what is' by asserting what Alexander called "bare possibility," the capacity to love or not to love, that same declaration returns the Potential Mood to the world of 'what is' in the form of deliberate, ethical action. The potential mood in fact preserves philosophy by grabbing the collar of wisdom just as it teeters on the edge of an imperative command.

In *Grammatical Drollery*, the Potential Mood draws a circle around "bare possibility" and asserts the existence of potentiality in the world. Pointing "herein" within the compass of "his own Sphere," the Potential Mood attributes a distinct existence to the space in which "I may or do what I please." This is not pleasure as value added but pleasure as a generative constraint on the possible, which goes some distance to explaining the enigmatic coordination of "or" in this line: "do what I please" is an alternative to "may" insofar as it encompasses the speaker's ability to 'not do' but it is also more simply a gloss on "may" because the potential mood preserves, as a condition of its "Sphere," the contingency of those actions it shelters under its "Signes." As John Leeds has written, whereas classical definitions of the subjunctive emphasize the mind of the speaker, his or her "affections" or what Priscian called "inclinations," Linacre's early discussions of the potential mood emphasize the "conditions of the real."²⁶ Classical discussions of the subjunctive emphasize what modern semantics calls epistemic possibility, or what a speaker perceives to be possible; Linacre emphasizes, by contrast, the existence of possibility as such. When the Potential Mood points "herein," he grants a special place to "what may be,"

26. Leeds, 221. On "inclinations," see also Cummings, 125.

but what is significant about that place and its specialness is that the point of separation is simultaneously the site of contact between the “Sphere” of ‘what is not’ and the world of ‘what is.’

The recent resurgence of interest in Heideggerian “mood” in literary criticism provides a helpful counterpoint to Linacre’s theory of the potential mood because both Linacre and Heidegger share an interest in Aristotle, though each follows him down a different rabbit hole.²⁷ Drawing on Aristotle’s *Rhetoric*, Heidegger’s understanding of “mood” is, as Jonathan Flatley explains, about “the conditions for our encounter with the world *before* cognition and volition.”²⁸ As a social phenomenon, Heideggerian mood is “the ‘way’” that characterizes the “with” of “being-with-others”: it is “the form that our with-ness takes.”²⁹ Renaissance writers play with this valence of “mood,” if only as the crude, conceptual byproduct of a more immediate interest in the ready pun. For example, as *Rhetorica* receives the attentions of *Grammaticus* in Barten Holyday’s university play *Technogamia: or The marriage of the arts* (1618), she responds to his awkward courtship across imperative, optative, and potential moods with the reply, “you shall goe further if you will, to the *Infinitive*: I am not in the *Mood* to be wooed now.”³⁰ Or, take William Gamage’s epigram from *Linsiwoolsie* (1613) in which he asks, “I Wonder greatly what thy Mood should be[?]” After discarding the indicative and subjunctive moods as possible answers, he concludes, “thine, sans doubt, is the Imperatiue, / Which makes thee dayly with thy Make to striue.”³¹ Linacre’s discussion of the potential mood, by contrast and as Leeds demonstrates, draws not from Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* but from Galen’s combination of Aristotelian metaphysics and physiology.³² The “mood” of the potential mood so conceived describes an ontology, the being of possibility, where the potential mood designates

27. See “In the Mood,” *New Literary History*, ed. Rita Felski and Susan Fraiman 43 (2012). For an overview of “mood” in Heidegger, see Charles Guignon, “Moods in Heidegger’s *Being and Time*,” in *What is an Emotion? Classic and Contemporary Readings*, 2nd ed, ed. Robert C. Solomon (New York, 2003), 181–90.

28. Jonathan Flatley, “How a Revolutionary Counter-Mood is Made,” *NLH* 43 (2012), 503–25 (505–06). Flatley discusses Heidegger’s interest in Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* (507, 522n17).

29. Flatley, 506.

30. Barten Holyday, *Technogamia: or The marriages of the arts* (Oxford, 1618), M3v.

31. William Gamage, *Linsiwoolsie* (Oxford, 1613), E7. On “the gendered and sexual constitution of mood,” see Clare Hemmings, “In the Mood for Revolution: Emma Goldman’s Passion,” *NLH* 43 (2012), 527–45 (529).

32. Heidegger described Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* as the “first systematic hermeneutic of the everydayness of being-with-one-another” (qtd. in Flatley, 507).

what “is not yet such a thing, but is able to be such a thing.”³³ In his reading of Aristotle, Giorgio Agamben describes this understanding of potentiality as “not simply non-Being, simple privation, but rather *the existence of non-Being*, the presence of an absence.”³⁴ Is this the mode of existence proper to fiction? Can the potential mood describe the peculiar existence of fiction: the existence of ‘what is not’ in the world—but may be or could be or should be or would be? Or, the existence of ‘what is not’ in the world as the existence of what may be or could be or should be or would be?

Instead of the autonomy of the art object, the potential mood offers us the distinct modality of fiction as an aesthetic event. Sidney’s famous declaration that the poet cannot lie because he “nothing affirms” could suggest an autonomous “Sphere,” apparently traced by the Potential Mood in Hickee’s provocative battle of the moods, except that the designation of that “Sphere” serves, instead, to secure the conditions for deliberative, ethical action in the world: “I may or can love, / Or let it alone.” The potential mood of “what may be and should be” is in this sense a resource for accessing what is contingent rather than fixed in the world of ‘what is.’ The potential mood so conceived is an explanation of how things in the indicative mood are capable of change: it is the mood of metamorphosis for which the caterpillar’s chrysalis might stand as emblem. Drawing on early work on possible worlds theory and fiction, Siegfried J. Schmidt described the production of fictional worlds “as a complicated process of inventing all possible sorts of possible worlds with all sorts of relations” between actual and fictional worlds “in order to widen the scope of imagination and find out alternatives” to the actual world “or parts of it.”³⁵ From the perspective of the potential mood, one maintains the distinctiveness of fiction not in order to sever ‘what is not’ from the world of ‘what is,’ but because it is precisely this distinctiveness—the modality of fiction—that enables us to imagine the world of ‘what is’ in its capacity to be otherwise.

I would like, by way of conclusion, to consider the implications of the potential mood for both our objects of study and the methodologies we

33. Qtd. in Leeds, 219. See also Debapriya Sarkar’s reading of “flickering instances that are withheld from the theatrical present” in “*The Tempest’s Other Plots*,” *Shakespeare Studies* 45 (2017), 203–20 (205).

34. Giorgio Agamben, *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy*, tr. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford, 1999), 179. As Heller-Roazen explains, “[w]hat is at issue in the concept of potentiality is nothing less than a mode of existence that is irreducible to actuality”: “Editor’s Introduction,” in *Potentialities*, 1–23 (14).

35. Siegfried J. Schmidt, “Towards a Pragmatic Interpretation of ‘Fictionality’,” in *Pragmatics of Language and Literature*, ed. Teun A. Van Dijk (Amsterdam, 1976), 161–78 (175).

deem adequate to those objects in the field of early modern literature—the implications, that is, of reading fiction for the potential mood and of reading fiction in the potential mood. An understanding of early modern fiction broadly conceived to include all renderings of ‘what is not’ might determine our objects of study. We might, as represented by the important work of Magnusson or Francis Berry’s earlier but related study, *Poet’s Grammar: Person, Time, and Mood in Poetry* (1958), train our focus to the moods of individual speech acts in a given body of texts, especially where those speech acts appear to meditate on their modal specificity. According to this focus, literary fictions are significant as the sites in which these meditations seem to concentrate, or track the complexities of modality, or experiment most recklessly, and therefore most productively, with modal oscillations. Read for its dominant mood or as a set of turns and translations among the full range of verbal moods, literature can be seen to limn a modal multi-verse with the coexistence of “the indicative world of actuality” and “the subjunctive world of wish, or desire.”³⁶ This is what Debapriya Sarkar has called a “speculative *poiesis*,” according to which “subjunctive linguistic elements are intellectual tools that can stretch a play’s ontological limits.”³⁷ Insisting on the shared existence of these modal alternatives, Berry prefers the language of continental grammarians, “(not *Sub-* but) *Conjunctive Mood*.”³⁸

There are limitations to this characterization of our literary objects of study. By locating fiction in the potential mood, such an approach runs all of the risks of discrete localization, as if you could put your finger on fiction and, by extension, the literary. Narrowing the frame of reference to the clause or the sentence, such an analysis neither explains nor interprets everything else. What is more, and at its most extreme, such an analysis understands “fiction” as what H. Vaihinger expansively described in *The Philosophy of ‘As If’* (1924) as “transit-points of thought” for the mind as it departs from, but ultimately returns to, the real.³⁹ At the very moment of its extreme specificity, such an identification of fiction proliferates instances of its object. Under this more expansive set of “*fictions*,” Vaihinger proposes the word “*figment*” for specifically “aesthetic” fictions.⁴⁰ The flip-side would

36. Francis Berry, *Poet’s Grammar: Person, Time, and Mood in Poetry* (London, 1958), 105.

37. Sarkar, 224.

38. Berry, 105.

39. H. Vaihinger, *The Philosophy of ‘As if’: A System of the Theoretical, Practical and Religious Fictions of Mankind* (London, 1924), 104.

40. Vaihinger, 81n1.

be to suggest that all knowledge practices, disciplined and otherwise, that make use of these “transit-points of thought” are also exercising the capacity of aesthetic fictions.

Rather than solve the problem of our objects of study, the potential mood might revive questions of methodology and our attempts to assess the adequacy of interpretation in the discipline of literary studies. In both the grammatical tradition and the poetry that thinks with its central texts and tenets, the “potential mood” describes the peculiar way in which fiction achieves its distinctiveness through its relation to the world of ‘what is.’ To remember Terence’s *Self-Tormentor*, the set of questions selected by Udall in his *Flowers or eloquent phrases* and designated exemplary of “the potential mood” permit the slave Syrus to craft a plot: *quid agam? aut quid comminiscar?* “I need to think out a scheme again from scratch,” Syrus proposes, but his audience is only partially privy to the planning that follows: “What if I approach it this way? No good. Or this? Won’t achieve any more.” We do not hear the content of Syrus’ proposals but the sound those proposals make when they smack against the limits of the real. Syrus considers and then discards this path, now that, until he backs his way into possibility: “Well this way, perhaps. Can’t be done. No, it’s excellent. Hooray!”⁴¹ The rhythmic oscillation of Syrus’ deliberations walk the line between the potential mood—“What may I do, or what may I devise & imagine?”—and the world of ‘what is’ until Syrus understands the constraints of the indicative to be capable of accommodating the imagination of the potential mood. Between “Can’t be done” and “No, it’s excellent” something shifts such that the line that separates the possible from the impossible moves, if only just a little to the left.

We usually think about constraint as a problem of the origins of art: how a dominant set of ideologies determine what is “thinkable” at a given moment in time, where that suffix “-able” extends the potential mood to a structure of thinking—not what was thought in time but what was thinkable at the time or what could have been thought.⁴² But for Syrus, the historical constraint on art has to do with transforming art into action: How do I bring art into the world as a design for living or as a device for transforming the world? Efficacy does not preclude the idea that there is a

41. Terence, *Self-Tormentor*, trans. John Barsby (Cambridge, Mass., 2001), 4.2.674–77. The passage reads: *quid agam? aut quid comminiscar? ratio de integro ineundast mihi. / nil tam difficilest quin quaerendo investigari possiet. / quid si hoc nunc sic incipiam? nilst. quid si sic? tantundem egero. / at sic opinor: non potest. immo optume. euge, habeo optunam.*

42. David Scott Kastan, *Shakespeare after Theory* (London, 1999), 58, 59.

distinct being attributable to fiction, it only complicates the model of the universe that this ontology presupposes. The criteria of efficacy insists on a translation across the world of fiction and the world of 'what is.' In terms of verbal moods, this means that the potential mood is always negotiating its place in the world by articulating its relation to the indicative mood, the domain of actuality, and the discipline of history responsible for describing actuality.⁴³

But the potential mood is also in constant negotiation with the imperative, the mood that takes poetry's moral and ethical responsibilities seriously, but which threatens to transform the presence of duty or obligation in the potential mood into an ideological program. The imperative mood seizes the ideals that authorize fiction's claims to moral efficacy and promises to remake the world of 'what is' in the image of those ideals. The discipline of philosophy may, in its modern form, be unrecognizable under the description and terms of Sidney's *Defence*, but efforts to recuperate fiction by recourse to moral and ethical instruction remain common. Take, for example, the widespread claim that locates the value of fiction in the ethical cultivation of empathy.⁴⁴ In the potential mood, fiction imitates this function of the philosophical but it is always with this difference: fiction retains a capacity to withdraw the moral imperatives that it offers. To remember *Grammatical Drollery*, "I may or can love, / Or let it alone." The potential mood only ever masquerades as the imperative. And this masquerade, or the capacity of fiction to withdraw what it commands, is itself an ethics.

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43. Without reducing that discipline to a positivist caricature of itself, or forgetting the crucial questions and reflections following the "linguistic turn," I think it is nonetheless a general agreement that modern historians deal largely in affirmations and subject their own knowledge claims to the criteria of "true" and "false." For other criteria, including moral and aesthetic evaluation, see e.g. Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in 19th-Century Europe*, Fortieth-Anniversary edition (Baltimore, 2014), and the cogent foreword by Michael S. Roth, "'All You've Got is History,'" ix–xxi.

44. For a career-long interest in this argument, see Martha Nussbaum, e.g. *Loves Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (New York, 1990). For a recent revision and revival, see Zadie Smith's account of "cross-epidermal reanimation" in "Fascinated to Presume: In Defense of Fiction," *New York Review of Books*, October 24, 2019, para.6.

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