



BRILL

“We Are Not Aliens in the Universe”

Marilynne Robinson's Imaginative Re-enchantment of Protestantism

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Abstract

Marilynne Robinson, in her novels and essays, sets out to retrieve a foundational strain of religious experience, one that has been minimized or even repressed in most branches of the Protestant tradition. This is what, following Paul Ricœur, American theologian David Tracy calls “the manifestation orientation” in religious expression. Building on Tracy’s distinction between “manifestation and proclamation” within Christianity, I identify and analyze a shift of emphasis from the “proclamation orientation” of Robinson’s first novel, *Housekeeping*, with its presentation of human existence as radically homeless and alienated, to “manifestation” in Robinson’s later work. In the *Gilead* novels, while preserving the proclamation orientation of Protestantism through an indictment of social injustice, she corrects the one-sided Protestant emphasis on divine transcendence and human sin, affirming a fundamental “at-home-ness” (Tracy) in the universe. Through her fictional Protestant minister and a creative rereading of classical Protestant theologians, Robinson offers an imaginative alternative to Weberian accounts of Protestant spirituality.

Keywords

literature – literary criticism – religion – philosophy of religion – theology

1 The Case against Weber

In her essays, Marilynne Robinson has repeatedly shown herself to be a staunch critic of Max Weber’s work, persistently attacking his views on Protestantism.

It is puzzling, however, that she has never presented a convincing case against him. Besides several critical remarks dropped into her essays and interviews, there is only a brief discussion in *The Death of Adam*, in which she argues that the spirit of capitalism can hardly be traced back either to Calvin's theology or to the Puritans.¹ She ignores, however, Weber's insistence on distinguishing between theology or dogma and its "practical-psychological consequences," or as he puts it elsewhere, between the ideals a religion strives for and "the actual result" of its influence on believers' lives.² Furthermore, while the connection between Protestantism and capitalism has been contested by sociologists ever since the publication of Weber's famous treatise and was never as unquestioningly accepted as Robinson seems to claim, his seminal ideas—the description of secularization as a process of disenchantment and his analysis of the Protestant engagement with the world—have repeatedly proved their explanatory power in the study of modern Western culture.³ It would be equally difficult to disregard his claim that the Reformation and the processes it set into motion have played an important role in the secularization of the Western world. Robinson's quarrel with Weber may well be interpreted, I contend, as an oblique expression of her underlying discontent with the arguably desacralized character of much contemporary Protestantism and the reverse side of her great project: the imaginative re-enchantment of the Protestant tradition. Somewhat paradoxically, her way of making a case against Weber is to offer an imaginative alternative to Weberian constructions of Protestant spirituality in the fictional character of John Ames, as well as by creative appropriation of classical Protestant theologians, including Calvin.

This is not to say that she misrepresents the Protestant religious tradition. Rather, she sets out to tap its resources and to retrieve a foundational strain in religious experience and expression, which Reformed spirituality has tended to minimize or even repress. This is what, following Paul Ricoeur, the American Catholic theologian David Tracy calls the "manifestation orientation" (Ricoeur, "Manifestation" 48–67). The purpose of this essay is to account for and explore Robinson's emphasis on the sacred by building on Tracy's distinction between

1 23–24, see also 180–181. David Little, a renowned Calvin scholar himself, complains how "Marilynne Robinson surrenders unfortunately to a one-sided and uninformed interpretation of Weber's writings, particularly his essay on the Protestant ethic" (94).

2 See note 30 on page 169 and note 40 on page 196 in Weber, *The Protestant Ethic*.

3 One has only to think of Peter Berger's account of Protestant spirituality or, in our own time, the monumental work of Charles Taylor on the secularization of the West, both of which owe a great deal to Weber's theories.

“manifestation and proclamation orientation” in religion, and, correspondingly, the “analogical and dialectical imagination” in Christian theology (Tracy 202–445).

2 The Two Master Modes

The incorporation of a polarity or tension in the description of different religions, or different orientations within the same religious tradition, was proposed by several scholars in the twentieth century. Ricœur’s distinction between manifestation and proclamation was preceded by roughly analogous contrasts between the mystical and the prophetic, the aesthetic and the ethical, or in Christian theology between word and sacrament.⁴ Aware of the dangers of applying binary distinctions to complex realities, this essay has chosen to rely on the work of Paul Ricœur and David Tracy, neither of whom treat this polarity as “a sterile antinomy, or ... an unmediated dichotomy,” but as the complicated interdependence of two dialectical poles (Ricœur, “Manifestation” 48). In his influential study of the Christian imagination Tracy has convincingly demonstrated how a nuanced and critical use of this dialectic can illuminate not only the complexities and conflicts in Christian self-understanding, but also yield seminal insights in studies of modern art and culture.⁵

Manifestation and proclamation, which are the two master modes of religious expression, derive from a fundamental dialectic, characteristic of religious experience itself: the disclosure of the reality of the self as essentially good and “participating in the whole” and yet as also “radically estranged” from it (Tracy 211). In manifestation orientation, the universe is charged with the power of the sacred, and human participation in the sacred cosmos is enacted through the repetitions of myth, ritual, and symbol. In contrast to the immanent and preverbal character of the manifestation mode, in proclamation mode the experience is that of a radically alienated self that is addressed by the shattering Word of a judging yet gracious transcendent Other (209). The prophetic word of proclamation, the paradigmatic religious expression of the Judeo-Christian tradition, uproots our harmonious belonging to the sacred whole, demanding desacralization, a radical distancing from “the orig-

4 One early classic is Friedrich Heiler’s book on prayer, first published in German in 1919 (*Prayer*). For other examples see Robert J. Egan’s article.

5 205. One example is the book of John Neary titled *Like and Unlike God: Religious Imaginations in Modern and Contemporary Fiction* in which he uses David Tracy’s distinction to explore different views of ultimate reality in several modern fictional works.

inal and compelling sense of participation” (210). Whereas manifestation is an inherently immanent orientation in that nature and the cosmos manifest the divine through universal, recurring patterns, proclamation traditions, with their emphasis on transcendence, warn against expressing the Wholly Other in nature and image. While ritual repetition looks towards the past time of origins in order to anchor us in the permanence of the cosmic present—the “always already”—the prophetic word, disrupting the cycle of eternal return and pressing for repentance and renewal, looks towards the future—the “not yet.” In the classical proclamation event of the Reformation, prophetic judgment confers religious significance upon the world by setting it apart and appointing it to become the stage of transforming ethical action in the believer’s obedient response to the divine call.

Although the distinction of the two types, as it is expounded in Paul Ricœur’s original article, is applicable to any religious expression, David Tracy adapts it to his own purpose of elucidating the complexities and conflicts within Christian theology. In his book, he traces how the New Testament dialectic between the fundamental trust based on the “always already” reality of the incarnation and the suffering and negativity of the cross develops into the two dominant strains of the Christian theological imagination, the analogical and the dialectical. The analogical imagination tends to perceive similarities between God and world, whereas the dialectical tradition places the emphasis on dissimilarities. In religious expressions of manifestation and in analogical theologies “some pervasive yes at the heart of the universe” is recognized: the entire world is ultimately envisioned as sacrament emanating from the paradigmatic sacrament, Jesus Christ, which in turn elicits “trust in the profound *eros* in every self in all its quests for truth, for goodness, for beauty, for beatitude” (386, 432). As a necessary corrective, prophets of the dialectical vision warn against establishing easy continuities between God and world as well as between God and the “flawed, guilty, sinful, presumptuous, self-justifying self” (415).

Admittedly, such a simplifying summary runs the risk of hardening these types into a false dichotomy, against which Ricœur and Tracy are at pains to guard. Indeed, Tracy’s affirmation of Christian pluralism rests on his nuanced elucidation of the dialectical interdependence of the two poles in any version of Christian spirituality and theology. The Christian story, he insists, “discloses the tense reality of both a real always-already presence and an equally real not-yet” (281). The conclusion he then draws from his generous and wide-ranging analysis is that, unless serious efforts are made to right the balance when one mode entirely gains the upper hand at the cost of the other, Christianity is in danger of withdrawing into “nondialectical solace” and losing its vitality (212). An overemphasis on manifestation runs the risk of false security and compla-

gency, whereas a theology and spirituality dominated by proclamation is in danger of “becoming either merely abstract content or violent and authoritarian address,” as well as of retreating into methodistical rigor (274).

That said, both the Protestant Ricœur and the Catholic Tracy clearly place the emphasis on the importance of reclaiming the manifestation orientation in Western Christianity. Though warning against its obvious risks, both seem to suggest that the dangers of the opposite extreme are greater and more relevant in the last third of the twentieth century. Though maintaining throughout the complementarity and interdependence of the two modes, they ultimately insist on manifestation being both the ground and the fulfillment of religious experience. Without enveloping proclamation in the manifestation of the sacred, the deepest needs of the human heart and imagination are left unfulfilled (Tracy 217; Ricœur, “Manifestation” 67).

Today, in the face of a growing preference for non-institutional spirituality, and for Protestants perhaps more than for other Christians, there is even greater need to recover a sense of the sacred, to reclaim a genuinely Christian theology of immanence. According to Peter Berger, the classical Protestant view of reality, which has come to dominate the West, is “polarized between a radically transcendent divinity and a radically ‘fallen’ humanity,” and human life is lived in a universe “bereft of numinosity” (111–112). In much the same vein, Charles Taylor’s speaks about a view of the universe “ruled by causal laws, utterly unresponsive to human meanings” (280). One obvious reason lying behind Marilynne Robinson’s popularity is that her work speaks to the longing of post-secular, Western culture for the healing of its alienation by revitalizing a sense of participation in a reality conceived as sacramental. But the other, equally important reason for the positive response of Protestants to her work is her success in carrying out this project in a genuinely Christian way, preserving the dialectical interplay of manifestation and proclamation, immanence and transcendence, the “already” and the “not yet.” It is to Robinson’s version of this dialectic that I will now turn.

3 The “Not Yet” of *Housekeeping*

David Tracy has observed how several theologians and artists who started their careers as radical representatives of the dialectical tradition find themselves righting the balance by developing an analogical-sacramental vision in their later work (417). The same shift of emphasis, I suggest, can be seen in Robinson’s artistic trajectory. Although today she is rightly acknowledged for her Protestant sacramental imagination, the central questions of her work were

first focused, to use Tracy's words, "through the no in our common no-where, our sensed no-longer, not-yet-at-home-ness in this time and place given to us" (363).

Robinson's contemplation of universal human homelessness produced her first novel, *Housekeeping*, which is clearly dominated by prophetic negation. The focal point for the dialectical imagination is the cross of Christ which gathers into itself all the sin, suffering, and sorrow of humanity, the "pain of the negative," as Tracy puts it (266). Accordingly, in *Housekeeping* specific losses and sufferings are transformed into an awareness of "the force behind the movement of time that will not be comforted" (*Housekeeping* 192). Traumatized by the early disappearance of her father, the tragic death of her grandfather, the suicide of her mother, and the premature loss of her grandmother, the elder of two sisters, Ruth, surrenders herself to "a grief without time, space or—in the absence of a larger community—the ability to heal" (Caver 128). Rejecting the boundaries and comforts of home, she joins her vagrant aunt Sylvie, who is strongly associated with the fluidity and chaos of water, in a self-inflicted exile from society. Importantly, however, what appears to be a state of regression and arrested mourning from a psychoanalytical standpoint, in the broader, spiritual perspective of the novel becomes prophetic judgment, an insight into "the world's true workings."⁶

Just as the calm surface of the lake in *Fingerbone* hides vortices as well as hundreds of dead bodies, under the deceptive surface of peaceful, ordinary life lurks a "darker world," the ever-present threat of suffering, loss, and homelessness. In what is perhaps the only instance in Robinson's work in which the "ordinary" is depicted ironically, Ruth tells us how her grandmother was "lulled ... into forgetting," suppressing the memory of the train accident, until "the dear ordinary had healed as seamlessly as an image on water" (13, 15). The ordinary is associated here with complacency and denial. Unlike for the narrator of *Gilead*, for *Housekeeping's* Ruth it is not the home and its ordinary rituals but the chaotic, dark waters that are endowed with a numinous quality. Ruth and Sylvie are definitely aliens in the universe. The sacred, in this work's eschatological perspective, is expressed in Ruth's imaginative longings and thus projected into the future, the "not yet." Her spiritual experience, dominated as it is by the awareness of the tragic depth of life as opposed to the smooth surface, is radically kenotic and transcendent.

6 *Housekeeping* 116. On the spiritual value of Ruth's wandering narrative see Tyndall and Ribkoff.

By rejecting what Tracy calls "at-home-ness in the cosmos," the order and boundaries of ordinary daylight, Sylvie and Ruth are deprived of a sacred space. Chaos ultimately defeats cosmos, as "the watery darkness" exerts a powerful pull on the protagonist and drags her down into its world without light and air (*Housekeeping* 162). What Sylvie desires to dissolve and eliminate by sitting indoors in darkness and letting the weeds and later the flood invade is, for archaic religious communities, the *threshold* which delineates human habitation as sacred space. For Mircea Eliade, a significant modern explicator of the manifestation mode in religion, human habitation is always sacred, as it represents the emergence of cosmos out of chaos. Home is a microcosm of the world which is "our world" because it has been created by fixing its limits and thus separating it from "the fluid and larval modality" of chaos. "The world (that is, our world)," Eliade writes, "is a universe within which the sacred has already manifested itself" (29–31). If "the act of construction and of habitation is entirely desacralized," Ricœur suggests, what "preserves us from being simply *errant vagrants* in the world" (emphasis mine) ("Manifestation" 64)?

The sense in which *Housekeeping* can be regarded as a prophetic narrative becomes clear if we consider how Eliade, and in his wake Ricœur, describe the prophetic strain in biblical religion as a summons to the desert, a demand for radical desacralization, a proclamation of the day of judgment over the continuities and certainties of sacred rituals and institutions. It is worth quoting Ricœur in full:

Must we go so far as to say that prophecy unmakes the cosmos that ritual is employed to make sacred? Nostalgia for the "desert", the time of the betrothal of Yahweh and the people, is opposed plainly to the vision of a cosmos centered around a sacred place. The act of habitation is shaken to its depths. One day, another rabbi will say, "Follow me". "Yes, I come to separate the son from his father, the daughter from her mother-in-law. Your enemies will come from your own house." One does not become a disciple, in other words, without uprooting oneself.

"Manifestation" 57

Ruth's separation from the community, the way she uproots herself, is so extreme that she ends up living a life without nourishment, no longer feeling cold or hunger as discomfort. Unlike her biblical namesake—and unlike Lila, Ames's wife, whose narrative is equally modelled on the story of the biblical Ruth—this Ruth never finds home. Her surrender to the darkness can be seen as analogous to the self-emptying of Christ, who identified with the human condition through his immersion in the waters of the Jordan. She describes

her extreme experience as a “sad and outcast state of revelation,” comparing it to the situation of Noah, who was aware of the reality of the flood while skeptical neighbors ignored its imminence (*Housekeeping* 184). In a stunning passage—an unorthodox manifesto of solidarity with sinners and outcasts—Ruth envisions Noah’s wife on the morning after the flood, opening the shutters and realizing that, with all the people drowned and lost, this is no longer a human world (172). In fact, it is more like the plump and other-worldly heaven of her grandfather’s paintings (146), and she wants to return to the waters.

In conclusion, *Housekeeping* shows all the important traits of the negative dialectic of the proclamation mode. In modern religion and theology, Tracy identifies an important ramification of the tradition of proclamation, distinguishing the prophetic denunciation of social injustice in liberation theologies from the classical Reformation emphasis on individual degradation and sinfulness (390–396). With its emphasis not only on personal loss and grief, but also on compassion for and solidarity with the exiled and dispossessed, the novel exemplifies both aspects of the tradition of proclamation.

4 The Tension between the “Already” and the “Not Yet” in the *Gilead* Novels

At the outset of *Gilead*, with pointed emphasis, Reverend Ames provides a miniature summary of the journey from Fingerbone to Gilead, foregrounding at the same time a central issue in the oeuvre: “I didn’t feel very much at home in the world, that was a fact. Now I do” (4). His expression of “at-home-ness” is all the more remarkable, coming as it is from an old and sick man who is supposed to prepare for death and set his eyes on the other world.⁷ This emphatic affirmation of the world as home pervades Robinson’s later work, accounting for a great deal of its attractiveness in a profoundly alienated technological civilization. “[W]e are not aliens in the universe,” she declares in her essay “Theology,” “but are singularly rooted in it” (*Givenness* 213). The emphasis on the sacredness of human habitation, along with the rest of her theological ideas, is clearly shared, as we will see, by the narrator of *Gilead*. As Ames’s voice dominates the Pulitzer-winning *Gilead* and he serves as a welcoming embodiment of home-

7 Ames lost his first wife and their new-born baby girl as a young man and spent most of his adult life in loneliness, pastoring a congregationalist community in the small town of Gilead. The novel, in the form of a letter written to his late-born son, narrates the story of his family, including his falling in love and marrying an uneducated woman thirty years younger than himself who strays into Gilead after a life of vagrancy.

liness in *Lila*, critics have correctly foregrounded the sacramental imagination at work in the *Gilead* saga. For reasons outlined at the beginning, this essay also directs attention to the sacramental-analogical perspective in Robinson’s late work. At the same time, it is important to note that the tension between the uprooting effects of proclamation and the affirmation of at-home-ness in manifestation is a major structuring force and an important source of polyphony in the novels. Ames’s perspective is counterbalanced, or indeed prophetically challenged, by three other primary characters: Ames’s freedom-fighter grandfather, along with Jack and Lila, Robinson’s “prodigals,” who represent the other side of the polarity, a profound unease about the experience of home. Accordingly, in what remains of this essay, the alienating and desacralizing pull of proclamation is discussed, before the several ways in which the sacredness of “this life, this world” is affirmed in the *Gilead*-sequel are examined (*Gilead* 10).

The old Reverend Ames, who saw a vision of Jesus in chains and joined the fight for the Union in the Civil War, is a powerful representative of prophetic proclamation.⁸ In anticipation of radical liberation theology, solidarity with the outcast gets him involved in violence, perhaps even murder. It is not only during the civil war that the grandfather is restless: he never ceases to be a challenge to the complacency and potential self-deceit of domesticity, questioning a kind of life Ruth and Sylvie in *Housekeeping* radically rejected when they finally burned down the family house and fled from Fingerbone. Homeless at heart, Ames’s grandfather refuses to fit into a middle-class milieu, even stealing from his own family to assist the poor, and finally runs away from his hometown, entering self-inflicted exile. Engebretson is partly right when he describes him critically, associating his attitude with a strict “adherence to principle” which creates conditions of harm.⁹ Indeed, as Tracy notes, the prophetic stance often involves moral rigidity. That said, Ames himself unquestionably takes a positive stand, and the grandfather emerges from his narrative as an eccentric saint who embodies the inevitable and sometimes violent clash between the present world of injustice and abuse and the not-yet world of universal justice and peace.

8 Timothy Larsen places the grandfather in the revivalist tradition. The real-life analog to grandfather Ames, he writes, may have been the Reverend John Todd, a radical evangelical abolitionist. The fact that Ames, who often represents the author’s perspectives, has very great respect for his grandfather, speaks eloquently to Robinson’s embrace of a broad spectrum of Protestant spirituality, rather than just the classical mainline tradition. See Larsen, “The Theological World.”

9 38–39. See also Zamalin and Skinner 102.

There are two other characters in the *Gilead* novels who challenge the comfort of “at-home-ness”: Ames’s godson Jack, the “black sheep” in the family of Ames’s best friend, Presbyterian minister Robert Boughton, and Ames’s unschooled wife Lila, who used to be an itinerant, a cleaning woman, and a prostitute. Both characters are on a quest for homecoming in a social as well as religious sense, and their quests, unfinished in both cases, corroborate the validity of the grandfather’s prophetic legacy, his “great refusal,” in Tracy’s words, “to the present order of things” (312). Jack, an outcast for several reasons including his interracial marriage, leaves the town, perhaps never to return, and Lila’s “incomplete assimilation” is predominantly the result of her ongoing identification with the marginalized drifters of her earlier life (Ludwig 1).

The prophetic dimension of the *Gilead* novels is made even more conspicuous by rarely noted but nonetheless significant parallels among these three characters. Common motifs in the fictional roles of old Ames and Jack have been pointed out by Jonathan Lear in a book chapter titled, significantly for us, “Not at Home in Gilead.” Not only are they the only two characters, Lear suggests, who feel compassion for the plight of Black people (274), not only are they both indifferent to material comfort, their thieving can also be interpreted as having a similar function in the overall ethical vision of the novels. True, old Ames takes away from the haves to give it to the have-nots, whereas Jack’s stealing has no apparent purpose. According to Lear, however, Jack’s unsteady and confused attitude to private property may ultimately point to the arbitrariness of the social arrangement of “mine and thine.”¹⁰ Such a “liberal” interpretation of private property, as well as the two characters’ general indifference to worldly goods, recalls *Housekeeping*’s Sylvie who, just like Jack, has only a suitcase and her clothes to wear and apparently no scruples about “borrowing” the boat of a fisherman if needed. According to Lear, Jack’s inability to conform to the “established normative order” converts him into a “walking legitimacy crisis for the civilization that surrounds him” (270). Not only does Jack’s plight unmask the illusory world and the Christian hypocrisy of a Gilead that abandoned its abolitionist heritage, his failure to win the good will of the Reverend Ames up until the end of the story seriously challenges the latter’s credibility as a Christian (276–277).

10 Lear 273; see Robinson, *Home* 325. This subtle fictional questioning concerning the justice of the social distribution of goods aligns well with Robinson’s fierce critique of the ruthlessness of free market capitalism and the social Darwinism lying behind it. As far as thieving is concerned, she calls attention to the emphasis on care for the dispossessed in the Mosaic law with its corollary of a loose attitude to private property unparalleled in the ancient world. See *When I Was a Child* 101–103.

A further parallel which foregrounds the prophetic role of these three characters is that each of them is associated in different ways with the figure of Jesus as outcast, indeed, in Tracy’s term, with the negativity of the cross. As we have seen, the vision of a slave-Jesus in shackles inspires grandfather Ames to dedicate his life to the liberation of slaves. In *Home*, when it becomes clear that there is no place for Jack and his colored family in Gilead, Glory imagines him in terms of Isaiah 53 as a “man of sorrows,” “as one from whom men hide their face,” which, for Christians, is the classical Old Testament text foreshadowing the suffering of Christ (331). Earlier in the novel, Jack ironically identifies himself with Christ when, in answer to his brother Teddy’s expression of his joy and surprise upon seeing him after so many years, he says, “I could show you the wounds in my side if you like” (269). Building upon and modifying Lear’s reading of Jack as a Christian martyr, we can conceive of him as a scapegoat who puts on display the sins of Gilead by stealing things he does not need—which are inexplicable and therefore symbolical crimes—and then finds himself “outside the camp,” as did Jesus according to Hebrews 13:13. Lila, the former drifter and prostitute, also associates Jesus with outcasts like herself, grasping the Christian message mainly through her natural attraction to a Jesus “who drank from our cup and shared our baptism” (*Lila* 222). If Glory sees Christ in the ne’er-do-well Jack, Lila, on her part, identifies him with her vagrant stepmother, Doll, who died as a homicide suspect.

Robinson’s exiled characters, living their lives under the aegis of the negativity of the cross, forcefully confront readers with the pain and the injustice of the world, making them recognize “the not-yet in every concrete manifestation of the always-already” (Tracy 220). We have seen how in *Housekeeping* an experience of exile and exclusion becomes a basis of a future-oriented, eschatological vision, a corollary of the prophetic stance of judgment over the present. In the *Gilead* novels, however, the “no” of proclamation is grounded and fulfilled by the “yes” of manifestation. In the manifestation orientation of Reverend Ames, the emphasis is on origins and the eternal present, or in theological terms, on creation and incarnation. In what amounts to a framed structure, *Gilead* repeats the initial affirmation of “this life, this world” as home at the end of its narrative, which significantly is also the final moment in the entire family saga. In the opening pages, Ames tells us how he used to comfort his dying parishioners with the idea that this world was not our home and how he changed his mind by the end of his own life. Correspondingly, one of the final scenes quietly reaffirms this sense of at-home-ness when the Ames family, turning down the invitation of the Boughtons, sits down for an ordinary weekday dinner. As he says, “we three love to be at home” (*Gilead* 277). The intimate domestic ritual, with Lila lighting a candle because “dark is coming early”

and serving Ames's favorite dishes, is for readers of *Housekeeping* a diametrical reversal of the unusual evening meals in which Sylvie makes the girls sit indoors in darkness as a result of which the boundaries of cosmos and chaos, inside and outside, are dissolved. In contrast, lighting a candle at dusk re-enacts the sacred act of habitation, the establishment of boundaries between light and darkness, the recognition of the world as home. Indeed, the family thus ritually participates in the "first moment" of creation, celebrated a few paragraphs later:

I love the prairie! So often I have seen the dawn come and the light flood over the land and everything turn radiant at once, that word "good" so profoundly affirmed in my soul that I am amazed I should be allowed to witness such a thing. There may have been a more wonderful first moment "when the morning stars sang together and all the sons of God shouted for joy," but for all I know to the contrary, they still do sing and shout, and they certainly might well.

Gilead 281

These deservedly famous lines are a perfect illustration of how in manifestation mode the reality of sin and evil is overpowered by a profound awareness of the original goodness of creation, "the pervasive yes at the heart of the universe." Ames's imaginative vision echoes the theological idea of *creatio continua*, the notion of God continuously creating and upholding the universe by his word uttered in the eternal present.¹¹ The "sacred beauty of creation" is neither recalled nostalgically nor projected into the future: it is an ongoing reality in which the characters participate (*Gilead* 280). In Ames's lovingly contemplative narrative the expectation of a transcendent, future bliss is downplayed in favor of transcendence in immanence, heaven expressed in terms of the sensual and physical: "Ashy biscuit, summer rain, her hair falling wet around her face. If I were to multiply the splendors of the world by two—the splendors as I feel them—I would arrive at an idea of heaven very unlike anything you see in the old paintings" (*Gilead* 170).

The meaning of repetitive ritual, according to Eliade, is to transform linear, profane time into the sacred time of origins. Whereas proclamation places the emphasis on the historical uniqueness of the events of salvation history, such as the crucifixion and the resurrection, in manifestation they occur eternally

11 Ames explicitly refers to this theological idea by quoting the poet George Herbert (*Gilead* 126), but Robinson's theological source is Jonathan Edwards's *The Great Christian Doctrine of Original Sin Defended*. See Marilynne Robinson, "Jonathan Edwards in a New Light."

and are thus reflected analogically within the structures of nature, in the cosmic cycle of day and night, summer and winter. Thence comes the emphasis in *Gilead* on the birth of light at dawn, which is a manifestation of that ongoing first moment. The permanence of *creatio continua*, foundational to the manifestation mode and its spirituality of ritual, is suggested throughout: “Each morning I’m like Adam waking up in Eden, amazed at the cleverness of my hands and at the brilliance pouring into my mind through my eyes” (76). Here is an old man talking, but the miracle of the first moment is permanent, a repetition of what he experienced as a young boy:

This morning Kansas rolled out of its sleep into a sunlight grandly announced, proclaimed throughout heaven—one more of the very finite number of days that this old prairie has been called Kansas, or Iowa. *But it has all been one day, that first day.* Light is constant, we just turn over in it. So every day is in fact the selfsame evening and morning.

239, emphasis mine

Just as an ordinary sunrise symbolizes and thus participates in the creation and the resurrection, the family dinner, with the candle brought home from the church, becomes the site of the interpenetration of the sacred and the secular. Viewing the world with undiminishing surprise, for Ames ordinary events are repeatedly transfigured and become sacraments, or from a hermeneutical perspective, they become, in Paul Ricœur’s seminal term, “intersecting metaphors” in which the divine and the human meanings mutually interpret or “intersignify” one another in metaphorical interplay (“The Nuptial Metaphor” 301–303). Ricœur introduces this term to analyze the interpenetration of human and divine love in what he calls the “nuptial metaphor” of the Hebrew prophets.¹² Indeed, there are two basic human experiences of oneness or union which have traditionally been considered vehicles of spiritual experience: eating and sexuality (the former inspiring eucharistic food symbolism, the latter the nuptial metaphor). From this perspective, Reverend Ames is perfectly consistent to single out two out of all the splendors of the world to explain what heaven means to him: the meal (“ashy biscuit” received from his father’s hand) and erotic love (Lila’s wet hair falling around her face). Lack of food, on the other hand, is associated with the proclamation orientation: with Ruth who refuses

12 Such interpenetration tends to be rejected by Protestant, especially Lutheran, dialectical traditions which see eros and agape as dichotomies. The classic example is *Eros and Agape* by Anders Nygren, quoted in Tracy 228.

the comfort of nourishment and with the grandfather whose grave Ames and his father find only at the cost of almost starving to death. And just as a morsel of bread intersects with the Eucharist when Ames receives the ashy biscuits from his father's hand as communion, mortal love and divine love also act as intersecting metaphors:

I might seem to be comparing something great and holy with a minor and ordinary thing, that is, love of God with mortal love. But I just don't see them as separate things at all. If we can be divinely fed with a morsel and divinely blessed with a touch, then the terrible pleasure we find in a particular face can certainly instruct us in the nature of the very grandest love.

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Here Ames adds physical touch to eating and love as also a site of the sacred which accounts for the emphasis on blessing and baptism throughout the novels. Physically washing another broken or needy person—Doll scrubbing Lila, the abused child, Lila washing the blood off the murderous Doll, Glory washing the drunken Jack—turns into a purification ritual, indeed a baptism. On the other hand, of course, sexuality is also based on touch, the primal sense developed by human beings. Even though references to physical, sexual love, as critics have noted, are rare in Robinson's novels (Engebretson 88), dualistic notions of physicality should not prevent us from noticing in Ames's and Lila's love affair the subtlety of bodily communication, the process of becoming "one flesh" which involves several of the senses. One only has to think of the gentle eroticism of the baptism scene by the river, or when Lila decides that instead of the painful sharing of her memories she will simply rest her head on the Reverend's shoulder and feel his breath against her ear (*Lila* 58). And just as in chapter sixteen of the book of Ezekiel, Lila's favorite biblical reading, God picks up and takes care of the abandoned infant daughter Jerusalem to make her his wife, "spread[ing] the corner of his garment" over her when she grows up, Ames's gesture of wrapping his black preacher's coat around Lila's shoulder (*Lila* 117) or lending her his sweater (or feeding her, which happens often) is a physical embodiment of God's love for her. Just like the radiance of Lila's face is a spiritual experience for Ames, the harassed young woman experiences the divine embrace through her marriage relationship.¹³

13 Haein Park, referring to Jean-Luc Marion's study of idols and icons, writes that the face of his wife becomes an icon through which Ames comes to glimpse the face of God (114).

This emphasis on vision and touch at the cost of hearing and speech in the expression of human-divine love is especially meaningful for my purposes, as the contrast between hearing and seeing (ears and eyes), word and sacrament, has long been prominent among the different traditional formulations of the two master modes (Tracy 205). If anything, Protestantism has traditionally been described as word-centered, “the religion of language,” favoring preaching and teaching, the transmission of the cognitive contents of the faith. Thus, Ames’s conspicuous distrust of doctrinal discussions to win people for Christianity, the joy he derives from silence, and his awe filled attraction to the sacraments amount to an almost provocative challenge of this traditional Protestant emphasis. On at least two occasions he goes as far as downplaying verbal confession as a condition of salvation and of acceptance in the church. In the memorable scene of the baptism of his future wife, he replies to Lila, who having missed catechism classes out of embarrassment tells him “I can’t affirm nothing”: “We’ll skip that part then” (*Lila* 86). In a similar spirit, Ames writes that he felt “pretty much at ease about the state of [his brother]’s soul,” when Edward, in the middle of playing catch with him, asked for a glass of water, and, quoting from Psalm 133, poured it over his head: “Behold, how good and how pleasant it is, for brethren to dwell together in unity!” (*Gilead* 73). One cannot escape the impression that Edward, a self-confessed atheist, performs a ritual here, baptizing himself and reciting a sacred text which, according to Ames, might actually join him to the community of believers. Indeed, the recital is seen by Ames as a performative language act, rather than a conscious and voluntary expression of commitment. From this perspective it does not really matter if Edward is ironical, nostalgic, or simply kind with his pious brother. This attitude to language challenges a foundational Protestant orientation in which the purpose of language use in church is voluntary, sincere confession of faith, rather than participation in community ritual.¹⁴

Of course, it is only fair to note that Ames, notwithstanding the above, is a Protestant pastor, a preacher and a teacher, and a man of letters who wrote more than sixty-seven thousand pages worth of sermons and spent his life

14 The anthropologist Webb Keane, in a seminal analysis of the role of Protestantism in the emergence of the language ideologies of modernity, explains how the Protestant, especially Calvinist, emphasis on the capacity of language to convey immaterial meanings contributed to the formation of the disembodied modern subject which stands apart from an objectified material world. Verbalized beliefs, Keane argues, “are objects for one’s full consciousness and, therefore, things in relation to which one stands as an agent, being able to choose to commit oneself to them.” Therefore, what is required in a confession is that “the speaker’s words be sincere expressions of ideas truly understood” (75–76).

studying theology and philosophy. In more than one way, however, he takes a careful, ambiguous if not ironic, stance towards his own output. In his conversations with his wife Lila, the traditional role of the teacher and preacher is so often overridden by what has been called his “theology of uncertainty” that Lila gently reproaches him: “For a preacher you ain’t much at explaining things.”¹⁵ At least twice in his letter, he proposes that the best way to dispose of his innumerable boxes of sermons will be to burn them. Significantly, towards the end of the novel he imagines the burning as a first snow rite, a gathering around a bonfire, eating hot dogs and marshmallows. Words, again, give way to a meal and a ritual celebration intimately connected with the rhythms of nature: proclamation is subsumed into manifestation.

Many of Robinson’s interpreters are keen to derive the exaltation of the ordinary in her work from the Protestant valuation of the secular. This seems to be in line with Tracy, who, in his discussion of the Reformation, argues that the ordinary gains significance in proclamation which has released the secular to become God’s sphere of action and, therefore, of Christian service (210–211, 315). Charles Taylor, another prominent Catholic, also credits the Reformation with “the affirmation of ordinary life.”¹⁶ Yet, it is also clear that, for the Protestant believer, the world is affirmed primarily as a stage for ethical action and transformation. An early twentieth-century version of Tracy’s polarity, the distinction between “aesthetic and ethical sacramentalism” can be of help in understanding this difference. According to Anglican theologian Oliver Quick, in aesthetic sacramentalism the good things of this world are symbols or expressions of God’s eternal nature, whereas in ethical sacramentalism they are viewed as instruments which God uses to bring about his kingdom (Hughes n.p.). When the Puritan William Perkins famously asserts that the washing of dishes and the preaching of the word are equally pleasing to God, he understands God’s pleasure to derive from the ethical rightness of the obedient act rather than from its beauty. Performing a duty in obedience to God, even if done joyfully, does not make the experience of water rushing from the tap beautiful or numinous. The chief concern as well as the source of divine and human joy alike is ethical, the sense of duty accomplished, rather than aesthetic.¹⁷ In

15 *Lila* 99. Regarding Ames’s “theology of uncertainty,” see Lehnardt.

16 211–233. See also Engebretson 57–58.

17 Besides, without rituals to remind us of the holiness of created reality, breaking down the distinction between sacred and secular tends to result in secularizing the sacred. To put it simply, if everything is holy, nothing is holy. See Collier 86. As Robinson notes in an interview with Jennie Rothenberg Gritz, religious rituals “raise up and make visible the fact of the holiness of life” (Gritz n.p.).

contrast, Ames notes that "water was made primarily for blessing, and only secondarily for growing vegetables or doing the wash" (*Gilead* 32).

The remark Ames makes about the difference between the religious experience of his grandfather, his father, and his own tellingly illustrates my point. In contrast to his own everyday visions of transfiguration in the course of which soap bubbles or kittens' brows are charged with holiness, the old Reverend Ames, according to his grandson, had "a narrow view of what a vision might be" because he was "dazzled by the great light of his own experience" (103–104). This was not the light of transfiguration, but an enlightenment which gave him his mission. It was the summons of a slave-Jesus rattling in chains. Relying on Tracy's distinction of "classical religious persons" in the two religious modes (the type of prophet and hero, and of priest, sage, and mystic), we can say that, as opposed to the broad contemplative panorama of a sage and mystic, such as the grandson who captures the visionary aspect of any ordinary day, it is exactly its pointedness, its narrow concentration, that lends the grandfather's vision its sacred intensity.

However, as we see it from the grandfather's unease with domesticity and the conflict with his own son, it is practically impossible to accommodate this type of prophetic Protestantism to everyday life.¹⁸ At the other end of the spectrum of religious temperaments is Ames's father, whose rational mind rejects the extraordinary visions of his father, as well as his son's experiences of the transfiguration of the ordinary. Lacking both prophetic intensity and mystical-aesthetic sensibilities, he has no spiritual resources to fall back on and loses his faith. The grandfather and the father are embodiments, as it were, of opposite risks of the proclamation mode: becoming a fanatic on the one hand, too cerebral and arid on the other. Accordingly, both run away. The former goes into exile into the desert of Kansas, while the latter leaves behind his hometown to live with his elder son Edward and embrace his atheism.¹⁹

Proclamation divorced from manifestation, as Ricœur suggests, impoverishes the heart and the imagination. What enables John Ames to stay in the "shabby little town" his forbears left is that he draws creatively from the resources of his own religious heritage to unite the ethical and the aesthetic

18 According to Zamalin and Skinner, grandfather Ames could not translate his Romantic-heroic commitment to racial justice into a vision for "how people could change the way they live their everyday lives" (100).

19 Testifying to the polyphony, and thus to the credibility of the novels, critics who give preference to the prophetic dimension entertain a very different opinion. Jonathan Lear, for example, interprets the decision of Ames's father and his brother Edward to abandon Gilead as a positive move, expressing their disdain for what Kierkegaard called the "dreadful illusion" of Christendom (273).

in affirming the beauty and the sacredness of human beings as well as of the created world (*Gilead* 60). Like Marilynne Robinson herself in her essays, he is a meandering, aphoristic, and unsystematic thinker. He borrows freely from great Protestant theologians, reading them through the lenses of his analogical imagination. His favorites are John Calvin and Karl Barth, but surprisingly he admires Ludwig Feuerbach so much that he twice quotes him, whereas Barth is only referred to fleetingly.²⁰ He does take issue with Feuerbach's "idolatry" from a Barthian perspective, asserting that "God is set apart—He is One, He is not to be imagined as a thing among things" (158). Yet, at the same time, his spiritual experience, as we have seen, is best described in terms of Ricœur's intersecting metaphor: the divine and the human mutually interpreting one another. For Ames, this is not a contradiction. Secure in the faith of Barth's transcendent God, Feuerbach sits well with Ames's faith, to the extent that his "theology from below" is transfigured into a testimony of God's immanence. The God who is set apart is also paradoxically one with us: "Only that which is apart from my own being is capable of being doubted by me. How then, can I doubt of God who is my being? To doubt of God is to doubt of myself" (*Gilead* 273). These are Feuerbach's words, with which Ames sends Jack, the seeker, on his way after blessing him.

Ames, just like Robinson in her non-fiction, displays an uncommon reverence for the human being and gives less attention to the classical Protestant teaching about human depravity. This theological humanism, embedded in a broader sacramental view of the universe, is derived to a considerable extent from John Calvin's creation theology. However, Ames's predominantly manifestation orientation and the emphasis he lays on the sacredness of creation sometimes produces views one would not readily associate with Calvin, or for that matter with Barth. Baptism is a good case in point. Instead of associating it with the believer's new life, taking it to be the "sign and evidence of our purification" in Christ, Ames, looking back to the original goodness of each created person, baptizes children "to affirm the sacredness of the human creature."²¹

20 There is one reference to Barth in a theological context when Ames mentions him as a possible source of comfort for the likes of Jack who worries about predestination (174). What Ames must surely have in mind here is Barth's hope for universal reconciliation in Christ.

21 *Institutes* 1034; *Gilead* 104. In one of the more outspoken attempts at scrutinizing Robinson's theology from a Protestant perspective, Keith L. Johnson targets, on Barthian grounds, none other than the manifestation orientation of that theology. He worries that for Robinson "grace has become nature," as she seems to have flattened "the biblical story of God's love into a persistent state of being, such that our relationship with God is seen as a constantly available feature of our creaturely existence" (79). Johnson's warning, that

Ames puts a spin on Calvin’s famous theater metaphor for similar purposes, foregrounding the pleasure God takes not only in the existence but also in the behavior of human beings. He remembers Calvin saying “somewhere” that “each of us is an actor on a stage and God is the audience,” and, speculating about God’s possible reaction, he proposes that it “might be thought of as aesthetic, rather than morally judgmental in the ordinary sense”—in more simple terms, that “God might enjoy us” (*Gilead* 142). This is an unusual interpretation as in Calvin’s use of the metaphor, God is predominantly the playwright or the principal actor of the play rather than its audience, and in the rare instances in which he is described as a spectator of human performance, he appears as a witness or a judge in a tribunal rather than in an art jury.²² Ames, on the other hand, believing that as our audience “God might enjoy us,” recommends that we become “artists of our own behavior” (141–142). The two concerns, the ethical and the aesthetic, become one here. What if, Ames seems to ask implicitly, the human response of joy and awe to the manifestation of God’s holiness in the beauty of the world and human beings, is in itself a reflection of God’s pleasure in the beauty of the world and human beings? Ethical acts should be a response to this joy and awe. Calvin is specifically appealed to in one more instance in *Gilead*, when Ames meditates about the love we owe to the image of God in every fellow human. For Ames and Ames’s Calvin, it is the beauty and the mystery of this image, rather than a sense of duty which elicits the response of love.²³

“the being of the world should not be seen as the persistence of a beginning, but as the movement toward a future” makes perfect sense from the eschatological perspective of proclamation (81).

22 Calvin often quotes the “heathen” saying that there is no better stage for virtue than a man’s own conscience, only to compare it to God’s approval, which alone is what matters. In this metaphorical context God does become audience (“[W]e are standing in the view of God and of the angels,” Calvin says in his Commentary on Psalm 4:1), but the emphasis is not on aesthetic enjoyment but on God’s vindication of the virtues and the persistence of the faithful. See also his commentary on Psalm 35:11 (*Commentary on Psalms* 67, 552) and on Isaiah 38:9: “the more eminent any man is, and the higher the station which he occupies, the more is he bound to consider himself as placed by God on a theater, and enjoined to perform this duty” (*Commentary on Isaiah* 128).

23 It is hard to resist the temptation to speculate whether Robinson’s tacit purpose here was to refute Weber’s claim that in Calvinism the single-minded concentration to efficiently serve the glory of God alone “in the service of the rational formation of the societal cosmos” lent an objective and impersonal quality to brotherly love (Weber 63, see also 196–197n43). Calvin himself in book 3 of his *Institutes* (to which Robinson refers in *The Death of Adam* and Rev. Ames in the abovementioned instance) does speak movingly about how “the beauty and the dignity” of God’s image in people “allures us to love and embrace them” (580). Yet again, one wonders if with his predominant emphasis on human sinful-

Ames's sacramental view of humanness, as I have briefly noted in discussing Jack's role, is seriously put to the test by the unexpected return of the latter into Gilead. In this difficult encounter, the tension between the sacramental and the prophetic is at its peak. Ames's defensiveness, and his repeated rebuffs of Jack's several desperate attempts to win a fair hearing for himself, speak eloquently of the risk inherent in the manifestation mode, that of false security and insensitivity to the pain of others. In view of the central place solidarity has occupied in the prophetic vision of all four novels, the challenge Ames faces is indeed crucial.²⁴ As Tracy warns: "no *one* is fully, concretely saved without a relationship to all" (280).

That said, it can nevertheless be argued that whereas Jack's father is never reconciled with his son, Ames redeems not only himself but perhaps to some extent also his old friend and colleague by finally accepting and blessing Jack as his own son. Indeed, Ames puts his finger, though belatedly, on the core of Jack's existential crisis. If, as Jonathan Lear maintains, Jack can be seen as sent by God to rouse Ames and his Gilead from their callousness, Ames can also be seen as sent by God to refute Jack's fear that he is no more than "a nothing with a body" (*Home* 301). Telling a person who believes he is nothing that his being is God—this is what his farewell message through Feuerbach comes down to—is a sign of intuitive empathy. In general theological terms, it is a correction of the classical Protestant emphasis on the infinite distance of God and human depravity, which may have significantly contributed to Jack's angst. And, importantly, Ames could never have suggested this to Jack without a sacramental-analogical view of humanness. He does not attempt to elicit a conversion experience, a change of heart; rather, it is his own heart which changes as Jack becomes a sacrament for him, "a place where God is revealed" (Latz 289).

5 Conclusion

In this essay, I have used criteria derived from David Tracy to identify a shift of emphasis from proclamation to manifestation, from dialectical to analogical imagination in Robinson's later work. Whereas she preserves the proclamation orientation of Protestantism through her prophetic characters' symbolical

ness, Calvin does not, as David Little puts it, "take back with one hand what he had given with the other" (81).

24 The fourth volume of the *Gilead* series, *Jack*, has appeared after the final argument of this essay took shape.

indictment of social injustice, she corrects the one-sided Protestant emphasis on divine transcendence and human sin. Her popularity, I have suggested, is due to a contemporary longing for the sacred, for a manifestation of the divine in both nature and the human world. The narrator-protagonist of *Gilead*, John Ames, whose theological ideas coincide to a considerable extent with those of his creator, entirely fits Tracy's description of the theologian for whom "the universe itself [is] God's sacrament," and

the ordinary itself is the locus of a manifestation-event. Indeed, the ordinary, once really lived, embraced and loved, manifests itself as the extraordinary revelation of our primordial belonging-to, our radical participation in this body, this family, this people, this community, this church, this tradition, this history, this planet, even this cosmos.

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As Tracy notes, this vision of "the natural goodness of all existence, the radical immanence of God in all nature, the sense of each human being as *imago Dei*" goes back to the church fathers, Eastern Christianity, and the Franciscan tradition (381). Marilynne Robinson, however, looks to the Protestant tradition for inspiration. For her sacramental vision she relies not only on Calvin's theology of creation but also on the theological aesthetics of Jonathan Edwards, and her view of the sacredness of humans is inspired, alongside Calvin, by the incarnational humanism of Dietrich Bonhoeffer.²⁵ Bonhoeffer's Christology enables her to envision Christ in his role of Creator as "the defining instance of essential humanity," which implies that "a quality which can be called human inheres in Creation, a quality in which we participate, is manifested in us, which we epitomize."²⁶ In the spirit of the intersecting metaphor, she suggests that the restoring love, forgiveness, and grace of Christ are "human things" which "we know from our own experience, our own hearts, souls, and minds" (213). Viewing the incarnation through the focus of manifestation "as God's radical immanence

25 On Marilynne Robinson's appropriation of Calvin's creational sacramentalism, see the article of Andrew C. Stout. I am citing a later essay here, but the "high Christology" Robinson developed in the essays "Metaphysics" and "Theology" in *The Givenness of Things* certainly owes a great deal to Bonhoeffer, for whom the role of Christ as Creator was central. See Robinson's essay on Bonhoeffer in *The Death of Adam*, especially page 116.

26 *Givenness* 209. This means, as Johnson explains, that "God created the world with the human life of the eternal Son in his mind" (75), an idea familiar in Eastern Christianity, but fiercely debated by Calvin in his polemic against Lutheran theologian Andreas Oslander (see *Institutes* 165–166).

in all reality through the manifesting Logos,” (Tracy 425), human and divine qualities will appear mutually analogous.²⁷

Through a creative interpretation of her favorite theologians, Robinson engages in an indirect critique of the proclamation mode by foregrounding God’s immanence and human sacredness.²⁸ Adding to this Ames’s account of two possible extremes of Protestant spirituality—the prophetic, yet “narrow vision” of his radical grandfather and his father’s lack of resources for enchantment—it is clear that the attitude of both Ames and his literary creator to their own tradition is one of the highest respect coupled with cautious, indirect criticism. With the creation of a Protestant pastor enchanted by “this life, this world,” Robinson provides a corrective, envisioning a sacramental spirituality that enhances our humanity by nourishing the heart as well as the mind and fostering an attitude of reverence towards the Earth as our home.

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27 Tracy 425. Jeff Zimmermann’s analysis of Bonhoeffer’s incarnational humanism is very helpful in understanding how Bonhoeffer must have influenced Robinson’s interpretation of God, self, and world through the mystery of the incarnation (79).

28 John Hesselink complains about “glaring gaps” and selectivity in Robinson’s use of Calvin, and a general emphasis on the Creator God at the cost of Jesus Christ (typical, of course, in the manifestation orientation). In the first part of his essay Hesselink discusses, among other things, Robinson’s view of the sacredness, even divinity of human beings. For Robinson’s selective reading of Calvin and the Puritans, see also the articles of Christopher Leise and Christie L. Maloyed.

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