Teaching Imagination

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ABSTRACT 'It is imagination, above all, that drives learning forward'. With the eloquence and insight always associated with his work Michael Armstrong considers how to recognise children's imaginative achievement: how to observe it, interpret it, value it and promote it. The child's exemplification of the power of the imagination demands our respect, but more explicitly our attention. It is this closeness of attention that marks out the act of interpretation as the polar opposite to standard assessment procedures that dominate educational practice on both sides of the Atlantic at the present moment. There could not be a better moment to reassert the primacy of the imagination in the process of learning and the value of interpretation in the business of teaching.

I want to talk about the imagination – in particular the imagination as it makes its earliest appearance in the work of children and young adults. I want to consider how to recognise children's imaginative achievement: how to observe it, interpret it, value it and promote it. By imagination I mean what the poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge called 'the germinal power that craves no knowledge but what it can take up into itself, what it can appropriate and reproduce in fruits of its own' – the power, that is, to make of a cultural tradition something new, something of one's own, to innovate as well as to absorb. It's my belief that the imagination, so defined, makes its appearance from the moment that learning begins and that it is the imagination, above all, that drives learning forward.

To talk about the imagination is to practice the art of describing – in a broad sense that includes observation, interpretation, reflection and speculation. Description, as I understand it, is a way of theorising the particular. It is the means by which we seek to enter the world of the child's' work – painting, writing, model, project, whatever it may be -, draw out its intention, meditate on its significant form and anticipate its future direction. It is the way in which we render children's work its due value.

I want to approach my theme by way of one particular example – a piece of writing composed towards the end of 2003 by a student just turned 14 years old. It is an unusual and in some ways exceptional work, written at a fragile and

fraught moment of development, as the writer struggles to represent what he has come to learn of the pain of human experience in ordered prose. I have chosen it as a striking example, exceptional maybe but not, in my experience, uncharacteristic, of a young person's imaginative engagement.

Simon is one of a family of three children, all of whom attended Harwell Primary School, Oxfordshire, between the ages of five and eleven years. Simon is the middle child, a boy between two sisters. In the winter of 2002, shortly before Christmas, his mother suddenly died of an unsuspected brain tumour. During the year that followed, Simon, and his younger sister made several return visits to their old primary school, 'our second home' as Simon once described it. In November 2003, while I was visiting the school, from which I had retired four years earlier, Simon arrived on one of his own still frequent visits. In the course of a conversation he told me that he had just finished a story which he would like me to read. This is that story. (The story is reproduced exactly as Simon gave it to me. It had been typed by his younger sister, following his precise instructions as to layout, in particular the use of italics.)

Ever Young Never Forgotten

'You wish you could wake up and forget. You pray that your life is all a cruel dream, but 'hey', what's the use in praying. The big guy up there, chooses who he needs and has no thoughts of the consequences, ain 't that just peachy.'

My grandma once told me that it's only when you loose something that you realise how precious it was. It is also a common fact that children take everything for granted. How can they appreciate what they've got, if they have no experience? That's what makes life so difficult to comprehend.

It was November. A chilly, dead time of year. Life seemed bearable, as most 13-year-old boys think. It was a good time for me, no worries and no responsibilities, just me and myself. School was, well, school. My family life was better than times before and my parents who were both loving and caring but more importantly they were paving the way for a memorable future, together, content. It was November 14th, that my mum felt *ill* We were at my sisters prize giving and after party, when all kids have to do is agree and smile. As a family we are known mainly through my father, the local doctor and friend to hundreds. But my mum was now becoming an equal, people knew her through church, school, work and not just through my dad. She talked to teachers and friends, all the time in serious pain. On November 15th , she got up weary and off balanced. The one thing that sticks in my mind is her forgetting to make tea. Women don't forget daily routines like making tea, an activity she had done everyday for the last 30 years. It was now that I demanded, *'Mum you need to sleep, I'll call Chris and she can take me in'*. Reluctantly she lay on the sofa in our

living room. If I knew that this would be my last time tucking my mum in at home, I would've given her a much longer hug and kiss.

When I arrived home later that evening, after successfully running in two tries at rugby, I was very happy. My mum's health had deteriorated and she was now only able to occasionally come out bed. It was at this time that my dad decided that he needed a second opinion on what he should do under the circumstances. We called Dr Rubin at about 2 o'clock on Saturday, I believe. He was of medium height, corpulent, and a brown haired man. Later that day he arrived and after much debating he settled on a difficult conclusion. He would have tea and not coffee. Slowly he plodded up the stairs. What they talked about I honestly don't know. All he muttered was, '*I do believe it's only a migraine'*. My dad questioned his opinion, because my mum had never suffered from migraines.

The next morning, our next-door neighbour and friendly doctor to the family, Alan, knocked on our back door. He came to drop off some cheeses, left over after his party, the night before. Eagerly my dad asked whether Alan could check my mum over, it was his medical opinion and my dads strong will power that got my mum into the Radcliff Infirmary and gave her a chance.

Events over the next few days are ones that take too much pain to write about. I can tell you that she was diagnosed at the time, with 'acute brain cancer'. By Thursday results looked gloomy and we had to decide on a decision, whether to go ahead with the operation or to leave it with fate. Exactly a week later, on Saturday the 23rd November, only 3 days to the operation, I stood in tears with my family. A prominent picture stands out in my mind; she struggled to gain air, breathing croakily as the counter on the bedside dropped slowly. All my family gathered round one bed. Noel and Tess, my mums parents on the left. My sisters, Hannah and Emily and I were on the right. My dad sat by her side.

> *For years I thought that a story needed a certain element of excitement and adventure. In a strange, murky way, I realised that truth and heart felt emotive writing speaks leaps and bounds ahead of my usual pattern of story telling. To put words on paper and draw a reader into your reality vortex, can touch a person so deeply, that they may even change.*

I don't know why I turn to poetry. I thought that rhyme and rhythm stuck more firmly in the mind, a lot better than sentences. On December the 3rd, 4 days after the funeral, I lay curled up staring at my bedroom ceiling. It was here that a poem came to me; here that my emotions took over, here that my poems would begin.

Why Not Today?

Make them say,
That each and everyday that goes past,
Is not one to linger on but to make last,

For those are fools who look through worried eyes,
People who panic at saying goodbyes,
These days which are wasted on doubt and sorrow,
Are better forgotten, move on there's tomorrow,
As one great poet may say,
Lets wait till tomorrow,
Leave it with fate,
Another will write,
Why not today, tomorrow can wait?

The funeral was beautiful, just what my mum would have wished for. There were flowers and a simple coffin for an elaborate lady. A service that bought over 600 tearful touched hearted people to pay their respects and to say goodbye to the women so many loved. Four black remembrance books lay at the corners in the church. The altar was decorated in bloom and the coffin in reeves of flowers and pictures. Three candles from each of us children, lit as we left the church. I still hold these even now a year later; all are lit in times of trouble, as they sit beside the fireplace.

I can't express in words how life was at that time, at that moment. I can only help you to understand how important your loved ones are. Again its all in the hard live of experience, but I hope you never have to experience that, that my *friend,* for that would be a serious tragedy.

It seems that God wants us to feel pain in life. He needs us to fully appreciate his glorious kingdom. Although it does make you wonder whether he meant to take human life away, or if he was just stuck for time. *Should he have rested on the seventh day?*

Mistake

When God created the earth, he didn't realise his power,
To create new birth, like the seedlings in a flower,
Why not an easier way then death, to join his paradise,
To take away human breath, is worse than sacrifice,
But I don't blame him for making his mistake,
For when the light is getting dim,
It's a mistake even God can make.

Now looking back I understand why my mum wanted us to keep going at school. Not because she was upset or she didn't want us to get left behind with schoolwork. It was because she wanted our last memories of her to be of happy times, not of a mum who couldn't feed herself or walk. *It's ironic that someone who brings up a human child, who teaches them to feed, to walk and talk, dies with the child doing the same.* In a way, I'm pleased that she was not scared or worried. She believed strongly in faith and no pain or suffering could change that. She firmly

believed she would die in Gods arms. I just hope we all can trust in someone or something that much and never even see them.

It's my lack of will power that makes me so stubborn to change. My constant thought of happier times from my past, causes me to miss out on years were I should have changed sooner.

So why do I constantly feel that life owes me something, if everything its given me has brought amazing memories?

I suppose everyone needs an excuse to give up and waste his or her life away. You see, I think that everyone is living life in constant denial. We deny that we are lonely or that we are sure of something. Children turn to adults for advice as a way of security. We children believe that adults know everything, but really they only know that little proportion of what they have experienced. How can I turn to an adult who hasn't lost a mum? What would you say if I asked you what to do? Talking gets your troubles off your chest but doesn't solve them. So we think that to give is perfectly expectable, if you cant win.

Why?

Why when faced with all this,
Do we expect to see the light?
When the loved ones we'll miss,
Don't resist and cant fight?
When life is so precious,
You realise what you've lost,
And death is so vicious,
Why should we pay the cost?
Why not then, dig a hole and curl up and die,
Lets throw away our soul,
It's your time to fly,
But don't give the satisfaction,
To the blank and the dark,
But be the reaction,
That lit a flame with your spark.

Life took a dramatic turn for the worst, in a short space of time. Right now all I can do is wait and push forward to the future with my sisters. My dad is left in disbelief, lost without a purpose to live, except us. Friends and family are torn apart through anger and jealously. If the world decided to forget that they were living, I'm sure we would live, lives of less fear. We wouldn't worry about the future; we would live for the day.

Sitting her at my desk, telling a tale of sorrow, l feel like a great burden has been lifted. The story doesn't have an ending or a moral, its only to tell you that you are not alone, my friend, there are those who share your pains. If you have read this story looking for a happy finish or an ending to make you smile, I have to say you are to be disappointed.

I do not write of the future, only of past and of present, who am I to say that all my views are true. I am just a child, a child of little experience, together with a loving family I can make it through life, so can you my friend, so can you!

He places the pencil on the table and closes his book. His job is now complete. The light outside is getting dim. His family are watching 'Shrek' the movie, down stairs, cuddled on the sofa. Christmas is near and time to remember arrives. He slowly creeps down stairs with a camera, to take a family picture unnoticed. The doorbell rings, interrupting the atmosphere. He opens the wooden door and meets an old friend

' Dear boy, my heartfelt sympathy, your mother is, Ever Young, Never Forgotten. Tell me, what is it like living in a tragic nightmare? '

I'm here

I'll always be waiting here,
Although I seem so far,
I'm always near,
Just look towards a star,
I never left you,
I know you're sad,
I know you'll come trough
It's the job of a dad,
I'm always in the room,
Laughing with you,
We'll meet again soon,
That much is true!

For mum, Ever Young, Never Forgotten,
Thank you for being you,
All my deepest love, your loving son

Simon's story is extraordinarily rich. On one level it is an imaginative reconstruction of the scattered fragments of an experience which the story itself describes as taking 'too much pain to write about,' even as it is, nevertheless, written. At another level it is a daring experiment in literary form, interweaving narrative with poetry, speculation, instruction and commemoration. It is a narrative of many voices, by turns direct, ironic, plaintive, introspective, sententious, distant, elegiac. It is a story about storytelling itself, about the experience that the storyteller makes known to us as we listen to the tale, a work of art about the values and purposes of art.

When Simon first told me about his story he was clear that that's what it was – a story. Later, when I had asked him why the first four lines were placed within speech marks, and italicised, he pointed out that these lines are spoken by the figure introduced on the story's last page, the first person narrator's third

person alter ego who must be imagined to be replying to his 'old friend's' question: 'Dear boy, my heart felt sympathy, your mother is Ever Young, Never Forgotten. Tell me, what is it like living in a tragic nightmare?' Simon's autobiographical narrative, then, is self-consciously framed within a third person fiction. The reason for this goes beyond any felt need to distance the tale from its emotional immediacy in Simon, the narrator's, own life, although I have no doubt that this too was part of Simon's intention. The boy's reply to his old friend's pompous, if well meaning question is bitter, dismissive of the proverb's trite formula, – ever young, never forgotten – almost cynical: 'You wish you could wake up and forget. You pray that your life is all a cruel dream, but 'hey', what's the use in praying. The big guy up there, chooses who he needs and has no thoughts of the consequences, ain't that just peachy.' But this sardonic utterance by the boy who opens the door to his old friend is, in effect, no more than the flippant introduction to a far more subtle tale. The first person narrative that follows both deconstructs and transcends its frame, recasting both the old friend's slack proverb and the dear boy's bitter reply in the light of a more profound understanding achieved through a retelling, now in first person, of the tragic tale. By the time the tale is told, its proverbial title can be confidently reaffirmed, in the author's closing dedication to his mother, because the tale itself has renewed it.

'My grandma once told me that if s only when you lose something that you realise how precious it was.' Grandmothers, the world over, are the quintessential tellers of tales, the old folks who have wisdom to impart, a lifetime's experience to exchange in the guise of stories, both their own stories and the stories which they in their turn have been told in the course of life. It is surely significant that Simon should open his first person narrative with the figure of the storyteller, for this is to be a story about storytelling, more especially, a story about the passing on of the storyteller's charge from generation to generation, adult to child, grandma to grandson. It may be, as the story assures us, 'a common fact that children take everything for granted.' It may be reasonable to ask, as the storyteller asks 'How can they appreciate what they've got, if they have no experience?' Yet this is to be a record of precisely a child's experience. 'I am just a child, a child of little experience,' the author muses at the end of his tale, but by then the experience which he has made known to us, his readers, has already set him apart as the figure with new wisdom to impart, the boy who can ask 'How can I turn to an adult who has not lost a mum?', the son who has to mother his own mother – 'It's ironic that someone who brings up a human child, who teaches them to feed, to walk and talk, dies with the child doing the same,' – the storyteller who can instruct us that 'The story doesn't have an ending or a moral, it's only to tell you that you are not alone, my friend, there are those who share your pains.' Simon's story, I want to say, is a story in which the teller learns what it is to tell a tale as he shares with us his tragedy, a story about the child's assumption of the storyteller's role. It is as if the grandmother listens as her grandchild takes over the tale.

The four paragraphs that follow this opening and lead us from the first sign of the mother's sickness to the moment of her death have an eloquent depth and precision that remind me strongly of the stories of Leo Tolstoy. Life and death, past, present and future, memory and forgetfulness, confront each other in this deceptively chaste account of a week's long torment. See how life and death set us off on the story: 'It was November. A chilly, dead time of year. Life seemed bearable...' Or how immediately memory is invoked alongside past and future: 'My family life was better than times before and my parents who were both loving and caring but more importantly they were paving the way for a memorable future, together, content.' A memorable future! It is, as Simon says, 'a tale of sorrow' that he has to tell, yet even from the depths of his sorrow he can observe, with delicate irony, by turns smiling or savage, the quaintness of life; the inconsequentiality of schooling, 'School was, well, school;' the embarrassment of receptions, 'We were at my sister's prize giving and after party, when all kids have to do is agree and smile; 'the obtuseness of the unlucky doctor, 'He was of medium height, corpulent, and a brown haired man. Later that day he arrived and after much debating he settled on a difficult conclusion, He would have tea and not coffee.' 'Events ...that take too much pain to write about', as Simon says, are described, despite the pain, in language so particular, so vivid, that it only serves to heighten a reader's emotion: 'Exactly a week later, on Saturday the 23rd November, only three days to the operation, I stood in tears with my family. A prominent picture stands out in my mind; she struggled to gain air, breathing croakily as the counter on the bedside dropped slowly. All the family gathered round one bed. Noel and Tess, my mum's parents on the left. My sisters, Hannah and Emily and I were on the right. My dad sat by her side.' The great German critic Walter Benjamin, in his remarkable essay *The Storyteller,* writes that 'Death is the sanction of everything that the storyteller can tell.' I want to say that at this moment in his story, here in the very particular presence of death, so intimately portrayed, Simon, the narrator, assumes in full the authority of the figure of the storyteller, as Benjamin describes him or her. It is not for nothing, then, that Simon here breaks off his story to reflect on what he has achieved in setting down for us a written account of that terrible week. It is as if he suddenly and indisputably recognises his own authority and has, at once, to declare it. 'For years I thought that a story needed a certain element of excitement and adventure. In a strange, murky way, I realised that truth and heartfelt emotive writing speaks leaps and bounds ahead of my usual pattern of storytelling. To put words on paper and draw a reader into your reality vortex, can touch a person so deeply, that they may even change.' Benjamin tells us how 'the storyteller takes what he tells from experience – his own and that reported by others. And he in turn makes it the experience of those who are listening to his tale.' Simon, in his tale and in the telling of it, shows us how this happens, how 'to put words on paper and draw a reader into your reality vortex can touch a person so deeply that they may even change.' It would be hard to imagine a more touching demonstration of Benjamin's argument.

And now comes a further twist in Simon's narrative. Heartfelt as it is, the story he has told us has not captured, yet, the full intensity of his emotion as he contemplates his mother's death. To achieve that he must abandon narrative and turn to lyric poetry, to the mind speaking to itself. Breaking away from his sequential narrative and momentarily shifting into the present tense, he introduces us to the poetry which he began to write 'on December the 3rd, 4 days after the funeral' – an event yet to be recorded – and which he has been writing ever since. 'On December 3rd, 4 days after the funeral, I lay curled up staring at my bedroom ceiling. It was here that a poem came to me; here that my emotions took over, here that my poems would begin.' With these words Simon embeds his poetry within his story while acknowledging their extra-narrative significance. 'Why Not Today' is a poem which it is hard to make seem coherent and it might be tempting for a teacher – as it was, certainly, for me – to speculate on the possibility of revision, assuming, as one of my colleagues did, that this story of Simon's was a work in progress, although I don't think that's how Simon saw it. But the poem's confusion is witness to the pressure of emotion which the poem itself seeks to articulate and behind its tortuous speculation lies one of the story's over-riding themes. 'Why not Today?/ Make them say,/ That each and every day that goes past/ Is not one to linger on but to make last.' What can be the meaning of this contrast, gentle in sound but edgy in sense, between 'linger on' and 'make last?' To linger on the passing day is to fail to make sense of it, to dwell on it as a yet unconfigured whole. To make the day last is both to have done with it and to hold it in mind, to remember it, to be inspired by it, to grasp its meaning and to move on. It is the thought that seems to me to underlie the narrator's later comment that 'Sitting here at my desk, telling a tale of sorrow, I feel like a great burden has been lifted.' The story is the means by which he configures his experience and, in so doing, reconfigures his own life.

The poem ends and the narrative voice returns as Simon, stepping back again in time, writes of his mother's funeral with the same spare eloquence as before, '...a simple coffin for an elaborate lady.' There is no lingering on emotion but a directness of observation that, surely, makes last: 'Four black remembrance books lay at the corners in the church. The altar was decorated in bloom and the coffin in reeves of flowers and pictures. Three candles from each of us children, lit as we left the church.' The narrative confirms and justifies the poet's words.

At the end of this short paragraph the narrative leaps ahead to the present moment: 'I still hold these even now a year later, all are lit in time of trouble, as they sit beside the fireplace.' What follows is a meditation on the profound trouble of death itself, a meditation directly addressed to 'my friend' – whether the 'old friend', still to be announced, or, more generally the reader. The invocation of the reader at this moment is in no way incidental. It is only in sharing his experience with another that the writer can confront his own despair – 'the hard live of experience' – and discover some kind of resolution, though the resolution is not to be found in an ending or a moral but in the sharing itself

– 'The story doesn't have an ending or a moral, it's only to tell you that you are not alone, my friend, there are those who share your pains.'

I don't have space to examine in full the details of Simon's meditation. Its central challenge is to the authority of God himself: 'Should he have rested on the seventh day?' But if God is capable of making a mistake, as the poem 'Mistake' insists, then everything is thrown into doubt: his mother's faith, his own will power, his demands on life, his childhood trust in adult knowledge. 'Why not then dig a hole, and curl up and die' he laments in the long line at the middle of his poem, Why. It is the darkest moment in his story and, in its desolation, it seems to evoke an immediate, shocked response: 'But don't give the satisfaction/ To the blank and the dark,/ But be the reaction/ That lit a flame with your spark.' How? The story cannot tell. 'I do not write of the future, only of past and present, who am I to say that all my views are true.' But perhaps the answer lies in the power of narrative itself, its capacity to configure past, present and future into one temporal whole. 'Sitting here at my desk,' writes Simon, 'telling a tale of sorrow, I feel like a great burden has been lifted.' This lifting of the burden is not in itself a resolution: 'the story doesn't have an ending or a moral.' It's rather that in the act of telling the story, Simon, the narrator, makes his experience known, known to himself and known to his readers. Once 'he places the pencil on the table and closes his book' his story belongs to a public world, in which readers make his experience their own in the act of reading his story. That seems to be the significance of the transition from first to third person here at the story's close. It is placed at a moment of extreme emotion, on the first anniversary of his mother's death, at a time when 'Christmas is near.' A 'time to remember,' Simon calls it. A time, we might also say, to hand memory on – 'not one to linger on but to make last.' A time, that is, to tell his story.

So what? What might this one extraordinary story have to tell us about learning and teaching, about the place of the imagination in the business of education, and, in particular, about how to read the works of students, young or old? I want to suggest that, among much else, it tells us that observation and interpretation – the arts of describing – are foremost among our many responsibilities as teachers. In describing Simon's story I have been seeking to enter his imaginative world, to live within his story. Keats writes in one of his letters – classic texts for anyone studying the imagination: 'We read fine-things but never feel them to the full until we have gone the same steps as the author.' In describing Simon's story I would like to feel that, in one way or another, I have been retracing his steps, as Keats urges. It would seem to me that this is the first and chief responsibility of teachers facing the challenge of students' imaginative work: first because it is the act out of which all the teacher's other acts will grow; chief because it recognises that children's imaginative work does indeed challenge the teacher's own understanding, as Simon's story demonstrates.

The teacher's second responsibility, as I see it, is to represent to her students her understanding of their work – that is to say, to respond to the

work and to its meaning with critical sympathy. Response may take many forms, and will always be shared with other readers of a student's work, most notably the student's classmates. Response includes elaboration, commentary, questioning, criticism, echoes of other works, hints, diversions and recapitulations. It implies, as I understand it, a conversational exploration of the work and its world, shared between readers and writers, teachers and students. When Simon first showed me his story, I wrote him a letter, explaining my initial reactions. Much of what I wrote then now seems inadequate, as it often the way with our initial responses to works of art. But response, however immediate, is a way of getting conversation started and, and in a collaborative classroom, once the conversation begins no one can tell just where it will lead or how the interaction between the work, its author and its readers will be played out.

The teacher's third responsibility is to look ahead to future work: to suggest to her students what next to read, what new lines of inquiry might resonate with their current concerns, what new skills or techniques or forms might help to promote and sustain their imaginative projects. As the American philosopher John Dewey once remarked, 'No knowledge is too great, too advanced, to assist a teacher in guiding students in their explorations' (Dewey 1956:16). I would want to suggest to Simon that he might enjoy some of the lyric poetry of John Keats, or Thomas Hardy. I might introduce him to the poetry of elegy. I would ask him, perhaps, to experiment with metrical form, or with various forms of poetic constraint. I might give him to read a fairy tale written by a friend last year as she too faced tragedy and sought to configure it in narrative.

As I have said, Simon's story may be exceptional but, more importantly, it is also characteristic. Simon writes that 'to put words on paper and draw a reader into your own reality vortex, can touch a person so deeply that they may even change.' So he puts it at the age of 14. And now, here is Jessica, a Dominican American student aged 9, expressing a related thought in equally compelling language when responding in writing to her teacher's request that she describe herself:

> I have black hair, brown-dark eyes, very tan skin and I'm also shy but if you give a paper and pencil I would just write it all down because you have given me the power to just free my brain and my thoughts and myself away into the paper that you have just given me. But if you just tell me I wouldn't tell you much because I'm scared inside like I'm closed.

The power of which Jessica and Simon speak is the same power as Coleridge describes in the passage I quoted at the beginning, the power to make things known and make things new – the power of imagination. It's a power that I believe all children exercise, one way or another, and as teachers it demands our respect but more especially our attention. It's this closeness of attention – close reading if you will – that marks out the act of interpretation as the polar

opposite of the standardised assessment procedures that dominate educational practice on both sides of the Atlantic at the present moment. In many ways it is the polar opposite of grading also, inasmuch as the act of grading forecloses on the necessary openness of interpretation. So be it. There couldn't be a better moment to reassert the primacy of imagination in the process of learning and the value of interpretation in the business of teaching.

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Note

This is the revised text of an address given to a workshop of teachers, students and parents in the city of Lawrence, Massachusetts in the spring of 2004.

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