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Reading Beverley Farmer's 'A Man in the Laundrette': Paradigms of Apprehension

Beverley Farmer's 'A Man in the Laundrette'¹ won almost immediate attention on two grounds: (p. 1) the argument it appears to advance espouses women's independence in a male-powered world, and (p. 2) the metatextual strategy it uses permits the central woman character to write the story that the reader is reading, which empowers her to write her male partner out of her life.² These two characteristics of the story clearly constitute elements *in* the story, or ways into understanding the gendered tensions that lie on the story's surface. I want to suggest, however, that they do not *equate with* the story, and that a closer consideration of the text reveals more ambiguities than absolutes about the exercise of authority and the right to power.

Briefly, the story tells of an Australian woman who, in the relatively recent past, has moved into a male companion's rudimentary downtown apartment in an unnamed American city. She is a writer; he (a student perhaps?) works at some unstated occupation, in the apartment, which requires him to concentrate – meaning that both of them are intently

¹ *Home Time*, Fitzroy, McPhee Gribble/ Penguin (Victoria, 1985), pp. 91-101.

² For the opportunity to discuss some readings of this story, I am grateful to my students in English 546 at the University of British Columbia (Fall, 2000). I also wish to thank Peter Mahon, for bibliographic assistance. Among published critics who have commented on Farmer's fiction, Kristen Hammett observes that the stories in *Home Time* deal with the connections between 'violence and the propaganda of romance' ('Beverly Farmer: A Retrospective', *Southerly* 56-1 [Autumn 1996], pp. 92-105, p. 93). Noting that the characters in 'Home Time' recur in 'A Man in the Laundrette', Lyn Jacobs focusses more specifically on the characteristics of writing that are both the stories' subject and their method. Jacobs emphasizes how the patterning of imagery (light and shade) reveals the deterioration of the couple's relationship, and she reads the structure of 'Laundrette' as that of a story-within-a-story, where 'the act of writing serves as a home base or outside parameter to which the writer returns to evaluate encapsulated experience' ('The Fiction of Beverley Farmer', *Australian Literary Studies* 14-3 [May 1990], pp. 325-35, p. 330). She also argues that the two stories together offer 'an implicit contrast when the full bitterness of the black man's experience is unleashed on the vulnerable woman' (p. 331). In this way the two stories 'mirror' each other (p. 332), and the couple's disintegrating relationship mirrors the sexual and racial tensions of the society in which they live. I argue that the structure of the narrative is more complex still, and its conclusion more deliberately ambiguous.

focussed, both preoccupied with their own world, and that she (at least *so she tells the reader*) tries to avoid disturbing him. To escape the confines of this space (emotional, physical, metaphorical, territorial) she resolves to take their soiled laundry (mostly *his*) to the nearest laundromat (perhaps feminized here by the *-ette* suffix in the term 'laundrette', which would be a rare usage in the USA, though more common in Australia and Britain). While she has done the laundry before, he expresses this time some concern about her losing her way – and implicitly, though not explicitly, for her safety – but he does not accompany her nor meet her there. At the 'laundrette', she encounters various people, particularly a drunken black man who presses his unwelcome attentions on her. She continues writing her story, and later, the laundry done, she returns to the apartment. An argument then ensues about whether or not she has invited this declaredly unwelcome attention. The 'story' (and by extension, their relationship, *her version of him and her*) is then 'finished'.

A conventional reading of the narrative would say that it is 'about' the way men objectify women, presume to be able to codify their behaviour, make women the object of their gaze and themselves either the lords of the universe or the victims of female malice: a version of reality to which this narrator writes *finis*. There is, in social behaviour, plenty of justification for these conclusions; but *in the text*, it is in fact the female narrator who is constructing the set of realities that the reader is invited to untangle or accept. The metatextual strategy requires this engagement. But this conclusion means that the narrator's written – constructed – version of events is itself a fiction: perhaps the fiction she has been living, or perhaps the fiction by which she chooses to reconstruct her life in this 'America', or perhaps both. That is, perhaps readers of this story are being 'told the tension itself' – not a tension between truth and fiction, but a tension between what the narrator would like to believe about possibility and what she would like to believe about limitation: her own, and the (male?) world's. The story consequently becomes a narrative of explanation and of the rhetoric of explanation, asking the reader not just to listen to the *apparent* sequence of events but also to respond to the manner of telling them: the paradigms of apprehension.

For while the easy reading of the narrative suggests that the male world impinges on the narrator, the opening makes clear that she does have an active part in shaping the events that follow. Her partner later charges that she *invites* the attention that she declares she finds unwelcome from other men, and this particular paradigm, which he dredges up in argument – *blaming the victim* – quite rightly offends her. But her narrative none the less constructs gender relationships ambiguously, so that – while she clearly does become a 'victim' of the obstreperous man in the laundrette, she is also in other respects author – or at least facilitator, collaborator in – her own condition. 'Conditioning' is key. Whatever has conditioned her to see men as she does (to construct them as she does, to expect from them what she does) lies outside the

story, in the systemic inequalities of the culture in which she lives. But the way she constructs *herself in relation to men* is articulated textually. The opening passage reads this way:

She never wants to disturb him but she has to sometimes, as this room in which he studies and writes and reads is the only way in and out of his apartment. Now that he has got up to make coffee in the kitchen, though, she can put on her boots and coat and rummage in the wardrobe for the glossy black garbage bag where they keep their dirty clothes, and not be disturbing him. 'I'll only be an hour or two', she says quickly when he comes back in. She holds up the bag to show why.

'Are you sure?' His eyebrows lift. 'It must be my turn by now'. They were scrupulous about such matters when she first moved in.

'I'm sure. I must get out more. Meet the people'. She shrugs at his stare. 'I want to see what I can of life in the States, after all'.

'Not to be with me'.

She smiles. 'Of course to be with you. You know that'.

'I thought you had a story you wanted to finish'.

'I had. It's finished'. (p. 91)

The last four lines, italicized, are reiterated at the story's end, reaffirming that an affectionate relationship is dead almost before it begins, and clearly so before the events in the laundrette crystallize for her her dissatisfaction with the status quo. *She* has moved into *his* room, the space that he has shaped; now she needs out.

The rhetorical strategies of the opening also set out the terms through which the reader – if not necessarily the character – will understand this shift in determination. The sequence of pronouns, for one thing – *She, you, I* – tells of the distance between 'I' and 'you', the severance of mutual affection, and of the distance that the narrator now feels from herself, to the point of becoming a third-person 'she', identity dislocated, projected onto an external form. Within this passage, 'she' does shift back to 'I' at the point of declaring the 'story' 'finished'. The careful working of the passage, however, opens up the possibility of counter-interpretations. The subject-pronoun 'I' perhaps asserts an achievement – it is her declaration of realized independence – or is it perhaps an illusion, simply part of a fiction that she continues – live?

The other obvious rhetorical gambit in the opening passages juxtaposes several paratactic sets (*studies and writes and reads, boots and coats*), their implied equivalences turning cumulatively into the hypotactic affirmation of dependency (*where they keep their dirty clothes, when he comes back in, when she first moved in*). This paradigm houses and then sets in motion the further juxtaposition between a series of absolutes and a set of exceptions, which reinforces the tension between what's said and what's lived. This opposition can be tabulated as follows:

Absolute	Exception	Condition
She <i>never</i> wants	<i>but</i> she has to <i>sometimes</i>	<i>as</i> this room
<i>is the only</i> [his]		<i>Now</i>
I'll <i>only</i> be an hour	<i>though</i> , she can ... and <i>not be</i> <i>or two</i>	
Are you sure, it <i>must be</i>	[interrogative]	<i>when ... why</i>
I'm <i>sure</i> . I <i>must</i>	more ... <i>want</i> ... what I can	<i>by now ... when</i>
	I thought	<i>after all</i>
<i>not to be</i>		
<i>of course to be</i>		
<i>finished</i>		

Despite the exceptions, that is, and the set of temporal and spatial conditions that serve them, the arc of this passage (and of the story) goes from absolute back to absolute, as though absolutes were necessary to permit a decision to be made: 'the only way in and out of the apartment'. The implication is that his space (for language as well as for physical occupancy: studying, reading, writing) constitutes the absolute that shapes her, but her own narrative rhetoric is also studded with absolutes. 'It's mostly my clothes, I suppose', he later says, of the laundry to be washed. 'It always is', her narrative comments, punctuating 'fact' (p. 92). Without a dimension in which exchange can happen (as distinct from evasion, which is how conversation functions here), their actions only intensify their separateness. He studies; she rummages. He makes; she wants. She smiles; he stands 'unsmiling'. She perches; he stares. He 'never says'; she 'never asks'. He 'shrugs'; she 'shuts the door'. (pp. 91-2) For her there is no person here, just a surface. When she sees him full face, she records only his eyebrows; the rest of the time he is simply 'a dark profile' (p. 91). How he sees her is explicit in his declared belief, at a critical point in their subsequent argument: 'A man can always tell is a woman fancies him' – an absolute declaration which her startled reply 'Infallibly?' of course ironically dismantles (p. 100). His view perhaps also frames the narrative contextually. But it is mainly implicit. In the long run his perception of her lies off the page rather than on it; the page is hers to control, part of what she 'wants to see' and 'can see', the distillation of life in America epitomized by 'a man in the laundrette'. What it focusses on, how it expresses itself, how it determines a relation between action and rendered action ('writing'), it is at its heart (in the 'laundrette', as it were) about how she sees 'men' and about how this set of determinations affects her being in the world.

The title, in this regard, is especially important, for it signals from the start the narrative layering. 'A' man in the laundrette can clearly refer to

the one man who particularly accosts the narrator; and casual readers are perhaps encouraged to read the story with this conclusion in mind: ‘the’ man who accosts intrudes on the narrator’s space, and is cast as the villain. But he also becomes the catalyst for change even if she finds him (and the experience) unpleasant and writes them *as* unpleasant into narrative existence. He is not, however, the only man she meets in the laundrette, and the title – ‘A Man’ – seems deliberately (and rather casually) indefinite. The indeterminacy resonates. This turns less into a story about ‘the’ man-who-accosts than into a story about the perception of ‘a’ man – that is, of indeterminate man, *the idea of ‘man’* with which this woman has been living and against which she has been trying to write. To ask, then, does she have the space to do so is to ask if she can (ever?) be free from the convention, the learned trope, or the preconception. Initially, she takes the laundry away in order to grant herself a legitimizing ‘way out’ of her partner’s apartment. But in the laundrette, it is the writing space, not just the physical space, that is intruded upon. When she goes back to the apartment, where she ‘has never properly unpacked’ and ‘Now... never will’ (p. 101) – both phrases structured as absolutes: *never, never*, and both also qualified: *properly, now* – she ‘drops’ her things into her suitcase, ‘folds’ his things away, and *writes* that her story ‘is finished’ (p. 101). But has she consequently found her independence? Even at the end, she is writing – finishing her writing (and the double-entendre of the word ‘finished’ should not be overlooked; it means *ended* but also *polished*: buffed perhaps till it is reflective, till it shows a mirror surface) – inside the house of a man. The narrative layering, that is, becomes more complex still.

Turning to the central episode helps clarify the narrator’s covert preoccupation with identity (she calls herself ‘Anne’ but declares this act of naming, in the same passage, to be a lie) and the story’s implied politics. After ‘Anne’ leaves the apartment (‘Quietly she shuts the door’, p. 92), the narrator focusses on weather (cold, windy), street appearance (‘patched’, ‘weedy’, p. 92), the paragraph functioning as a transition from one containment to another, closing with her slamming the laundrette door behind her, sealing herself in. While the old room (of the apartment) had proved claustrophobic, the new room provides no release. The day is Saturday, the laundrette is crowded with people (old black couples, four black girls, and a fat white woman, shortly to be joined by two Puerto Rican couples and the young, drunk black man in ‘stained white jeans’ [p. 94] who will torment the narrator here). Furthermore, she has arrived without U.S. coins. Her efforts to get change from the ‘old Irishman’ (p. 93) who runs this laundrette (and DK’s Bar, to which it is attached) meet first with silence and then with the manager’s apparently characteristic surliness. The reader is invited to read here the codes of both lexicon and syntactic sequence.

‘Anne’s’ ‘luck’ (p. 93) apparently changes when a washing machine becomes available and she begins to write of *‘the only way in and out of*

his apartment (p. 93), when immediately it is curtailed once more. 'A side door opens for a moment on to the layered smoke of the bar' (p. 94) and her nemesis 'lurches' (p. 94) towards her; he 'purrs', 'taps her pad', becomes insistent, shows off, starts to insult her, brags of his connections with money and violence, swaggers up close ('his fly almost touching her forehead', p. 97), and then bends over her, encloses her, thrusts up against her, spits, smokes, strikes out, and stumbles to the floor. Throughout this extended passage (6 pages of a 10-page story), doors open and close, open and close – the narrative playing catch-and-release, only to catch again, playing cat-and-mouse with the woman, toying with the declared desire for freedom – till the old black woman pounds on the side door for help and two white men 'tumble in' (like laundry in a dryer, it seems) to return the place to 'order' (p. 99). 'Anne' leaves, with one of the Puerto Rican men providing 'safe' companionship partway 'home', as far as the 'corner' (p. 99) – although, like her partner later, he tells her that the fault is hers: she 'didn't handle him right' (p. 99). Meanwhile, the white men bar the black man's way 'at the door of the laundrette' (p. 99). The threshold is the site for more than one constraint and more than one transgression.

The indeterminacy of identification in Beverley Farmer's title – 'A man' in the laundrette – begins therefore to resonate further. Asking 'which man' could be answered with any one of the following:

the young black man
 the Puerto Rican
 the grey-haired black man
 the surly Irishman
 the white bouncers

– each of them nameless, anonymous ('A' man), and all of them together a composite version of a United States male ('A-merican' man). 'I want to see what I can of life in the States', she has said, of her ostensible motivation to go to the laundrette alone (p. 91).

More fundamentally, given the story's recurrent subject and contemporary urban setting, these men provide for 'Anne' a composite version of the *sexualized* male, whether American or other. Such a reading derives not just from the actions of the drunken black man, whose pelvic thrusts constitute a parodic pantomime as well as an offensive, unwelcome intrusion into 'Anne's' physical and emotional space, but also from the language by which the text recounts this entire episode. From the moment 'Anne' leaves the apartment, the narrator's language eroticizes the landscape, and in particular renders it as a territory of male sexuality – or at least as a territory only comprehensible in the terms used to describe male impotence, arousal, and orgasm. The point is not that the text focusses on genitalia (though it clearly concerns itself with physical as well as emotional harassment) but that it renders sexual everything and everyone in this environment. Can the narrator be free in such a world?

Farmer's story seems to suggest not just that the narrator's expectations are shaped by her experience of men but also that men's sexuality is genital-centred and that the (male, and perhaps self-preoccupied) language she has available to her to express herself implicitly masculinizes – sexualizes – how and whatever she sees. It is not just an occasional image I am referring to here, to characterize a particular person or event, but rather the cumulative force of a sustained choice of lexicon to characterize the entire landscape.

Consider the trip to the 'laundrette'. It begins along 'his street' (the phallic 'old elms... full of *quick* squirrels') where 'red ivy' *shawls* the tall (3-storeyed) brick mansions. 'As she comes down the street', 'drops of rain... *prickle* her face', and the wind 'shuffles her and her *clumsy bag*.' The laundrette, which she reaches 'with a *shudder*', is called 'DK's Bar and laundrette' – 'DK' possibly being a random alphabetic choice to suggest the American penchant for acronyms, and/or possibly a recondite, cryptic allusion to the San Francisco punk rock band, Dead Kennedys,¹ and/or possibly a socially resonant homonym ('decay'), and/or (given the text of the story) possibly also a genital pun: *dicks*. The people in the laundrette are scarcely individualized; the text usually refers to them as '*couples*', and her only money is 'a *couple* of dollar notes', which she '*fingers*'. The old man is '*wrinkled*'; the washers '*churn*'; Anne herself '*fumbles*' for her '*pad and pen*'; and the assorted doors are ways '*in and out*'. When the drunk man comes in, she sees his '*eyetooth*' as a '*furred brown stump*.' He shortly gets '*sweaty and shaking*', '*sucks smoke in, sighs it out*', asks 'Anne' to go with him into the bar with the phrase 'Wanna come?' – then opens the door 'on a darkness *slashed with red mirrors*', returns to thrust '*his belly... hard* against her back' while she clutches '*hot shirts*'. After the Puerto Rican offers her '*safe*' passage and tells her she didn't '*handle* him right', she looks back to see him 'out on the road, *his body arched*'. And she returns to her room-mate's street, where the 'streetlamps are '*coming on* already with a *milky, fluttering, bluish-white*'. Here, too, a squirrel '*stands erect*' for a moment, then '*darts away, ... the silver spray of its tail*' following it up an elm. 'Anne' '*fumbles*' again, this time for her key, then rushes into the apartment where she has never unpacked and where she 'Now... never will' (pp. 92-100). Unpacked what? Unpacked her clothes, obviously. But if this

¹ Although, if so, it would make the bar and laundrette the site of a deliberately offensive critique of conservative Republican America, which would seem to stretch the narrative unduly. The band (Dead Kennedys), which first performed in the USA in 1978, comprised vocalist Eric Boucher (as 'Jello Biafra'), guitarist East Bay Ray, bassist Klaus Fluoride, drummer Bruce Slesinger (aka 'Ted'; replaced by D.H. Peligro in 1981), and a second guitarist known as '6025'. After an extended legal case, which ended in a mistrial in 1987, the band folded, though the band members each went on to separate musical careers. I am indebted to my colleagues Peter Babiak and Michael Greene for directing me to further information about this band.

phrase also means *unpacked her sense of self, unpacked the language through which she tells 'her' story*, then the story suggest a far greater restriction than the simple *physical* fact of living in another person's room.

But what induces this restriction? What does *the story* suggest induces it? It is here that interpreting the story becomes more obviously an act of selective recodification. For there can be at least six working hypotheses:

- 1) This is a feminist story; it argues that men make unfounded assumptions about women, intrude upon them physically, emotionally, and intellectually (through the paradigms of lexicon and linguistic structure), and that women need a place of their own – and have the capacity to affirm and locate one – in order to express themselves and write their way out of that constriction.¹
- 2) This is a feminist story; it argues that women who accept male language, women who construct the world according to male paradigms and images, women who see themselves only in the mirror of men's (metaphoric) 'bars', and women who shape the world around them because (however justifiably) they fear men, are not themselves free and furthermore perpetuate this lack of freedom for other women.
- 3) This is a feminist story; it argues that this particular woman has an identity *other than* the false one she surrenders to others, and that this 'real' identity, expressed through her ability to tell this story (in what really is her language) is not fearful, for it matter-of-factly writes men out of her life and leaves them behind in their drunken blundering and inarticulate silences.
- 4) This is a feminist (or perhaps anti-feminist) story; it argues that this woman *is* a user of the men in her life – and of other women – insofar as she (being a writer) inevitably cuts up and reassembles others *in order to tell story*, and therefore implicitly finds her 'being' primarily in writing or perhaps attaches greater value to writing than to being (in the world).
- 5) This is a political story (perhaps feminist); it argues not just that the language of 'man' conventionally shapes and encloses living space ('his street') or infantilizes it ('laundrette'), but that it is the language of *American* man that does so: i.e., that (to the degree that the world has become American space) the rest of the world has become enclosed and infantilized by this 'foreign' and 'imperial' culture.
- 6) This is a political story (perhaps feminist and perhaps race-encoded); it argues that, in seeming to affirm union, the male projects his desire for the Other, his desire to control and subjugate the Other, in both gendered and

¹ In 'Letter to Judith Brett' (*Meanjin* 43-1 (1986), p. 142; rpt in *Eight Voices of the Eighties*, ed. Gillian Whitlock, U Queensland P [Brisbane, 1989], pp. 130-1), Farmer replies to an article by Kerryn Goldsworthy in *Meanjin* (1985) on the ideological requirements of feminist fiction; Farmer insists that, while feminism is a political force, it is not a dictatorship, and that criticism should not *require* a particular political stance of any writer. She affirms that a writer can, that is, if she chooses to do so, create a female character who is ideological committed or one who, under any form of exclusive ideological examination, might be 'found wanting' (p. 131). Farmer briefly extends these comments in her interview with Marylynn Scott (esp. 93). See Marylynn Scott, 'Rebuilding Lifeworlds' [Interview with Beverley Farmer], *Kunapipi* 16-1 (1994), pp. 87-100.

racial terms: hence this story, adapting black-white-Latino configurations, at once reiterates and complicates the Aboriginal-white tensions of Australian history, as adumbrated in such earlier fictions (by Australian women) as Katherine Susannah Prichard's *Coonardoo* (1929) and Mary Durack's *Keep Him My Country* (1955), where it is white men who abuse black women, where white women are sometimes also victimized, and where white women sometimes (even simultaneously) prove to be collaborators in institutional and imperial design.

While 'A Man in the Laundrette' sustains each of these descriptive summaries, it is, of course, not a mandatory requirement of interpretation that readers must choose among these options, nor that they must choose from these options only. (Perhaps, for example, it might also be possible to read the narrative as a psychological story in which 'Anne' projects a *fear* of sexuality, locating threat rather than love in a landscape she calls 'foreign', or perhaps the story is more fundamentally a political critique of urban space and the decline of a once genteel culture.)¹ That the story should sustain this contradictory range of reactions, moreover, does not constitute confusion so much as it suggests something of the ambiguous nature of the narrator's sense of self and surrounds. To what end?

Earlier in this commentary, I used the phrase 'paradigms of apprehension' to refer to the manner in which the events of the story are told. The deliberate ambiguity in this phrase emphasizes what I take to be the reason for the story's having been written as first-person metatext. It deals with both fear and comprehension, the two faces of 'apprehension' – fear conveyed through the (gendered, sexual) lexicon, comprehension conveyed by the (circular, self-reflexive) structure. But there is a further complication here, for the narrator's 'appreciation' of her dilemma (and these words raise ambiguities of their own: *recognition, valuation*) does not intrinsically free her from the circle she has been written into or that she has written herself into.

Towards the end of the story, after she has returned from the laundrette, *folded* her room-mate's shirts, *hung up* his trousers, *paired* his socks, and *dropped* her own 'few things' into her suitcase, she notices her surroundings again in a passage that asks insistently to be read as psychic metaphor:

The tall windows behind her lamps are nailed shut. A crack in one glitters like a blade. Wasps dying of the cold have nested in the shaggy corners. In the panes, as in those of his window, only a greyness like still water is left of the day. (p. 101)

¹ In an example of yet another approach to this fiction, Xavier Pons ('Dramatising the Self: Beverley Farmer's Fiction', *Australian Literary Studies* 17-2 [October 1995], pp. 141-8) argues that Farmer's stories are autobiographical.

Fixity and enclosure permeate everything, it seems. The next paragraph, however, begins with the word 'But' – there is to be another exception. The narrator notices one 'strip of window' where a slant of sun shines through 'ivy' leaves (likely 'Virginia creeper' or 'Boston ivy', given the plant's 'fire'-red fall colour) and creates the illusion of stained glass. Presumably the fire-colour, even the 'flicker' of it, suggests a way of countering the water-world of the laundrette and the windowpane. Or does it just circle the woman back into it? 'I'll never forget this window', she says, anticipating a future of change (p. 101). Though 'change', pointedly – the story working through homonym again – is what she failed to take with her to wash with, to set the laundry cycles in motion. She speaks out loud here, but the room-mate – 'statue', 'shadow', 'hard edge' – gives no sign of having 'heard'. She begins then, abruptly, to act: she kills a wasp, 'slaps it with a newspaper and sweeps it on to the floor' (p. 101). Although she is still 'afraid to touch it in case a dead wasp can still sting, if you touch the sting', she does pick up her pen again at this point, potentially a stinger of another kind, and proceeds to 'finish' the story she has to write. 'A Man in the Laundrette' then closes.

What does it explain? Answering this question depends less perhaps on the teller than on the active presence of a listener. If the room-mate does not hear, or does not choose to hear, her claim on light, fire, time, change, *difference*, then the act of explanation – of *ex-planation* (= 'making level'), not *apology* (= 'speech in defence') – changes neither him nor the circumstances of his closed room. For Beverley Farmer, by contrast, to have shaped the narrator's story as a slowly articulated act of self-recognition (the mirror 'finish' to the story proving functional) constitutes an invitation to the reader to hear the difference between a fearful passivity and a not-unafraid determination to speak.

Even so, the narrator's hand 'shakes' as she writes (p. 101). This story offers no easy resolution to gendered disparities of conduct or opportunity, whether individual or systemic. By taking up the pen at all, however, she appears to believe she has a 'handle' at last on how to treat the men in her life. Whether that constitutes more a fictional gesture than a prelude to a physical separation remains conjectural. It likely depends on whether her version of 'man (in the laundrette)' is a psychic state to which she (and the reader) must return, or a specific restrictive condition that (by recognizing it for what it is, or has been) she is able to grow beyond. Put another way, it likely depends on whether the reader attaches more credence to the apartment's stained glass or to the drunken man's stained pants, to the language of declared action or to the structure of cyclical return. Farmer's point may well be that the two choices do not represent mutually exclusive options, but inseparable ones, sustaining the ambiguity of text in order to recognize how life itself is a tissue of contradictory signs.

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