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**DESTABILISING BOUNDARIES AND INHABITING  
THRESHOLDS: ECCENTRICITY AND LIMINALITY IN  
ANNE TYLER'S WRITING**

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of The Nottingham  
Trent University for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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In memory of my Dad

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## ABSTRACT

The thesis argues that Anne Tyler's initial concern to explore representations of eccentricity is made more complex in her subsequent novels where it becomes subsumed within notions of liminality. Both the eccentric and the liminal are based upon the idea of boundaries and limits; Tyler moves on from a questioning of behavioural 'boundaries' and perceptions of the eccentric and becomes more concerned, in my reading, with the idea of liminal 'thresholds', characterised by their permeability. Here it is possible to identify four overlapping phases: the early 'apprentice' novels up to *The Clock Winder*; the predominantly eccentric phase up to *Morgan's Passing*; the transitional phase where the theories of the anthropologist Victor Turner are relevant; and the final liminal phase.

After a discussion of Tyler's work in relation to biographical and historical context and of how, in spite of accusations of apoliticality, it is possible to locate her work on the periphery of socio-cultural engagement, the study traces the development of representations of eccentricity. Here her questioning of conventional definitions of acceptable behaviour moves away from the association between the eccentric and the Southern to the notion of what I identify as the 'double edge' of eccentricity, which is less celebratory and benign. Tyler goes on to destabilise perceptions of 'normality' by questioning the perception of the eccentric as threat and subverting the practice of imposing inflexible behavioural boundary-lines. I then consider the transition stage in her writing and my fifth chapter contains an analysis of *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant* (1982) and *The Accidental Tourist* (1985).

In these texts representations of the eccentric persist but are complicated by the notion of liminal thresholds where familial boundary-lines are fluid and indefinite. Subsequently representations of eccentricity become increasingly subsumed within a liminal dynamic which is variously re-configured in the next four novels.

## ABBREVIATIONS

### NOVEL TITLE (PUBLISHED)

<i>If Morning Ever Comes</i>	IMEC
<i>The Tin Can Tree</i>	TCT
<i>A Slipping-Down Life</i>	SDL
<i>The Clock Winder</i>	CW
<i>Celestial Navigation</i>	CN
<i>Searching for Caleb</i>	SC
<i>Earthly Possessions</i>	EP
<i>Morgan's Passing</i>	MP
<i>Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant</i>	D
<i>The Accidental Tourist</i>	AT
<i>Breathing Lessons</i>	B
<i>Saint Maybe</i>	SM
<i>Ladder of Years</i>	L
<i>A Patchwork Planet</i>	PP
<i>Back When We Were Grownups</i>	BW

### NOVEL TITLE (UNPUBLISHED)

<i>I Know You, Rider</i>	IKYR
<i>Winter Birds, Winter Apples</i>	WBWA
<i>Pantaleo</i>	P

### SHORT STORY TITLE (PUBLISHED)

'As the Earth Gets Old'	E
'The Feather Behind the Rock'	F
'The Common Courtesies'	CC
'With All Flags Flying'	FF
'The Bride in the Boatyard'	BB
'Half-Truths and Semi-Miracles'	H
'A Knack for Languages'	K
'The Artificial Family'	AF
'The Geologist's Maid'	GM
'Your Place is Empty'	YP
'Holding Things Together'	HT
'Uncle Ahmad'	AM
'Linguistics'	Ln
'Laps'	Lp
'A Woman Like a Fieldstone House'	WL

### SHORT STORY TITLE (UNPUBLISHED)

'Glass Wind'	GW
'Believable Lies'	BL



*DU:* The Anne Tyler papers, Special Collections Library, Duke University, Durham, North Carolina. The collection contains manuscripts and typescripts of Tyler's novels and short stories. In addition, the collection contains several boxes of correspondence, reviews and newspaper clippings. However, the papers are only partly catalogued so no more precise referencing is possible. Also, in many cases, the page numbers have been clipped from the reviews.

## INTRODUCTION

'When you finish a book, it feels like you've used up all your ideas - like cleaning out your drawers; then, slowly, it all fills up again' (Anne Tyler)<sup>1</sup>

Anne Tyler is something of an oddity in the context of contemporary American fiction. Despite the fact that she has been a prolific writer since the mid-sixties and her novels have been well received by reviewers and other writers, there have been relatively few scholarly works published on her fiction. Perhaps her reputation for being 'a good read'<sup>2</sup> and the popular appeal<sup>3</sup> that she has maintained for more than a quarter of a century have meshed with the sort of literary prejudices that privilege the less accessible, and meant that she was largely neglected by the academic community until the beginning of the 1990s.

Given the concern with boundaries and limits which persistently emerges in her novels, it is apposite that Tyler seems 'odd' in that she is located on the margins of the contemporary American novel. The central chapter of *Breathing Lessons*, which won the Pulitzer Prize in 1986, concerns the funeral of Serena's husband, Max Gill. This was published as a short story in the *New Yorker* entitled 'Rerun',<sup>4</sup> and this title identifies Serena's determination to replace the conventional funeral service with a re-enactment of the wedding between her and Max twenty-nine years before. In this she is transgressing the limits of reverence and dignity which inform the cultural imaginary of a conventional funeral. Furthermore, Serena's attempt to replace a rite of passage serving to separate with a rite of passage serving to unite, suggests a denial of the threshold of death through this process of substitution. A former high-school friend, Sugar, who is required to sing once more 'Born to Be with

You' feels this to be inappropriate, especially as the song contains the words 'By your side satisfied' (B, 60). She voices a less eccentric position: 'I mean I know we're supposed to be humouring the bereaved, but there are limits' (B, 65).

It was this sort of complexity concerning limits and boundaries that I wanted to explore and I took this idea to the literature that is available. There were two early important dissertations on Tyler: Nesanovich's *The Individual in the Family* (1979) and Linton's *The Temporal Horizon* (1989). These early studies identify two issues which will persist through Tyler's work; family tensions and the complexities of time. The first full-length study was Joseph Voelker's *Art and the Accidental in Anne Tyler* (1989), which rightly acknowledges that the subtleties of Tyler's writing merit close reading. However, in my view, his analysis is conceptually confused, particularly when he takes Freudian theory to *The Accidental Tourist* (1985) and reads *Breathing Lessons* (1988) as a Keatsian meditation on the autumnal nature of middle age. Two more overviews aimed at an undergraduate readership followed: *Understanding Anne Tyler* by Alice Hall Petry (1990) and *Anne Tyler* by Elizabeth Evans (1993). Petry's stated aim was to put 'aright some of the amazingly wrong-headed things that have been written about your work'<sup>5</sup> and Evans's to 'not wax eloquent but wax with reason and evidence'.<sup>6</sup> Both these studies provide a basis for further research in that they identify themes and motifs and in this respect three collections of critical essays also provide an additional resource.

In 1990 C. Ralph Stephens edited thirteen essays drawn primarily from the April 1989 symposium at Essex Community College in Baltimore and *The*

*Fiction of Anne Tyler* includes 'Private Lives and Public Issues', an essay by the feminist critic Sandra Gilbert. Gilbert has repeatedly dismissed Tyler's work as slight and lacking any political/feminist bite and her opinions may have contributed to the belated attention of women scholars. Perhaps the fact that Tyler is a comic author relates to this as such criticism might emphasise the trivialising overtones of pleasure and deny that texts can be both intensely enjoyable and intellectually profound. However, it is precisely because Tyler's comic fictions reach a wider audience than overtly didactic feminist literature that they have greater potential influence and merit more critical attention.

In 1992 Petry edited a book of essays, interviews and personal statements and Mary F. Robertson's 'Medusa Points and Contact Points' is particularly useful and thought-provoking in identifying how Tyler's narrative strategies intersect with the dynamics of family life. Robertson also identifies reasons why Tyler's novels have received relatively little academic attention; her adherence to 'memorable charcters [sic], seductive plots' and 'imaginative and hawk-eyed descriptions';<sup>7</sup> her lack of engagement with either political issues or feminist debates. Dale Salwak's collection of 1994 contains two useful pieces: Rose Quiello's discussion of language, 'Breakdowns and Breakthroughs'; and Ruth O. Saxton's analysis of dress as signs of femininity, 'Crepe Soles, Boots, and Fringed Shawls'. Since the mid-1990s there have been two further overviews and here Robert Croft's *Anne Tyler: A Bio-Bibliography* (1995), which is an invaluable factual resource, eclipses Paul Bail's attempt in *Anne Tyler: A Critical Companion* (1998) to identify themes and apply a variety of theoretical readings.

Originally, the main aim of this project was to analyse representations of eccentricity in Tyler's texts in an attempt to construct a theoretical base for this sort of behaviour. Although reviews and publishers' publicity material often drew attention to her eccentric characters and the quirky aspects of her work,<sup>8</sup> this has not yet received any comprehensive or explanatory critical attention. My starting point was to consider how Tyler's depiction of individual character destabilises, questions and, to a certain extent, subverts consensual definitions of acceptable behaviour through representations of eccentricity. Tyler can be viewed as a domestic novelist in the sense that family relationships provide the raw material for her work, hence her recurrent preoccupation with the dynamics of the familial, the nature of motherhood and the character of marriage. A further aim, then, was to locate the eccentric within the ideology of American family life. Relatedly I intended to analyse Tyler's formal strategies and follow an approach stressing the unstable nature of signification to demonstrate how eccentricity problematises the constructions of meanings.

Following this line of research led to my becoming exercised by the notion and nature of *boundary-lines* in her writing. Much of the limited critical attention she has received has concentrated on the formal and the stylistic in order to classify her work and place it within traditional literary boundaries. Consequently she has been read variously as a realist, a minimalist and a postmodernist. Arguably this emphasis on form unnecessarily limits discussion of her writing, which defies such categorisation and occupies a multivalent terrain transgressing generic and stylistic boundaries. The

relationship between boundary and both *context* and *content* is a much more fruitful line of research.

Hence the project will start with a consideration of Tyler's work in relation to historical and biographical context. Although I will not adopt an overtly historicist approach, I aim to acknowledge that it is not possible to disassociate completely her novels from personal life experiences and public events. Tyler has been accused of avoiding such events and of being apolitical. However, this is to oversimplify. Although she does not foreground political events, there is a sense in which context is driven to the margins and sited on the periphery with regard to socio-cultural engagement, and this is particularly evident in *Morgan's Passing* (1980). As stated above, Robertson suggests that this muted approach to 'big' issues has contributed to the relative dearth of Tyler criticism and she also comments on her lack of an evident feminist position. Indeed Tyler has been read as both feminist and anti-feminist. Although she has been applauded for creating such independent women as Justine Peck in *Searching for Caleb* (1976) and Muriel Pritchett in *The Accidental Tourist* (1985), critics have also pointed out that these characters are emotionally rather than economically independent. They occupy the traditional wife/mother role within the family and the personal replaces the directly political, implying little sense of sisterhood or collective identity. Betts rightly identifies that 'Tyler's feminism is of this less dramatic sort - she admires the people, often women, who have an abyss running right through their own backyards and still hang out the laundry'.<sup>9</sup>

My own feminist position will also be of a 'less dramatic sort'. Discussions of Tyler's re-configurations of family, marriage and motherhood will be

informed by feminist theory, yet I do not intend to foreground the sort of feminist critique which addresses the nature of her position and her conservatism (or not) with regard to the politics of gender. This is already a well-researched area and the recent work of Stout and MacPherson has questioned the dismissive attitude of such critics as Petry<sup>10</sup> and Gilbert.<sup>11</sup> These books refine earlier criticism by concentrating on narratives of departure and escape and apply these to Tyler. Stout indicates the ambiguities of her position and her concern with the tension between individual demands and shifting family responsibilities. She questions the notion of Tyler as conservative domestic novelist: 'I see her, instead, as a novelist attempting to navigate between conservatism and departure, concerned with trying to find ways of accommodating the departures of social change to the persistent needs of human beings'.<sup>12</sup> Macpherson, in her discussion of *Earthly Possessions* (1977) and *Ladder of Years* (1995), also calls into question the idea that Tyler is conservative: 'instead of reifying gendered positions, or accepting them uncritically, Tyler actually presents desire for release coupled with the recognition that release is not always possible'.<sup>13</sup>

There has also been critical uncertainty concerning Tyler's relationship to the Southern literary tradition. Tyler, who spent her adolescence in Raleigh, North Carolina, and gained a degree at Duke University, Durham, regards herself as a Southerner but not a Southern writer, in spite of an acknowledged debt to Eudora Welty.<sup>14</sup> 'I don't consider myself a Southern writer; only a Southerner'.<sup>15</sup> Kissel attempts to place her in a white Southern literary tradition alongside Shirley Ann Grau and Gail Godwin: 'Anne Tyler's fiction, too, attests

to the continuing paralysis from the weakness, absence, or actual death of the white southern father'.<sup>16</sup> Certainly there are absent fathers in Tyler's fiction, most notably Beck Tull in *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant* (1982) and Danny Bedloe in *Saint Maybe* (1991). However, it is difficult to see in what sense these characters are 'Southern'. Furthermore, Kissel's conclusion seems confused. It locates Tyler's characters in both 'a complex, urbanised South where faint, anachronistic traces of a more aristocratic, mythically "genteel" South still cast shadows over everyday lives',<sup>17</sup> and 'modern-day Baltimore' which is 'very much part of mainstream American society'.<sup>18</sup> Significantly, Baltimore, where Tyler lives, and where her novels are set, is in Maryland, a state situated 'betwixt and between'<sup>19</sup> the South and the North. And, in my view, Tyler can be located only on the periphery of a Southern tradition. She has endorsed this herself: 'I'd have to be a great pretender to present myself as a Southern writer (I wasn't born in the South, and was only raised on the outskirts looking in)'.<sup>20</sup>

Consequently, in Chapter 2, I investigate the ways in which Tyler's early works inhabit the margins of a Southern literary tradition. This involves a discussion of the unpublished *I Know You Rider*, written in 1961 while she was at Duke, and her early published novels set in North Carolina: *If Morning Ever Comes* (1964), *The Tin Can Tree* (1965) and *A Slipping-Down Life* (1970). One of the 'Southern' elements in these texts is their representation of eccentricity and there is a need to establish the nature of such early representations in order to gauge how these change and become more complicated. Here again Tyler occupies a middle ground; as a reviewer of *The Tin Can Tree* suggests, 'Her people do not walk the wilder shores of



eccentricity'.<sup>21</sup> At this stage in her writing her representations of the eccentric celebrate the benign aspects of such behaviour and are consequently rather tentative and lacking in purpose and bite. A different emphasis begins to emerge in her fourth published novel, *The Clock Winder* (1972), the final novel under discussion in this chapter, where eccentricity intersects with the familial and its less benign aspects begin to surface.

In Chapter 3, I go on to consider how these less benign aspects develop yet further in the novels from *Celestial Navigation* (1974) through *Morgan's Passing* (1980). In these texts Tyler again calls into question the boundary-line between the 'normal' and 'not normal' and the conventional and the non-conventional. However, the behaviour of Jeremy Pauling, her first fully-developed male eccentric, is not depicted as merely 'benign'. Furthermore, this loss of benignity has a double edge. Here the conservative perception of 'odd' behaviour, as a potential threat to the dominant order which needs to be neutralised, is set against a more radical position which draws attention to the constraints of damning categorisation – the setting up of hard-and-fast boundary-lines. Tyler also questions the expectations of motherhood, and the need to reside within them, in her characterisation of Justine Peck, her first fully-developed female eccentric, in *Searching for Caleb* (1976), and Charlotte Emory in *Earthly Possessions* (1977), relating this to individuality and a perceived sense of self. In *Pantaleo* (unpublished) and *Morgan's Passing* (1980) it becomes clear that, although she continues to dislodge the boundary-lines of 'motherhood', Tyler's depiction of eccentric *characters* is entering a crisis stage. She is becoming unhappy with any such exclusive categorisation involving boundary-line divisions.

After *Morgan's Passing* appeared, Tyler only sat down to compose two short stories but before this time she had been a prolific short-story writer. Between 1959 and 1977 she had thirty-six stories published in such diverse magazines as the *New Yorker*, *Cosmopolitan* and *Mademoiselle*. There is also a wealth of unpublished manuscript material in her papers at Duke University. A study of this shorter fiction is necessary in order to help establish any relationship between her different ways of writing. Indeed there are dialogues between her short and long fiction and, in this sense, her fictive practice transgresses the generic boundary between the short story and the novel. The two genres share the familiar domestic themes, expressed with her usual attention to detail. However, writing short stories provided Tyler with what she termed herself as the freedom 'to be playful'.<sup>22</sup> She could play experimental games with representations of eccentric characterisation and explores less familiar areas like race. She also indulges her interest in the idiosyncrasies of language and attempts to deconstruct the relationship between reality and illusionism, thus drawing attention to the paradox of her own practice. In this process the idea of boundary-lines is fundamentally eroded, and, more and more, Tyler becomes concerned to represent arenas of exchange and cross-over, 'liminal zones' as I shall come to define them. Tyler could then take the fruits of this experimentation back to her novel writing in order to enhance it.

The fact that representations of eccentricity and the question of 'normality' inform both Tyler's short and long fiction might suggest that a psycho-analytical approach would provide an appropriate theoretical base for a study of her work. However, this sort of approach, with its emphasis on the hidden causes of neurotic behaviour and readings of the unconscious, proves largely

untenable when applied to Tyler's texts and these texts, with their increasing emphasis on the fluidity of borders, and more progressively their permeability, draw attention to the dangers of classification. Here, she subverts the sort of labelling of individuals which forces them to conform to the arbitrary definitions of normality which might inform psycho-analytical theory. Such labelling emerges, instead, as a form of oppressive social control. For example, Tyler subtly depicts Jeremy Pauling's ways of seeing and thinking without probing his subconscious motivations. This would be too intrusive for Tyler and she voiced this position at the outset of her writing career: 'If I have to take a moral stand, though, I feel terribly strongly that nobody should do anything, that you should leave your hands out of other people's business'.<sup>23</sup>

*Morgan's Passing*, as I have already suggested, marked a crisis in representations of the eccentric. Subsequently these became less foregrounded. Tyler's next novel, *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant* (1982), further advances a shift of emphasis in her writing. My fifth chapter will consider this transitional stage. Formerly Tyler has been questioning the notion of behavioural boundaries with regard to eccentricity. Now, in *Dinner*, and after, Tyler becomes concerned with viewing putative categorical distinctions as liminal 'thresholds'. These liminal thresholds are characterised by their permeability in the sense that they are passed *through*. However, and here I take issue with the theories of the anthropologist Victor Turner, as with representations of eccentricity, the notion of double-edge emerges. There is a sense of passing through in two directions; not only a crossing *over* but a crossing *back*. After this shift the eccentric persists as a motif but is subsumed

within the liminal, and it is this sort of reading that I apply to *Dinner* and *The Accidental Tourist* (1995).

In Chapter 6, in order to explain how the liminal is differently evoked in four novels: *Saint Maybe* (1991), *Breathing Lessons* (1998), *Ladder of Years* (1995) and *A Patchwork Planet* (1998), I switch from a chronological approach. Here, I pair the novels in relation to gender and discussions of liminality will also consider the relationships between two male and two female protagonists: Ian Bedloe in *Saint Maybe* with Barnaby Gaitlin in *A Patchwork Planet* and Maggie Moran in *Breathing Lessons* with Delia Grinstead in *Ladder of Years*. Furthermore, in order to demonstrate the ways in which short story and novel intersect in Tyler's work, I shall take two chapters which have been extracted and published as short stories in *Saint Maybe* and *Breathing Lessons* as starting-points. Relatedly, *Back When We Were Grownups*, Tyler's latest novel will be used as a starting-point to the conclusion. I have chosen not to include this text in the body of the project as it was published in 2001, very late in my research. However, it will provide a useful tool for a summing-up of the thesis.

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1 Wendy Lamb, 'An Interview with Anne Tyler', reprinted in Alice Hall Petry, ed., *Critical Essays on Anne Tyler*, New York: G.K. Hall, 1992, 58.

2 A reference to *The Accidental Tourist* in *Family Circle*, 26 December 1985: 132 (DU).

3 An article in *The Observer Review* on reading groups identifies Tyler as one of the 'most read' writers, 11 March 2001: 20.

4 *New Yorker*, 4 July 1988: 20-32.

5 Letter to Anne Tyler from Alice Hall Petry, 4 July 1989 (DU).

6 Letter to Anne Tyler from Elizabeth Evans, 13 May 1990 (DU).

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- 7 Mary F. Robertson, 'Anne Tyler: Medusa Points and Contact Points' in Catherine Rainwater and William J. Scheik, eds., *Contemporary American Women Writers: Narrative Strategies*, Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1985, 119.
- 8 Hence the quote taken from a review from *The Times* on the back cover of *Morgan's Passing*: 'an enchanting book about a ramshackle eccentric, who finds the world luminous and rich with possibilities'.
- 9 Doris Betts, 'Tyler's Marriage of Opposites', in Ralph C. Stephens, ed., *The Fiction of Anne Tyler*, Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1990, 13.
- 10 Alice Hall Petry, 'Tyler and Feminism', in Dale Salwak, ed., *Anne Tyler as Novelist*, Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1994, 33-42.
- 11 Sandra Gilbert, 'Private Lives and Public Issues: Anne Tyler's Prize-winning Novels', in Stephens, 136-146.
- 12 Janis P. Stout, *Through the Window, Out The Door*, Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1998, 145.
- 13 Heidi Slettedahl MacPherson, *Women's Movement: Escape as Transgression in North American Feminist Fiction*, Amsterdam: Rodolpi, 2000, 135.
- 14 Marguerite Michaels, 'Anne Tyler, Writer 8.05 to 3.30', reprinted in Petry, ed., 40-44.
- 15 Anon, 'Anne Tyler: A Brief Interview with a Brilliant Author from Baltimore', *The Rambler*, 2 March 1979: 22 (DU).
- 16 Susan S. Kissel, *Moving On, The Heroines of Shirley Ann Grau, Anne Tyler and Gail Godwin*, Bowling Green: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1996, 69.
- 17 Kissel, 98. A further confusion is that Kissel fails to clarify what she means by a 'mythically "genteel" South'.
- 18 Kissel, 98.
- 19 Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*, Chicago: Aldine, 1969, 65.
- 20 Laurie L. Brown, 'Interviews with Seven Contemporary Writers', in Peggy Whitman Prenshaw, ed., *Women Writers of the Contemporary South*, Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1984, 3.
- 21 Theodore O' Leary, 'Nothing Matters So Much as the Death of a Child', *Kansas City Star*, 24 October 1965 (DU).

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22 'Olives out of a Bottle', Duke University *Archive* 87 Spring, 1975, reprinted in Petry, ed., 28 (Interview with Anne Tyler).

23 Jorie Lueloff, 'Authoress Explains Why Women Dominate in South', *Morning Advocate*, 8 February 1965, reprinted in Petry, ed., 25.

## CHAPTER 1

### Still just writing: on the periphery of context

'I lead a happy, peaceful existence, inhabiting the same dense web of stories that surrounded me when I was 3 ... I'm still waiting to see what I'll be when I grow up' (Anne Tyler)<sup>1</sup>

Tyler once said 'I write because I want more than one life',<sup>2</sup> and perhaps this access to the possibility of alternative ways of being goes some way to explaining why an author, so concerned with eccentricity, has been content to lead a seemingly uneventful and 'normal' life; a life where it is possible to identify influential phases - childhood in a Quaker commune, adolescence in the South, early marriage and motherhood and, since 1965, work as a full-time writer, reviewer and editor. Tyler was born on 25 October 1941 in Minneapolis, Minnesota, and spent her earliest years in Phoenixville, Pennsylvania, and Duluth and Chicago, Illinois. Her parents, Phyllis Mahon, a social worker, and Lloyd Parry, a chemist, encouraged her creativity and attempted to uphold Quaker ideals. Consequently, they took Tyler, aged six, to the Celo Community near Burnsville, North Carolina, a community of conscientious objectors and the oldest land-trust community in America. Although it would be dangerous to overemphasise the influence of this Quaker heritage, commentators have identified a quiet tolerance and reluctance to judge or interfere in Tyler's work.<sup>3</sup> She herself has acknowledged two ways in which this experience has influenced her. Its simplicity and lack of sophisticated conveniences made subsequent adjustment difficult: 'I was

eleven. I had never used a telephone and could strike a match on the soles of my bare feet';<sup>4</sup> and its ideas of division of labour helped prepare her for the 'less physical freedom' of being wife and mother in the early sixties: 'What we have here, I told myself, was a perfectly sensible arrangement: one member was the liaison with the outside world, bringing in money; another was the caretaker, reading the Little Bear books to the children and repairing the electrical switches'.<sup>5</sup>

However, it was her adolescence in North Carolina, in Raleigh, and later at Duke University, Durham, that had a more profound influence on Tyler. Although she denies that she thinks of herself as a Southern writer,<sup>6</sup> she remains nostalgic for the South. In 1996, in the introduction to her selection of Southern stories, she writes about memories of Raleigh where: 'You could watch a movie at the movie house for fifty cents, eat a pit-cooked-barbecue sandwich at the five-and-dime, and buy clothes in a department store where the clerk was addressed as Miss Mildred'.<sup>7</sup>

Tyler majored in Russian at Duke, graduating in 1961 Phi Beta Kappa. After a year as a postgraduate at Columbia University, New York, she returned to Durham to work as a Russian bibliographer. It was during her time at Duke, as an undergraduate, that she started writing and she had two short stories published in *Archive*. Her mentor at Duke was the novelist Reynolds Price, whose English classes she attended. Price has referred to her story 'The Saints in Caesar's Household', written at that time, as 'the most accomplished short story I've ever received from an undergraduate in all my thirty years of teaching'.<sup>8</sup> This story indicates her early interest in the parameters of 'normality' and concerns a friendship between two girls which



suffers when one of them has a nervous breakdown. Price's praise is borne out by the fact that this was one of the stories for which she won the Anne Flexner award for creative writing while she was at Duke.

When she returned to Duke for a seminar which included Price, Tyler was asked whether she had learnt from other writers, to which she replied, 'I think obviously and visibly from Eudora Welty because I just knew her by heart when I was in high school'.<sup>9</sup> In 1980, in a review of her collected stories, she reiterated her debt to Welty: 'For me as a girl - a Northerner - growing up in the south, longingly gazing over the fence at the rich tangled lives of the southern neighbours, Eudora Welty was a window on the world'<sup>10</sup> and, in her article 'Still Just Writing', she comments: 'Then I found a book of Eudora Welty short stories in the high school library. She was writing about Edna Earle ('The Whole Wide Net') who was so slow witted she could sit all day pondering how the tail of the C got through the loop of the L on the Coca Cola sign. Why I knew Edna Earle. You mean you could *write* about such people. I have always meant to send Eudora a thankyou note but I imagine she would find it a little strange'.<sup>11</sup> In fact she has had opportunities to 'thank Eudora'. She visited Welty for the *New York Times Book Review*<sup>12</sup> and they attended another panel discussion at Duke, again attended by Price.<sup>13</sup> Admiration is mutual between the two writers, which accounts for Welty's comment on the last sentence of *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant*: 'If I had written that sentence, I'd be happy all my life'.<sup>14</sup>

Again it would be dangerous to place too much emphasis on biography, but for a writer whose main concern has been the domestic, marriage and children must have had some impact upon her writing. In an article in a small

magazine article entitled 'Anne Tyler: A Brief Interview with a Brilliant Author from Baltimore', she commented: 'my interest in families is a result of my curiosity about how people endure together, adapt, adjust, grate against each other, give up, and then start over again in the morning'.<sup>15</sup> In 1963 she married Taghi Mohammed Modarressi, an Iranian-born child psychiatrist and author, and, while he continued his residency, she moved with him to Montreal. Here she worked as an assistant librarian at McGill University law library. In a rare interview, in 1984, Tyler remarked, 'I like to see what happens when people have to stick together'<sup>16</sup> and Tyler and Modarressi did 'stick together', spending 'an undramatic life'<sup>17</sup> until his death in April 1997. Tyler still lives in the same house in Roland Park that they moved to in 1967.

With regard to her own family life, Tyler has made it clear that she did not find it easy to reconcile the role of writer and mother to two daughters, Tezh born in 1965 and Mitra two years later: 'When the children ring the doorbell I have trouble sorting my lives out. The children complain regularly that I'm not really paying attention and they're right'.<sup>18</sup> In 1966, although she received the *Mademoiselle* award for writing given 'to young women whose talent, originality and hard work have brought them unusual distinction',<sup>19</sup> she abandoned *Winter Birds Winter Apples* in the same year: 'one of the reasons there's a gap in the novels is that I did write a novel when I had the first baby and it never really gelled'.<sup>20</sup> One of her strategies was to attempt to separate the wife/mother from the writer: 'After the children started school, I put up the partitions in my mind. I would rush around in the morning braiding their hair, packing their lunches; then the second they were gone I would grow quiet and

climb the stairs to my study. It feels like a sort of string that I tell myself to loosen'.<sup>21</sup>

Of course, since her children have grown, Tyler's writing practice has ceased to be as circumscribed, though she still keeps to a schedule, 'just so my day will have some shape to it'.<sup>22</sup> She has made a career of full-time writing. She began book reviews in 1972, initially to help pay for her daughters' school fees, and, in 1977, she became a regular reviewer for the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post* and the *New Republic*. Over two hundred and fifty reviews later, in 1991, she stopped reviewing because 'I felt I'd used up the vocabulary for it'.<sup>23</sup> Her last published short story was 'A Woman Like a Fieldstone House', in 1989, and her fifteenth novel, *Back When We Were Grownups*, came out in 2001. She has received several national awards: the American Academy of Arts and Letters award in 1977, for *Searching for Caleb*; the Janet Kafka prize, 1981, for *Morgan's Passing*; the PEN Faulkner award, 1983, for *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant*; the National Book Critics Circle Award, 1986 for *The Accidental Tourist* and the Pulitzer Prize in 1989 for *Breathing Lessons*.

However, in spite of continued popular success (the paperback of *The Accidental Tourist*, aided by the film version starring William Hurt and Geena Davis, who won an Oscar for her portrayal of Muriel Pritchett, sold over 1,500,000 copies), Tyler has assiduously maintained her privacy. Madelaine Blais suggests that in this she resembles one of her own characters, 'extremely famous, totally retiring. The Shy Celebrity'.<sup>24</sup> She was not present at the Washington première of the film and only agreed to attend a première in Baltimore on condition that the event be used as a benefit for the Juvenile

Diabetes Foundation.<sup>25</sup> In the panel at Duke referred to above, she related this to her writing practice: 'I need to protect myself from experiences ... I don't want to be influenced in any way by the outside ... since part of a reason for writing is to put out on paper some of your own privacy that you've kept bounded in'.<sup>26</sup> Relatedly she is happier with her characters 'on paper' because she has more control over their 'intrusion' than people 'in a room'.<sup>27</sup> For the past two decades she has been very reluctant to give public interviews:

The only real trouble that writing has ever brought me is an occasional sense of being invaded by the outside world. Why do people imagine that writers, having chosen the most private of professions, should be any good at performing in public, or should have the slightest desire to tell their secrets to interviewers from ladies' magazines?<sup>28</sup>

Because of this reluctance, in a 'non-interview' for *Baltimore Magazine* that seems to have passed unnoticed, Patrick Smithwick had to piece together the somewhat guarded comments on Tyler from family and friends.<sup>29</sup> Hence Reynolds Price refers to her shunning of publicity and any notion of celebrity: 'She simply made the decision to avoid the writer's star circuit'.<sup>30</sup> Not that this desire for privacy in any way implies reclusiveness; to quote John Barth, 'Tyler has a large circle of friends and is an active literary citizen'.<sup>31</sup> Indeed she has involved herself with local writing,<sup>32</sup> is supportive of first authors and students<sup>33</sup> and has been invited onto the Pulitzer Prize Panel.<sup>34</sup> However, she still remains determinedly private: 'I avoid personal interviews of any sort. I would gladly answer your questions by letter, on the other hand, if that would be helpful to you'.<sup>35</sup>

So might this privacy, this reluctance to engage with 'the outside world', inhabit a broader and more significant terrain? In the four decades of her life

as a professional writer, political, economic and cultural change has transformed the fabric of American society. Her novels have been published contemporaneously with the political trauma of Vietnam; the end of the Cold War and contentious involvement in South America; the social realignment of civil rights, gay liberation and the women's movement. Does Tyler's concern with the domestic, then, imply a lack of engagement with these changes, with 'the grim realities of life in the final decades of the twentieth century'?<sup>36</sup>

Certainly this would be the argument of the feminist critic Sandra Gilbert. In her article in *Southern Women Writers* she emphasises the apolitical nature of Tyler's work. She alleges that there is a 'want of an historical dimension' in 'the timeless world of her fiction' where 'the great world impinges very little'.<sup>37</sup> She refines this argument in her piece on the prize-winning novels *The Accidental Tourist* (1985) and *Breathing Lessons* (1988). Her point here is that although Tyler does now address topical problems, namely the welfare issues of crime on the streets and public education in *The Accidental Tourist*, and abortion in *Breathing Lessons*, she still maintains her emphasis on 'the accidental nature of life' and 'private modes for coping'.<sup>38</sup> Gilbert suggests that this privileges the private and personal, rather than the public and the political.

Gilbert takes issue with what she regards as a sanitised view of social problems particularly as she feels it reflects a flawed contemporary ideological position:

Even as I write, the governors of fifty states are assembled in summit to determine whether American efforts at mass public education can be revived and not abandoned, and columnists and cartoonists depict the president (George Bush) wringing his hands at the public's and the media's refusal to see plainly that the thousands who die yearly from

guns die accidental deaths, die from acts of God, die from causes unamenable to legislation or leadership.<sup>39</sup>

She argues that Tyler's emphasis on individual, rather than collective, endeavour diffuses and dissipates any potential political bite. In a more damning indictment Gilbert asserts that her emphasis on nostalgia and stasis contributed to her winning of the Pulitzer Prize:

Does it or does it not matter "really" to readers of America's Pulitzer prize winning novel, in the year of the possible overturning of Roe v Wade, that the story and emotional weight of the book vindicate foes of abortion, and the book's "acceptance" is most basically an "acceptance" of life?<sup>40</sup>

She criticises Tyler's emphasis on stasis, where 'Waste in Tyler's world is of time given to effect change, not waste of life's opportunities for action'.<sup>41</sup>

Similarly, Carol Iannone relates Tyler's fiction to the ideological context of late-eighties America: 'she seems to speak to the odd mixed mood of resignation and hope that characterises the liberal mind at this moment'.<sup>42</sup> Iannone, too, criticises the prize-winning novels: 'With her all-encompassing, non-judgemental, low-grade soap-opera formats she seems to offer the reassurance that anything can happen (*The Accidental Tourist*, for example) or that nothing can happen (*Breathing Lessons*, for example) and that either will be okay'.<sup>43</sup>

Now these critics correctly suggest that Tyler's texts are not informed with an obviously radical agenda. Her realism demands that she acknowledges the minutiae of popular cultural change. She comments on fashion, 'Occasionally he caught a glimpse of a girl or two, with her hair piled in a fantastic frizzled mountain on her head and her skirt well above her knees' (IM, 9); on TV

game shows with 'People winning a thousand tins of cat food or a heart-shaped bed' (EP, 92); and on changes in the landscape with 'the new things – the brick ranch houses rising baldly out of fresh clay, the drive-ins and Dairy Queens' (TCT, 177). However, she does not directly and overtly confront 'big' questions and the political changes these might involve. In *The Accidental Tourist* she is more concerned with Muriel's 'private mode of coping', in the ways in which she reconciles single parenthood with a variety of jobs, than with public issues of domestic welfare. In *Breathing Lessons* she does not foreground or attempt to disentangle the divisive issue of abortion. Fiona is persuaded to keep the baby not by the picketer outside the clinic protesting 'All the angels in heaven are crying over you' (B, 240), but by Jesse's mother's announcement that 'He's building a cradle' (B, 241).

However, to dismiss Tyler, in Gilbert's terms, as nostalgically conservative or, in Iannone's, as blandly reassuring, is to mis-read. It is possible to identify a political dimension within her work. Tyler is quietly subversive; she does ask questions but she does so with characteristic obliquity and it is these subtleties that some critics have neither identified nor acknowledged. Certainly Maggie is anxious that Fiona should keep the baby, marry her son and live happily ever after - but why does Maggie behave in this way and adopt these attitudes? This, in this text, is the 'quiet question' Tyler raises and addresses, by suggesting the potency of ideological constructions of the female which prioritise woman's role as wife and mother. She is concerned to expose, albeit comically, the influence of popular cultural discourse which promulgate idealised notions of love and marriage. Maggie has to question whether 'Love is a Many Splendored Thing' (B, 61) and to unlearn, in a text so concerned

with lessons, that life with Ira is not like a 'Rock Hudson-Doris Day movie' (B, 58).<sup>44</sup>

In this sense Maggie is not an 'ahistorical' character but one firmly rooted in, and trapped by, what came to be identified as the 'feminine mystique' and 'the problem that has no name'.<sup>45</sup> This ideological construct, dominant in the fifties, glorified domesticity, articulated that woman's place was family-centred, and defined sexuality as motherhood. Indeed Tyler had already addressed this very 'problem', in an earlier text than *Breathing Lessons*, through her characterisation of Mrs Emerson in *The Clock Winder* (1970), a woman who works hard at being 'ladylike', accepting the demands of display and discomfort that this involves by continuing to wear 'her matched skirts and sweaters and her string of pearls, her high heeled shoes' (CW, 91). As 'wife' she is defined by her marital status, she is given no first name and, when her husband dies, she cannot exist outside the private sphere of the family: 'Oh where was her husband, with his desk-sized cheque book and his bills on a spindle and his wallet that unfolded so smartly whenever she was sad, offering her a new outfit or a trip to Washington' (CW, 11). As 'mother' she is defined by her seven children and cannot cope when they want to leave her protective interference: 'They are always moving away from me; I feel like the centre of an asterisk' (CW, 17). Tyler's depiction of Mrs Emerson can be read as a critique of the fact that her limited mindset is the result of being caught up in restrictive constructions of femininity. Hence her notions of history are confined to the precise dating of family photographs and she is unaware of world affairs. While her son Peter was fighting in Vietnam 'she had kept writing to him to ask if he had visited any tourist sights. And could he bring home



some sort of native craft to solve her Christmas problems' (CW, 244). Hence Mrs Emerson remains 'secure in her sealed weightless bubble floating through time' (CW, 244).

Arguably, Tyler, unlike Mrs Emerson, does not inhabit 'a sealed weightless bubble'; she does not, as some critics suggest, wholly neglect world events. Her next direct reference to the Vietnam war appears in *Morgan's Passing* (1980). When Leon Meredith leaves college and marries Emily, his resentful parents give his forwarding address to the draft board. As Leon says, 'They'd rather have me dead in the jungle than alive and happy without them' (MP, 81). Now here Tyler appears to close down issues concerning the war and she directly confronts neither the anti-war movement nor resistance to the draft. Leon does not avoid the draft by burning his card; he fails the physical. However, this is not to say that the novel is a text devoid of political comment. As I will discuss later, Tyler depicts Morgan as a flawed character and I suggest that these flaws contribute to the crisis of eccentricity that is evident in *Morgan's Passing*. Yet Tyler also freights this character with a further level of significance. She sets up the paradox that, although Morgan's self-obsession distances him from the Nixon era *within* the text, it is possible to politicise the character *outside* the text in the sense that Tyler's characterisation of Morgan can be read as her comment on Nixon. Furthermore, this inside/outside distinction becomes more evident in later texts where the notion of liminal threshold becomes more significant.

Tyler introduces Morgan to the reader in 1968:

You could say he was a man who had gone to pieces or maybe he'd always been in pieces; maybe he'd arrived unassembled. Various parts

of him seemed poorly joined together... Parts of his life, too, lay separate from other parts ... Last month's hobby... bore no resemblance to this month's hobby. (MP, 21)

Significantly, 1968 was not only the year when the Republican Nixon beat the Democrat Hubert Humphrey, it was also a year marked by racial unrest, anti-war protests fuelled by the Tet offensive, the assassinations of Martin Luther King Jr and Bobby Kennedy. Arguably the fragmentation and lack of centre that characterise Morgan could also be applied to American society. The historian William Chafe comments that the 'center was flying apart, as if uncontrollable centrifugal forces were intent on ripping asunder the social fabric'.<sup>46</sup> Furthermore a similar lack of a coherent identity could be applied to the President himself in that many people wondered who the 'real' Richard Nixon was. The writer Garry Wills was of the opinion that 'He is the least "authentic" [person] alive'.<sup>47</sup> Like Morgan, he adopted more than one identity, casting himself, at home, as self-made man and consummate politician and, abroad, as visionary world leader. Chafe emphasises the complexity of Nixon's personality. He acknowledges his statesmanlike qualities, citing the rapprochement with the People's Republic of China and the spirit of détente between the Soviet Union and America he effected. Yet he also condemns his duplicity:

The president pledged to end the war in Vietnam, then expanded it by the secret bombing of Cambodia. He promised to speak the truth at all times, then lied repeatedly to the American people. He ran an administration rhetorically committed to the principles of law and order, only to have twenty five of his top aides indicted for criminal activity.<sup>48</sup>

In an analogous way, Tyler suggests that Morgan combines creative imagination with manipulation and deceit. The last sentence of the novel indicates that he is a man of imagination: 'Everything he looked at seemed luminous and beautiful, and rich with possibilities' (MP, 282).

However, throughout the text, Tyler depicts Morgan as a man who needs to manipulate. She has him send interfering letters to his family, resent changes in the Merediths' minimalist life style as they acquire more furniture and a car and, most importantly, assume different identities, thereby controlling people's perceptions of him. Similarly, Nixon's liking for power, and need to manipulate, is legendary, evidenced in his policy in Vietnam. In public, he adopted a policy of restraint and 'Vietnamisation', as South Vietnamese troops, reinforced by US *matériel* and bombing missions, assumed the major burden of fighting. In private, he threatened escalation and adopted the so-called madman theories of intimidation which resulted in the massive bombing raids against communist bases in neutral Cambodia and North Vietnam.

Clearly the public/private doubleness in this foreign policy connects with the deceit and pretence associated with Watergate and the subsequent attempt to tamper with the crucial evidence contained in the White House tapes. The President's 'I'm not a crook' declaration was exploded by the subsequent exposure of illegal fundraising, of subversion of opposition candidates, of the activities of the 'plumbers', of counterintelligence operations against domestic dissidents and of ambiguities in Nixon's personal finances. So, arguably, the Nixon presidency both at home and abroad was based on duplicity and pretence. Similarly Tyler depicts Morgan as a character who bases his behaviour, indeed his life, on pretence as he takes on the role of

doctor one day, cobbler the next. In addition, though he is obviously not 'crooked' on the scale of Nixon, he too has engaged in illegal activity. He has stolen his father's filebox, which he continually rearranges, incidentally an obsession with detail shared by Nixon. He is also 'technically speaking' a bigamist, not having divorced his first wife. Morgan reveals this to Emily, commenting, 'But it's really very natural', he told her. 'It's quite fitting, when you stop to consider. Aren't we all sitting on stacks of past events? And not every level is finished off, right? Sometimes a lower level bleeds into an upper level. Isn't that so?' (MP, 120).

Here Tyler has Morgan, in his recognition of the potent inter-relationship between past and present, use the verb 'bleeds' with its connotations of pain, wounding and loss of life. And, in my view, this comment could equally have been made by Nixon to Haldeman or Ehrlichman.

Arguably, then, Tyler suggests a correspondence between Nixon and Morgan and this reading, which exposes the inequities of the Nixon era, serves to challenge Gilbert's view of Tyler as an apolitical writer whose work consistently lacks a 'historical dimension'. Yet this is not the only criticism Gilbert levels at Tyler; she also alleges that her texts ignore the politics of gender: 'Without concern for placing her characters in large social or historical context, Tyler treats them in families, not as lone individuals seeking self-expression or self-identity. She is thus doubly distant from much twentieth century feminist writing, which frequently does one or the other'.<sup>49</sup> But, as indicated above, Tyler's depiction of Maggie in *Breathing Lessons* and Mrs Emerson in *The Clock Winder* demonstrates that Tyler's awareness of the restrictive impact of the 'feminine mystique' would lead her to endorse the

situation in the sixties, when this ideology was being unsettled as the civil rights movement provided a discourse of equality and a new model for social change. In fact, her early novels, written before the more sustained feminism of the seventies, challenge contemporary attitudes and prejudices. Her first novel, *If Morning Ever Comes* (1964), concerns the self-sufficient and empowered women of the Hawkes family, and has been referred to as 'a protofeminist classic'.<sup>50</sup> At the end of *A Slipping-Down Life* (1970), Evie Decker takes control; although pregnant she leaves Drumstrings, returns alone to the family home and relinquishes her role as wife.

Clearly Tyler's work, with its emphasis on the domestic, can be located within the disputes of the seventies where two 'feminist' groups emerged. These sat uneasily together. The moderate professionals of The National Organisation of Women were less concerned than younger activists with redefining femininity and sexuality and articulating politicised bonds of sisterhood. A debate concerning the relationship between this new heightened feminist sensibility and the positioning of family and motherhood emerged, and persisted, surfacing particularly in 1977, International Women's Year, in attempts to ratify the Equal Rights Amendment. Although these sorts of issues are relevant to Tyler's subject matter, she does not confront head-on or engage in debates of this sort. Consequently, critics have found her 'private' position increasingly problematic, particularly through the eighties and nineties, when a more radical approach emerged. According to the historian Sara Evans, this approach 'reintroduced the personal experience of being female into the political discourse of the day, challenging the obsolete language that bifurcated public and private lives along lines of gender'.<sup>51</sup>

Evans has also suggested that 'women's actions have powerfully re-shaped the structure and meaning of family life as well as a variety of public arenas from voluntary to electoral politics'.<sup>52</sup> Now it would be problematic to locate Tyler's female characters in this sort of feminist terrain and it is certainly the case that Tyler's female characters are neither economically independent nor educationally successful, and that bonds of sisterhood remain undeveloped.

However, I would argue that the persistent questioning of societal norms and the mechanics and boundaries of domesticity, which resonates through her writing, makes it possible to identify a feminist dimension in her work. Indeed the critic Rita Felski considers 'feminist' 'all those texts that reveal a critical awareness of women's subordinate position and of gender as a problematic category, however this is expressed'.<sup>53</sup> In her depiction of domestic politics Tyler has continued to call into question received and conventional ideas on women's role and to point up the potential damage inherent in idealised notions of family life. In *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant* (1982), she undermines the potency of family and the 'naturalness' of motherhood. She returns to the role of popular culture in determining female stereotypes in *Ladder of Years* (1995) and destabilises reified gender positions by presenting male nurturers in *Saint Maybe* (1991) and *A Patchwork Planet* (1998). It seems evident, then, that Tyler, by concerning herself with family life and heterogeneous relationships, neither conforms to nor colludes with the patriarchal order. In her professional life, by 'still just writing',<sup>54</sup> her subtle raising of issues concerning the politics of gender makes her novels contextually relevant.

Her work, then, can be located on the margins, both politically and socially. Biography intersects with context here because for many years she has lived in a state where the 'boundary-line' between North and South is historically ambiguous. Maryland was a border slave state in the Civil War only 'saved for the Union'<sup>55</sup> in 1861 when Lincoln sent in Federal troops. Furthermore, Tyler has set the majority of her novels in Baltimore. A review of her latest book, *Back When We Were Grownups*, refers to her 'little corner of the world ... the Baltimore where Southern bumps into Northern'.<sup>56</sup> However, at the outset of her career, she set her novels in North Carolina, the area in which she had grown up. And it is the relationship between Tyler's early novels and the eccentricity associated with a Southern literary tradition that will be explored in the next chapter.

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1 Anne Tyler, 'Because I Want More Than One Life', reprinted in Alice Hall Petry, ed., *Critical Essays on Anne Tyler*, New York: G.K. Hall, 49.

2 Tyler, in Petry, ed., 46.

3 'Tyler's work is a veritable Quaker meeting house in which every voice may be heard as possessing equal opportunity for authority', Donna Gerstenberger, 'Everybody Speaks', in Dale Salwak, ed., *Anne Tyler as Novelist*, Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1994, 139.

4 Anne Tyler, 'Still Just Writing', in Janet Sternburg, ed., *The Writer and her Work*, 1980, reprinted London: Virago, 1992, 32.

5 Sternburg, 28.

6 Alice Hall Petry, *Understanding Anne Tyler*, Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1990, 19.

7 *Best of the South*, selected and introduced by Anne Tyler, from *Ten Years of New Stories From the South*, Shannon Ravenel, ed., Chapel Hill: Algonquin Books, 1996, vii.

8 Quoted in Patrick Smithwick, *Baltimore Magazine*, July 1988: 85 (DU).

9 'Olives out of a Bottle', quoted in Petry, ed., 3 (Discussion with Anne Tyler).

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- 10 Anne Tyler, 'The Full Fine World of Eudora Welty', *Washington Star*, 26 October 1980: D3.
- 11 Sternburg, 32.
- 12 Anne Tyler, 'A Visit with Eudora Welty', *New York Times Book Review*, 2 November 1980: 33.
- 13 Reported by Betty Hodges, *Durham Morning Herald*, 12 December 1982 (DU).
- 14 Barbara Ascher, 'A Visit with Eudora Welty', *Yale Review* 74 (1984) (DU).
- 15 Anon, 'Anne Tyler: A Brief Interview with a Brilliant Author from Baltimore', *The Rambler*, 2 March 1979: 22 (DU).
- 16 Natalie Harper, 'Searching for Anne Tyler', *Simon's Rock of Bard College Bulletin* 4, Fall 1984: 6 (DU).
- 17 Taghi Mohammed Modaressi, quoted in Smithwick: 63 (DU).
- 18 Sternburg, 47.
- 19 Letter to Anne Tyler from Betsy Talbot Blackwell, 13 October 1965 (DU).
- 20 Petry, ed., 34.
- 21 Sternburg, 29.
- 22 Quoted in Petry, ed., 49.
- 23 Paul Bail, *Anne Tyler, A Critical Companion*, Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1998, 8.
- 24 Madeleine Blais, 'Anne Tyler', *News and Observer*, Raleigh, N.C., 29 October 1991: 3E (DU).
- 25 Robert W. Croft, *Anne Tyler, A Bio-Bibliography*, Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1995, 80.
- 26 Petry, ed., 31.
- 27 Wendy Lamb, 'An Interview with Anne Tyler', reprinted in Petry, ed., 58.
- 28 Sternburg, 33.
- 29 Smithwick: 62-63, 84-88 (DU).
- 30 Reynolds Price, quoted in Smithwick: 86 (DU).
- 31 John Barth, quoted in Smithwick: 86 (DU).
- 32 A letter to Anne Tyler from William Donald Schaefer, 25 November 1985, indicates that she had been 'selected to receive the Fifth Annual Mayoral Award for Outstanding Support for the Arts by a Private Citizen in 1986' (DU).
- 33 'Thank you very much for ... expressing your willingness to participate in an informal question-and-answer session with students in my evening course



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- "The American Short Story" at Hopkins', letter to Anne Tyler from Nancy Norris, 8 April 1984 (DU).
- 34 Letter to Anne Tyler from Robert C. Christopher, 11 May 1984 (DU).
- 35 Letter to Ann Hurford from Anne Tyler, 28 January 1996.
- 36 Petry, ed., 6.
- 37 Sandra Gilbert, 'Anne Tyler', in Tonette Bond Inge, ed., *Southern Women Writers: The New Generation*, Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1990, 251.
- 38 Inge, 251.
- 39 Sandra Gilbert, 'Private Lives and Public Issues: Anne Tyler's Prize-winning Novels' in C. Ralph Stevens, ed., *The Fiction of Anne Tyler*, Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1990, 141.
- 40 Gilbert, 141.
- 41 Gilbert, 144.
- 42 Carole Iannone, *National Review*, 1 September 1989: 46.
- 43 Iannone: 46.
- 44 Tyler had already addressed the influence of popular culture in her third text, *A Slipping-Down Life*, when Evie wanted the sort of relationship she had read about in magazines: 'a courtship, with double dates and dances and matching shirts' (SDL, 92).
- 45 Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, London: Gollancz, 1963.
- 46 William H. Chafe, *The Unfinished Journey*, Second Edition, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991, 343.
- 47 Garry Wills, quoted in Chafe, 382.
- 48 Chafe, 381.
- 49 Inge, 275.
- 50 Alice Hall Petry, 'Tyler and Feminism', in Salwak, 34.
- 51 Sara M. Evans, *Born for Liberty: The History of Women in America*, New York: The Free Press, 290.
- 52 Evans, 310.
- 53 Rita Felski, *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989, 14.
- 54 Sternburg, 34.
- 55 Maldwyn A. Jones, *The Limits of Liberty*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983, 220.

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56 Anon, 'New Anne Tyler novel treads familiar ground', *Boston Globe*, 14 May 2001, 13: 47, reprinted in <http://www.azcentral.com/rep/books/articles0515grownups.html> accessed on 15 July 2001.

## CHAPTER 2

### On the margins of (Southern) eccentricity: the early novels

'Her people do not walk the wilder shores of eccentricity (O'Leary)'<sup>1</sup>

Reviewers of *If Morning Ever Comes*, Anne Tyler's first full-length novel, published in 1964, and *The Tin Can Tree*, published a year later, commended her youthful promise. Orville Prescott described the book as 'honest and accurate in its account of a confused young man' and he complimented Tyler's method: 'her touch is deft, her perceptions keen, her ear for the rhythms and wild irrelevancies of the colloquial is phenomenal'.<sup>2</sup> More significantly, reviewers identified a strain of eccentricity in her work related to Southernness. Commenting on the first novel, Diana Hobby of the *Houston Post* places her in a 'quirky and humorous' tradition<sup>3</sup> and Theodore O'Leary writes in the *Kansas City Star* that she brings something 'fresh and natural' to the 'long and often tedious succession of novels which deal with families that are a little nutty - but, of course, in an endearing way'.<sup>4</sup> (Tyler herself would disagree with such positive assessments of her first two novels. Though acknowledging its Southernness, she nearly lost the manuscript of *If Morning Ever Comes* 'almost on purpose'<sup>5</sup> by leaving it on a plane and agrees with the reviewer who said Ben Joe was 'about as interesting as a cucumber sandwich'.<sup>6</sup> She feels that both of these early texts are 'formless and wandering', that publication was a big mistake and that 'they should be burned'.<sup>7</sup>)

Therefore such an identification of eccentricity in Tyler's work, by reviewers and critics, began early, and still continues. It is a term aptly applied to a writer very determined to question the vertical border in favour of the oblique slant, in that the term falls between the societal and the psychological, between acceptable and expected conventions of society and perceived deviations in the workings of the mind. This difficulty in the categorisation of eccentricity is evidenced by the dearth of either sociological definition or psychological investigation. It is often defined in terms of what it is *not*. It is defined as 'off centre',<sup>8</sup> 'unconventional'<sup>9</sup> or 'a deviation from normalcy'.<sup>10</sup> In 1995, Weeks and James, two clinical psychologists in Edinburgh, attempted to fill this gap, and were to claim that 'our results were tangible proof that the mental life of the eccentric is unlike anything that psychology has yet described'.<sup>11</sup> They conducted a systematic, observational study which sought to distinguish between eccentricity and more harmful forms of mental aberration, such as schizophrenia or neurosis. They were therefore, from the start, at pains to undermine the common misconception that eccentricity is a mild form of madness, an illness in need of a cure. The fundamental position they took up is that eccentricity does not imply dysfunction or stress. Eccentric individuals are not delusional, they make deliberate behavioural choices, well aware of a difference which they relish: 'We found by administering standard diagnostic tests that eccentrics actually have a higher general level of health than the population at large'.<sup>12</sup> For them the nonconformity of eccentrics resonates with creativity and originality, humour, unlimited imaginative curiosity and 'doing ordinary things in extraordinary ways'.<sup>13</sup>

This understanding of eccentricity corresponds with a comment made quite recently by Tyler in an interview concerning the protagonist of her fourteenth novel, *A Patchwork Planet* (1998): 'I think Barnaby is only average and ordinary to the extent that most people are average and ordinary - that is, not very, if you look carefully enough'.<sup>14</sup> Tyler would be resistant to Weeks' and James' attempt to label, systemise and categorise modes of behaviour. Implicit in her comment quoted above is a blurring of the distinction between the extraordinary and the ordinary, or the 'normal' and the eccentric. However, the nexus of eccentricity they identify in their research dovetails very closely with core aspects of Tyler's own view of eccentricity. Their book is a celebration of the sort of eccentric behaviour Tyler depicts in her early novels. Indeed it is possible to identify an eccentric element related to Southernness in Tyler's first novel, *I Know You, Rider*, which was written in 1961 during her final year at Duke.

This early work, which remains unpublished, concerns a trio of social misfits; Danny Pender, Maggie Scott and Spirit Farraday, who inhabit a city in North Carolina, not unlike Raleigh. Danny, the central character, is a drifter, wanderer and dreamer. He is juxtaposed in the text with his friend, the conventional Todd Landis, who tries constantly to get him a regular job. However, Danny's interest is in the idiosyncrasies of others; he wants 'some kind of job where you can listen to funny things, like this businessman I met whose biggest memory of his life was being disguised as a hot dog one night forty years ago when he was in college' (IKYR, 46), or to be an author and an observer and write novels with a difference with 'last pages with nothing to come before them' (IKYR, 14). This leads him to try on identities, to 'become'

a fat woman by walking with 'his elbows held a little way out from his side as if there were suddenly little marbled mounds of fat hanging from his straight arms' (IKYR, 10) or a child learning to walk 'with his stomach stuck out, over his wobbling leg as if he were setting one building block on top of another' (IKYR, 42). He attempts to re-configure himself in old age by changing his voice so 'It sounded like a rusty faucet being turned on' (IKYR, 29). As a lonely insomniac he wanders the streets at night searching for the windows of his friends.

One such friend is Maggie Scott, a slow thinker, who speaks rarely and then 'in spurts, in great long paragraphs that had been stored up for weeks' (IKYR, 78). Her tardy reflections on her relationship with Danny are symptomatic of the naivety that informs *her* difference. As a poor white girl from a rural background she struggles to conform to life in the city, epitomised by Danny. She finds it difficult to reconcile this with her former life, 'an infancy of Sundays spent tap-dancing ... and singing "Whispering Hope" in a pink too-ruffled dress from the Discount House and a childhood of Mondays handing the great gummy tobacco leaves to the tyer [sic] and feeling the tickling drops of sweat running down between her bare shoulder blades' (IKYR, 80). Danny represents the pretty things that she has always yearned for, like 'Mrs Ballin's calla lilies in their neat line across a great white porch' (IKYR, 80) and 'a Smith-Corona cigarbox Scotch-taped shut from my brothers' (IKYR, 89).

Danny provides an alternative for Maggie but he provides 'magic' (IKYR, 139) for Spirit Farraday and the bond between them becomes actual at the end of the novel after Danny's death in a scooter accident. Finally Spirit identifies with Danny by re-living his last 'job'. In order to give him a sense of

spiritual peace he accompanies a black drummer through the streets with a clay whistle: 'He played faster and faster until all he could hear was the pulse sound of the drum and the piping sound of the whistle' (IKYR, 215).<sup>15</sup> Spirit is Tyler's third misfit, an impoverished drinker, hence the 'greyness' he feels every morning: 'the morning always began badly for Spirit Farraday, no matter how well it ended' (IKYR, 146). Often broke, he tries to make money by pawning such items as a sentimental placard of an 'Old Rhyme' supposedly given to him by his arthritic old mother or by displaying his talent for interviewing the dead. He cannot conform to conventional norms while his shiftless behaviour is at odds with a misplaced sense of his own spirituality: 'Ever since I got my spiritual headache ... the truth ain't in me: I cuss and I smoke and I drink' (IKYR, 136).

Clearly in depicting these three misfits Tyler leant very heavily on Southern stereotypes: the golden-haired young drifter, the innocent country girl, the flawed preacher - and the title of the novel replicates the title of a Southern blues song. Indeed the whole text can be read as a rather pale imitation of the sort of Southern literary tradition associated with Carson McCullers and Flannery O'Connor. Much of the action takes place in Darleen's Grill, a version of the Sad Café, though this eating and drinking place acts as a plot device and a setting for character interaction, lacking the symbolic weight of the McCullers café which brought a 'new pride'<sup>16</sup> to a poverty-stricken town. Sad Café is a vibrant place where the seediness of Mr Hutchins, a customer of Darleen's, would be out of place with his smell 'hanging on all his clothes like wet mold, it was breathed out of his dark mouth and his muddy cobwebbed eyes' (IKYR, 206). Danny, Maggie and Spirit also frequent

Darleen's and Tyler rehearses McCullers' narrative strategy in their triangular relationship. However, this lacks the psychological complexity of the grotesque, hard-edged relations between Miss Amelia, the rich, formidable owner of the Sad Cafe, her 'cousin' the hunchback Lymon Willis, and her criminal husband Marvin Macy. In Tyler's novel the central relationship is supportive rather than destructive and Spirit Farraday voices this in conversation with Maggie: 'I'm one to listen to and you're the one to listen to him and be his comfort' and 'it's our job to go treasuring and protecting it all' (IKYR, 139).

Furthermore Spirit, an erstwhile circuit preacher 'visiting at revivals ... and I could talk up a storm' (IKYR, 49), seems derivative of O'Connor's Hazel Motes in *Wise Blood*. What Tyler almost appears to be doing here is to re-cast Hazel Motes by making her character benignly comic. Both characters feel a sense of sin, but Tyler has Spirit raise an umbrella 'to keep the sins from raining down, boy. This place is Sodom and Gomorrah; a man needs protection' (IKYR, 132), whereas O'Connor has Hazel sleep with Mrs Leora Watts, the local whore. Tyler hints at self-mutilation but not by blinding or walking on stones; Spirit wounds himself while combing his thinning hair: 'The comb's teeth hurt his scalp. He could see the red lines they made' (IKYR, 154). Tyler obviously lacks the literary maturity to evoke the nihilism and violence of O'Connor's promulgator of the Church without Christ. Spirit is rendered pathetic rather than tragic and Tyler's preacher is driven not by obsessive rage but by a kind of apologetic shame. She makes this explicit when she introduces him, he 'ducked his head further in a kind of fright and there was a meek childlike shame about him' (IKYR, 46).



In this early text and its engagement with aspects of a Southern literary tradition Tyler is striving to find a voice, but she is also experimenting with form. Arguably, *I Know You, Rider* is a pivotal text, on the cusp between her successful short-story writing (the award-winning 'The Saints in Caesar's Household' was published the same year) and her longer fiction. The novel's lack of cohesion (for example Maggie is scarcely mentioned in the third chapter) stems from the fact that the three chapters are self-contained and can be read as a series of short stories, each with a central consciousness. In this respect the text is a very crude anticipation of what Tyler achieved in *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant*, published twenty years later. Tyler realises the importance of first sentences in a short story<sup>17</sup> and the openings of each of the chapters attempt to shed light on the central protagonist: 'This all began because of a game of Michigan poker' (IKYR, 1) indicates that Danny is a gambler; 'Maggie was never one to talk much' (IKYR, 78) points up Maggie's inability to articulate her feelings; and 'All in one Saturday morning it turned Spring' (IKYR, 146) anticipates Spirit's ultimate sense of spiritual re-birth. Tyler is less successful at the end of each chapter and these endings seem unconvincing. The sentimental image of Danny 'softly crying into his folded arms' (IKYR, 77) is an over-obvious evocation of his night-time loneliness. Similarly it seems unlikely that a character as unimaginative as Maggie would view herself as 'someone strange and foreign standing on a high cliff in a swirling black mantle' (IKYR, 144). Again at the end of Spirit's chapter the symbolism of his re-birth as Danny and the first day of spring; 'There was only the sweet slow pounding and the sweet high piping, and the

streets of the city and spring' (IKYR, 215) lacks subtlety. Despite several attempts Tyler could not get this novel published and the derivative nature of her cast of eccentrics and a tentative approach to form must have contributed to this.

A more successful rendering of an eccentric element related to Southernness is evident in her first published novel *If Morning Ever Comes* (1964). Here an eccentric stance is signalled in the opening paragraph with the reference to the odd collection of objects Ben Joe gave to his sister Susannah on leaving for New York: 'one used guitar, six shelves of National Geographic, a battered microscope, and a six-foot high hour glass' (IMEC, 5).<sup>18</sup> As early as 1965 in an interview with Jorie Lueloff she touches on eccentricity.<sup>19</sup> Her comments here are somewhat naive: 'Somehow writing in the South is like painting china - it seems to be a woman's occupation'<sup>20</sup> and 'I love the average southern negro - they speak a language all their own. A Southern conversation is pure metaphor and the lower you get in the class the more it's true'.<sup>21</sup> However, what she does do is acknowledge the 'freaks' recurrently to be found in Southern literature as a source of material and this may well explain her experiments with eccentric characterisation. As Shelley, Ben Joe's girlfriend in *If Morning Ever Comes*, remarks, 'your family is queer-like sometimes' (IMEC, 89). Evidence of this includes Uncle Jed's ability to walk barefoot on broken glass and Susannah, Ben Joe's sister, who has a tendency to hunt squirrels in the attic and enjoy cracker sandwiches. However, the book's most eccentric character is Gram; indeed one reviewer noted 'her touching portrayal of the eccentric old grandmother'.<sup>22</sup> Gram too likes unusual food and casseroles crabmeat with black olives. She dresses in

a bizarre manner, wearing luxurious underwear under an old lab coat and ill-fitting and shabby dresses. Tyler uses the idea of bizarre layering in the characterisation of another eccentric individual, a child rather than an old woman. In her second novel, *The Tin Can Tree* (1965), Janie Rose, 'when she thought things were going against her or she was frightened... would pile layer upon layer of undershirts and panties (TCT, 22). Janie's 'endearing eccentricities'<sup>23</sup> include dressing backwards, fearful that invisibility would result if she pulled clothes on over her head, obsessively drawing an apple tree and accidentally setting fire to the garden, while 'trailing ... her mother's treasured wedding dress and holding a lighted cigarette high in front of her with her little finger stuck out' (TCT, 140-41).

However, as a reviewer of *The Tin Can Tree* rightly suggested, 'Her people do not walk the wilder shores of eccentricity'<sup>24</sup> for her treatment of notions of the eccentric in these 'apprentice' texts, though not as plainly derivative as in *I Know You, Rider*, is tentative and lacking in purpose. Indeed an appropriate definition of eccentricity at this stage might be, like Ben Joe's reflections, 'little aimless curled-in-on-themselves things' (IMEC, 169). Gram and Janie Rose are quirky representatives of childhood and old age rather than fully developed characters. Janie Rose's unhappiness, suggested in her 'bad days' and nightmares, is not explained. Neither is it developed that eccentricity can be self-imposed; that Gram *chooses* to wear shabby tennis shoes but that the Domer family's strange clothing is the result of poverty. There also seems something slightly strained in Tyler's use of the eccentric. The ancestral house owned by the Hawkes family is predictably odd and almost Gothic: 'Round stained-glass windows popped up in unexpected places ... and the little turret,

with its ridiculously curlicued weather vane, looked as if it must be stuffed with bats and cobwebs' (IMEC, 34). Ansel's vision of his hometown with its over-religious and pirate-like inhabitants seems artificially exaggerated, as does the polarity between two of Ben Joe's sisters; the practical, methodical Jenny and the sexy, flamboyant Joanne. Even giving a book the title *The Tin Can Tree* seems self-consciously eccentric.

Perhaps Tyler is still trying too hard in these texts to conform to one literary tradition of the South. The domestic Gothic of Dr Pike's death, where a mysterious bagpipe player emerges out of nowhere and Ben Joe's stagey confrontation with John Horner who goes out with Joanne, seems to suggest this.<sup>25</sup> Perhaps she feels the need to include the 'freaks' she refers to in the Lueloff interview. Significantly, however, Gram and Janie Rose are not as grotesque as the characters referred to above that one encounters in McCullers or O'Connor. Rather it is the acknowledged influence of Welty which informs her characterisation. The Potter sisters in *The Tin Can Tree* contain echoes of the aunts in Welty's *Delta Wedding* and Tyler attempts to reproduce Welty's comic tone. Miss Faye and Miss Lucy bake cinnamon buns for neighbourhood children but then eat them themselves, causing anxiety about their heart conditions. They live in a maze of folding screens, require a weekly reassuring visit from the insurance man and erect a cardboard silhouette of a man reading to fool burglars.

Neither would the Brant family, in Tyler's next novel, *Winter Birds, Winter Apples*, be out of place in a novel by Welty, especially the eccentric aunts. Aunt Eula's mysterious night-time hopping raises questions: 'Rope-skipping? Some kind of prayer dance?' (WBWA, 62) and Aunt Ida divorced her 'sex-

fiend' husband after only a week because for 'seven nights he climbed under the covers with nothing on but his wrist watch' (WBWA, 152). The first sentence of this text identifies the three main characters: 'During the September that Ginny McKevlin was ten, living in a buckling house on the sea coast with her sister Bridget and Bridget's husband a peculiar thing happened' (WBWA, 1). As in *If Morning Ever Comes*, Bridget and Ginny are independent females who have been deserted by male family members. Furthermore, as in the earlier text, Tyler hints at the odd or eccentric. The 'buckling house' referred to, in Fiddler's Bow in North Carolina, has been inherited by Danny and is now a rather dilapidated eerie guest house with gloomy, echoing rooms and chairs 'rustling and whispering in the dark' (WBWA, 60). And the 'peculiar thing' is that Danny, Bridget's husband, disappears and, given the family propensity for accidents, it is feared that 'He'll have landed in a ditch somewhere, or run a mailbox down' (WBWA, 51). Indeed Tyler bases the family eccentricity on such accidents, as Bridget says:

I remember when I first met Daniel he kept having such odd things happen - falling through porch doors, getting caught in lawn mowers ... Then I met Aunt Meg and she told me she'd lost her husband when he tried to climb a steeple with hobnailed boots on ... I heard enough accidents to fill a Red Cross manual. Not one of them died in pyjamas those Brants. (WBWA, 22)

As discussed in Chapter 1, Tyler started *Winter Birds, Winter Apples* in 1966, after the birth of her first daughter, and she abandoned it. Indeed the novel does lack coherence and there are flaws in the writing. It is written from Ginny's point of view and Tyler does achieve some sense of an imaginative, curious child who riffles through the drawers in the house in the hope of

finding significant objects left by guests. When she comes across Daniel's collection of photographs of strangers, 'There was a lot she could pretend about them' (WBWA, 95).<sup>26</sup> However, she has this photograph motif carry too much emotional weight as a trope for marital dysfunction. That Bridget views these pictures of 'people clipped from newspapers, people frowning from the headlines of business letters, people decorating the front pages of advertising brochures' (WBWA, 95) as a personal affront and symptomatic of the tensions between her and Danny is unconvincing. Furthermore the repetition in the subsequent exchange points to the real problem with this text; Tyler's heavy-handed use of the accident motif. Bridget is both justifying and accusing; she alleges that she had looked at the pictures 'by accident' yet goes on to say 'if you had an accident, a real one, if the police went through your wallet, all they would find is photographs' (WBWA, 162). Moreover, alongside the emphasis on the accidental deaths of the Brant family, Bridget's pregnancy was also an accident where a 'clutter of awkwardnesses' and 'a series of stumbles, falls and mistakes had landed them side by side on the couch' (WBWA, 176). As Aunt Ida coyly remarks, 'Brants have more accidents than just falling down, dear' (WBWA, 118).

Relatedly the text lacks narrative impetus. Janie Rose's death in a tractor accident had precipitated the action in *The Tin Can Tree*, indicating that Tyler seems exercised by the accidental at this stage. So, given that Ginny is in some senses a version of Janie, the swimming accident early in *Winter Birds*, *Winter Apples* raises expectations with regard to plot. In a struggle in the sea, Ginny kicks Mr Bekhandian, a guest at the house, in the chest, causing him to drown. Yet Tyler does not develop either the ways in which this might develop

the narrative, or how it might affect Ginny. Nothing happens as a result and the fact that Ginny feels that this accident has somehow made her a Brant family member is not pursued. Interestingly the text ends with an intimation of how this death has entered Ginny's consciousness. The final sentence suggests another moment of domestic Gothic as she re-casts the cradle, the real reason for Danny's disappearance/desertion, as a symbol of death: 'She thought the cradle was coffin-shaped and ugly, but she went on laughing anyway with her eyes fixed on Bridget's face' (WBWA, 177).

### *A Slipping-Down Life*

After this failed attempt Tyler abandoned the novel form for three years, concentrating on short stories. However, in 1970, *A Slipping-Down Life* was published and this text represents a significant step forward when compared to her earlier works.<sup>27</sup> She has suggested herself that this book is different from *When Morning Ever Comes*, *The Tin Can Tree* and *Winter Birds, Winter Apples*. In a 1972 interview she said 'I felt as I was writing it that I was being braver.'<sup>28</sup> However, its origins do bear some relation to the incomplete novel. Though increasingly reticent about her own creative process, Tyler has revealed that she is stimulated by visual images and the idea for *A Slipping-Down Life* came from a 'real picture' in a newspaper, a photo of a stranger in fact, a fifteen-year-old girl from Texas who slashed 'Elvis' on her forehead.<sup>29</sup> There is also a reference in *Winter Birds, Winter Apples* to one of Bridget's friends, 'Lola Wilson who had carved her boyfriend's name on her wrist with a penknife' (WBWA, 118). These ideas evolved into the central character of *A Slipping Down-Life*, the unmusical and plump Evie Decker, who writes the

name of a rock musician across her forehead. As this self-mutilation signals, there are incidents in this text where a note of the comic macabre is informed with the violent and even the horrific. Episodes like the hasty wedding, the mock kidnapping and the scenes in the nightclub, where Evie's scars are illuminated by a candle, suggest that it is in this text that Tyler is at her closest to Southern Gothic.<sup>30</sup> Relatedly it is possible to identify a development in the treatment of eccentricity where the characters, though still relatively more benign, are moving, more successfully, towards the sort of representations encountered in McCullers and O'Connor. There are elements of the grotesque in Evie, with her scarred forehead 'large and ragged and Greek looking' (SDL, 24) and in her friend Violet, 'an enormously fat girl with teased black hair' with a sexy voice and brightly coloured clothes who delighted in orchestrating Drum and Evie's wedding, not least because she could wear a pink nylon cocktail dress. There is a dark quality to Drum himself, the sombre self-absorbed singer in black denim and leather.<sup>31</sup> As Sandra Gilbert has commented, 'these are oddities indeed' and she goes on to refer to them as 'more strange as a complete cast than those of any books to follow'.<sup>32</sup> This distinction made by Gilbert endorses my view that *A Slipping-Down Life* is Tyler's last attempt to write a Southern novel. Subsequently she seems to abandon her problematic engagement with the South.

It is worth considering at this stage in what sense the relationship has been a problematic one. Not only are there confusions in the articulation of a literary voice; the writing itself is, at times, heavy-handedly Southern. The *New York Times* review of Tyler's *The Tin Can Tree* applauds Tyler's striving after local colour in a chapter where a group of women tie tobacco while discussing the



death of Janie Rose. The review compliments the 'nice specificity of local detail' and an ear for dialogue which 'captures the casual and yet complex movement of Southern rural speech with its indirections and interruptions, its reticences and awkwardnesses'.<sup>33</sup> However, here the description of tobacco binding seems too long and the depiction of Missouri points up a further problematic area in these early works, that of the representation of race.

Tyler acknowledged in the Lueloff interview that any attempt to write a Southern novel must confront this vexed question. However, in her first novels, her references to blacks are certainly questionable; the children Ben Joe sees on the train have 'hands like little brown spiders' (IMEC, 19) and she rehearses this image in *Winter Birds, Winter Apples*, where Rufus, Aunt Eula's servant, has hands 'like two black spiders' (WBWA, 40). That other black characters in *If Morning Ever Comes* have 'laughing black faces' (IMEC, 29) smacks of minstrelsy and the child Rufus is similarly stereotypical; the knowing mischief-maker and teller of tall tales. The suggestion that Matilda Haye's advice to Ben Joe embodies a kind of folk wisdom is also suspect, and Missouri embodies the stereotype of the wise old black woman. It is symptomatic of a less simplistic approach in *A Slipping-Down Life* that Clotelia, the Deckers' black maid, is undomesticated rather than efficient, aloof rather than compassionate, insightful rather than wise. Subsequently Tyler has rarely addressed the question of race, for as Petry has suggested racial issues do not loom large; 'Tyler once wrote to this author that "I would feel presumptuous writing about black life as if I really knew what it was like"... However she does see blacks as possessing qualities that whites would do well to acquire'.<sup>34</sup>

Nor are Tyler's attempts to capture, to quote Millicent Bell in the *New York Times*, 'the casual and yet complex movement of Southern rural speech'<sup>35</sup> always successful, although Martin Lewin, again in the *New York Times*, considered that in *A Slipping-Down Life* 'her ear for demotic dialogue is as accurate as Ampex'.<sup>36</sup> There are moments of writing which grate; Gram and Ansel sprinkle their remarks with 'lord' and 'low class' Shelley seems obliged to utter statements laced with typically Southern constructions such as, 'I declare, every time a body gets sad, it's a fact that someone'll come along all cheerful and tell them their problems' (IMEC, 144). The potency of Southern community gossip, whether malign, where Ben Joe fears Joanne's behaviour will damage the reputation of the family, or restorative, as used by Simon as a kind of therapy to assuage his mother's grief, is not the only laboured regional/cultural reference. Southern wind figures as a symbolic marker at Ben Joe's moments of insight and at Janie Rose's funeral which opens *The Tin Can Tree*. Food is used to enhance a southern 'feel'; hence Ansel's reference to fattening goats (TCT, 64) and Shelley's to pickled pig's feet (IMEC, 94). Aunt Eula cooks her specialty chicken livers in butter and sherry in *Winter Birds*, *Winter Apples*. This culinary aspect of Southernness is particularly evident in *A Slipping-Down Life*. Soon after Drum and Evie move into their tarpaper shack, Evie visits Clotelia for the recipe for baking-powder biscuits with bacon drippings which Drum's mother has served him with sidemeat. And it is a remark made by Mrs Casey that provides a clue to the importance of this text in the development of Tyler's writing. In this last text to be determinedly Southern, while praising her son's musical potential, Mrs Casey constructs what the narrator describes as a 'web of words' (SDL, 67). This

trope serves to identify Tyler's emerging concern with the relationship between eccentricity and the possibilities and constraints inherent in verbal patterns and language structures, a relationship which has continued throughout her work.

There have been intimations of this concern with language in the first two published texts. Even at this stage Tyler engages with the potential quirkiness of language, hence Ben Joe has learnt to read upside down. She also calls into question the adequacy of language; Simon makes a distinction between conversation and 'those little jagged bits of words' (TCT, 133) and James's father refers to conversation by telephone as 'A wavery thing ... On a thin line between what's real and what isn't' (TCT, 186). Relatedly Tyler points up the ludic possibilities inherent in verbal systems by having her characters fracture conventional semantic conjunctions. Janie Rose prays 'Deliver us from measles' (TCT, 20) and Ben Joe, identifying the name of a boat, confuses Sagacity with Saga City (IMEC, 66). The silhouettes at the end of *The Tin Can Tree* might be an analogy for such possibilities. Such outlines can be read as either fixed or flexible, as either recognisable or artificial. Hence 'Miss Faye finished Joan's silhouette with two quick strokes, ending in a point on the top of her head that wasn't really there' (TCT, 198). However, in *A Slipping-Down Life* the playfulness hinted at in *If Morning Ever Comes* and *The Tin Can Tree* appropriately becomes darker and is informed with a recognition of a deeper level of semantic structures freighted with ideological implications.

Tyler's approach to language in her third novel is informed with identifications of its arbitrary nature. Signification is problematic as the relationship between signifier and referent becomes attenuated.<sup>37</sup> After Evie's

father has died, when a neighbour alludes to funeral arrangements Evie 'thought of song arrangements, then furniture, then flowers in vases. Meanwhile Mrs Harrison and Mrs Willoughby looked at each other in silence, as if there were no possible synonym they could think of to offer her' (SDL, 14). Here Evie is unwittingly reflecting upon the instability of signification, that no word has a single meaning. The 'web of words' which constitutes language is constructed, not given. An awareness that the relationship between the referent and the signifier is relative not fixed, is made overt by Tyler when 'the cleaning girl' Clotelia 'only waved a hand and swept on into the kitchen - swept *literally*, gathering with the hem of her robe all the dust balls she had left behind that day' (SDL, 144, my italics). And it is surely ironic when Drum's singing is compared to David's drum playing: 'But it was only words which should be so precise, not drums' (SDL, 51). Nor need naming be 'precise' - 'David was the kind who slid from under nicknames' (SDL, 50) refusing the comic reversal of calling himself 'Guitar' even though his drum had Casey's name on it.

Tyler sees the interchange of language as a kind of dance set where participants engage in 'curtseying and murmuring a pattern of words' (SDL, 147). Consequently the intelligibility of Drum's 'speaking out' points up the fact that words are meaningless without patterning and structure; an acknowledgement of the structuralist notion that each sign in the system has meaning only because of its difference from the others. Halfway through a song he would stop singing and assault his audience with a series of disconnected sentences:

*'Have I got to tell you again? Have I got to say it?  
We met him on the mountain. He was picking blueberries.  
She was emptying trashcans.  
Don't leave now!'* (SDL, 9)

As Evie significantly comments, 'Nothing you speak out is connected ... how do so many pictures come into your mind at once?' (SDL, 70).

Here there is a double sense of failure as the structure of Drum's language breaks down both diachronically and synchronically. Neither the diachronic process, which acknowledges historical change in linguistic structures, nor the synchronic moment, within which meanings are established via signs' relationships, is coherent.

Rose Quiello supports my view that, in *A Slipping-Down Life*, language is freighted with a challenge to the dominant ideology and that Evie's appropriation of language, by inscribing Drum's name on her forehead, is fundamental to her development as a woman and undermines oppressive patriarchal structures. However, Quiello privileges a psycho-analytical reading, taking as her basic premise the notion that the term hysteria, culturally and historically determined, has been used to define deviant female behaviour. She suggests that Evie's carving 'proclaims her desire in an inexorable way - metonymic of a desire that cannot be negated'.<sup>38</sup> Here her scars are the hallmark of an act of empowering madness and image a woman finally able to represent repressed desires; they speak 'in the aphonic message of the hysteric'.<sup>39</sup> Evie's liberation rests on linguistic rather than psycho-analytical structures, where Evie resists the categorisation of hysteric, and Tyler is drawing attention to the slipperiness of linguistic boundaries where a sign can inhabit either a discourse of entrapment or one of liberation.

A discourse of entrapment would read Evie's self-mutilation as oppression and the inscription of Drum's name as a deliberate reproduction of the discourse which imprisons her. Here the scars, symbolic of exclusion, become the markers of the pain endured by the woman writer. Quiello glosses the Irigaray argument, which locates woman's language outside patriarchal space and suggests that 'Evie at once imitates the dominant discourse (when she writes Casey's name) and yet diverges from it (in that Casey appears inversely as Yezac) writing from her marginal existence.'<sup>40</sup> The letters are backwards because Evie is looking in a mirror when she carves Casey's name. Again feminist criticism is relevant where the mirror represents how the woman is seen and when she looks in the mirror she sees reflected a sharper representation of the patriarchal construction of herself.'<sup>41</sup> Now initially it is possible to read Evie's actions in this way. She, in part, identifies with Drum when she pastes his picture in the middle of her mirror, looking at herself and simultaneously seeing him: 'Drumstrings Casey's pencilled head took the place of her own every time she combed her hair' (SDL, 14). Further when Drum visits her in hospital he says, 'Feels like meeting up with your own face somewhere' (SDL, 35).

However, Quiello misses the point that the word-wounding can also be read as a discourse of liberation, where an act which at the outset might speak of insecurity and near illiteracy in fact instigates a narrative of empowerment. The process of self-discovery this implies can be seen in relation to Evie's command of linguistic structures; her understanding and use of language. Tyler places a clue in the very first sentence of the text, 'Evie Decker was not musical' (SDL, 1). It is not Drum's guitar playing but his

speaking out that evokes a response: 'It made me want to answer' (SDL, 10). When Violet asks, 'what kind of stuff does he do?', Evie replies 'I only heard him talking' (SDL, 6). She constantly listens to the radio but it is the words rather than the tunes which she finds compelling. She enjoys 'ferreting out the words with a kind of possessiveness' (SDL, 2). And the mutilation can be seen as another act of possession. To take Casey's name, without his consent, is to take something from him and, as she chooses his last name, this could be read as a kind of symbolic marriage. However, the reversal of inscribing YAZEC is not taking on the man's name in a patrilineal society, but failing to do this, which suggests an entering into a new terrain of the relationship. Tyler emphasises this comically in the dialogue of the text: 'Why not my first name?' he asked, "There's thousands of Casey's around". "What, Drumstrings?" (replies Evie) "I don't have that big a forehead' (SDL, 35).

The wounding literally marks the beginning of Evie's self-discovery. She refuses to conceal her forehead with bangs for she considers it 'the best thing I've ever done ... Something out of character. Definite' (SDL, 93). So the word on her forehead is the external sign of an internal process and this is indicated by Tyler: 'It looks as if she were staring at the letters from within' (SDL, 24). The word is necessarily backwards because backwards ironically implies forwards in the sense that from now on Evie changes.

She learns to rehearse the text of the relationship by practising conversations. This enables Evie to internalise language and make it her own. When Drum 'sets up a pattern' of sleeping on the porch and visiting her, he encourages her to talk and seems irritable when she is silent. Consequently she 'searches for words to fill the space'. She is given time and she relishes

this: 'She could choose her words ... slowly' (SDL, 84). A turning point occurs when she says what she means without rehearsal. When she objects to Drum's suggestion that they elope to South Carolina, 'Words popped forth ready-made' and 'she waited to see what she would say next, but nothing more came' (SDL, 95). That 'nothing more came' indicates that she is beginning effortlessly to say enough to assert her new-found power within the relationship. When they are first married Evie still feels that she has to 'check everything for stupidity before she said it' (SDL, 107) but another key moment comes when she gets a job outside the home. The text of her development is not written in school, the site of a breakdown in syntax, where what she writes 'trailed off in mid sentence' (SDL, 120), but in the local library, where she accepts the job 'without even planning it', banishing Drum's disapproval to 'some far unlighted corner of her mind' (SDL, 117).

However, Quiello rightly suggests that Evie becomes 'a woman who is now able, at the conclusion of the novel, to decipher the meaning of her past, and to begin to articulate her desires'.<sup>42</sup> She recognises the change in herself as she says, 'I didn't cut my forehead. Someone else did' (SDL, 163). This confuses Drum and also the critic Voelker, who takes the statement literally, suggesting that Evie 'was embroiled in a competition over him in the ladies' room and ended up marked with his name'.<sup>43</sup> What Evie plainly means is that the letters were carved by her former self. In terms of my argument she has become the word, in the sense that she is YESAC recast into a new identity. What she began to see in the mirror has become fully legible. In response to Drum's question about how she will explain to strangers having



'Casey wrote across your face", she says, "I'll tell them it's my name ... It is my name' (SDL, 153).

Now Drum's 'speaking out' could be viewed, in a discourse of entrapment, as an attempt to use patriarchal language to mystify and exclude and, in fact, initially, it does have this effect. Evie asks Violet, "Is he saying something? Is there something underneath it? Is he speaking in code?" (SDL, 21). However, by the end of the novel, Evie has 'cracked the code' and it is Drum who appears mystified in his only 'speaking out' that elicits a direct response: "But the letters was cut backwards. Would you explain?" (SDL, 154). There is a revision in the manuscript here from "if you were speaking the truth, how come the letters is cut backwards?"<sup>44</sup> The published version is more direct, even pleading, and implies that Evie has the answers. Significantly she is now absent; to quote the last sentence of the text, 'The only person who could have answered him was not present' (SDL, 154). This indicates how the politics between Evie and Drum has changed - the final reversal. In the beginning Evie, while acknowledging its difference, had heard but failed to understand Drum's speaking out. This began a process in her own construction of language which enabled her, within limits, to intervene and formulate her own meanings. Drum's incessant rhythms have not worked. Now she is about to raise their child alone and Drum is back at the Unicorn, singing the same old songs. He asks, "Where are the circular stairs?" (SDL, 154) and this is a revision of 'Trees is hung with icicles' in the manuscript.<sup>45</sup> This change is again significant as the natural image is hardened into something more functional. Clearly 'circular stairs' can be both ascended and descended and, implicit in this revision is the notion that on the staircase

referred to in Drum's speaking out, he is 'slipping down', whereas his ex-wife is moving on up.

Underlying Evie's encounter with the liberating qualities of language is the concept of learning to order and Tyler has also explored the implications of the order/clutter relationship in the earlier texts. Ben Joe Hawkes mistakenly sees himself as the indispensable head of a family of six independent women whom he wrongly feminises, imagining 'the ruffly closed circles of their world' (IMEC, 23). Thus in *If Morning Ever Comes*, clutter is gender-specific. The clutter in the flat in New York he shares with Jeremy, a fellow student, consists of 'the newspapers, tossed-off jackets, textbooks, playing cards' (IMEC, 7). This differs from the clutter in the house in Sandhill: 'The coffee tables were littered with things that had been there as long as Ben Joe could remember - little china figurines, enamelled flower pots, conch shells' (IMEC, 35). For Tyler, disorder can be associated with lack of control. So grief accounts for the clutter in the Pike household after Janie Rose's death and there is a sense that such clutter is a necessary part of the bereavement process before order should be restored; so 'Joan let the mess stay there' (TCT, 56). In *Winter Birds, Winter Apples* Bridget's pregnancy precipitates a lack of domestic control and an 'accumulation of litter' becomes 'a part of Bridget's personality' as 'Banana peels had piled higher and higher on the nightstand; socks without mates had lain in balls beneath the bed, and stray pearls had rolled all the corners' (WBWA, 142). This anticipates the 'uncontrolled' disorder which 'collected magically in an oval around her chair' (SDL, 36) when Evie returns scarred from the hospital and the 'overflowing ashtrays, empty record jackets, stray dishes in the sink' (SDL, 121) which accumulate as Drum's career as a

hard rock singer fails to materialise and he is leading 'a slipping down life'. It is therefore significant that when Evie seeks a job it involves putting things in order: 'for three solid hours she alphabetised Library of Congress Cards and stacked them in neat little piles' (SDL, 117) and that when she is preparing to leave Drum the image recurs and 'she squared her shoulders as if she were a stack of library cards' (SDL, 152). So the role of clutter at this point, though this is complicated in later texts, is configured as something to be allowed temporarily and then left behind.

### *The Clock Winder*

It is in Tyler's fourth novel, *The Clock Winder* (1972), that she develops this motif. Furthermore the notion of the boundary between order and clutter is related to eccentricity. This novel is a transitional text in that the nature of eccentricity changes from the tentatively specific kind of Southern eccentricity of the first novels and prepares the way for the more fully developed eccentric characters of the next phase. In *The Clock Winder* she extends her own borders not only technically, extending her time-span and experimenting with point of view, but also regionally.

In his review of *A Slipping-Down Life* Jonathan Yardley advocates this shift: 'Perhaps too Miss Tyler needs to stop writing about North Carolina ... Maybe she ought to forget about Eudora and Flannery and Carson and find another lode for her considerable talents to mine'.<sup>46</sup> However, Southern elements do persist to some extent, emerging when Elizabeth Abbot, the central character, leaves Baltimore and returns home to Ellington, North Carolina. Then there is a sense of the landscape: 'the red soil was baked, the

pinetrees were harsh and scrubby, the unpainted barns had a parched look' (CW, 169). Her father is a version of the comic Southern minister anticipated in some respects in Spirit Farraday in *I Know You, Rider* and by the revivalist Brother Hope in *A Slipping-Down Life*. His authority is suggested in his face 'made of straight lines' (CW, 127) and the way he uses his voice. In talking of the old South it becomes 'deeper and more southern' (CW, 133) and in front of his congregation 'His words rolled over each other, hollow and doomed' (CW, 18). However, the novel opens and closes in Baltimore which has now become the geographical site, together with Maryland, for the rest of Tyler's writing. She has finally turned away from attempts to write a 'Southern novel', and this text moves into a different terrain in terms of conventions and expectations.

There is also a change in the nature of eccentricity in *The Clock Winder*. Tyler now presents a family made up entirely of eccentric individuals, a family 'full of noise and confusion and minor accidents' (CW, 48). She presents two views of this, juxtaposing the view of eccentricity which emphasises the aberrant and threatening with the view that rests on the indulgent and celebratory. Hence a neighbour, Benny, states that 'The whole family's crazy, everyone knows that' (CW, 24), whereas their mother, Mrs Emerson, privileges her children's difference. She suggests that unlike other children who 'were steady and happy and ordinary', 'hers were special' (CW, 29). Margaret is 'moody' (CW, 29). She eloped at sixteen with Jimmy Joe, a 'stray delivery boy' (CW, 112). Melissa, an aspiring model, is 'high-strung' (CW, 29) and Andrew is 'unbalanced'. Subsequently, after writing death threats to Elizabeth (CW, 148), he does try to kill her (CW, 228) because he blames her

for the suicide of his twin Timothy. It is Timothy who considers Matthew, another brother, to be 'the crazy one in the family' (CW, 38). Matthew is Tyler's most fully developed eccentric so far; an outsider as a child, 'pale and scowling, wearing an old man's suit and cracking elderly jokes that made his classmates uneasy' (CW, 80) and, in adolescence, a disturbed medical student who had premonitions about death: 'He had begun to have spells lately of worrying that he had died, and that everyone knew it but him' (CW, 44). His suicide, in which Elizabeth has an ambiguous involvement, is explained because he has cheated in an exam, when 'I forgot the customs of the country' (CW, 79). This is a crucial phrase. Tyler, while still endowing her characters with a variety of quirks and strangenesses, is anticipating a further aspect of eccentricity. By alluding to 'the customs of the country', she is suggesting that eccentricity is a construct, ideologically defined and located within a nexus of societal norms and expectations. It is this reading of eccentricity that she will develop in later texts.

*The Clock Winder* marks a transition in the relationship between eccentricity and the opposition between order and clutter, where the eccentricity of the Emersons is re-configured as the clutter of family life. Of course Tyler has always concerned herself with the tensions and interactions of the domestic. *If Morning Ever Comes* and *The Tin Can Tree* address the complexities of the familial, the tensions between freedom and responsibility and between independence and duty. Tyler had already used the idea of Ben Joe Hawkes and his six sisters in two short stories; 'I Never Saw Morning' (1961), which focuses on the relationship between Shelley Domer and Ben Joe,<sup>47</sup> and 'Nobody Answers the Door' (1964)<sup>48</sup> which anticipates his isolation

within the family. *If Morning Ever Comes* opens when he rushes home to help them in what he perceives to be a crisis; Joanne leaving her husband. Ben Joe's misguided sense of his own status within the family, where his grandmother, mother and sisters function successfully without him, leads to his realisation of how 'closed-off his family looked ... Ben Joe having vanished, might as well not exist' (IMEC, 99). Belonging to the family group is also explored by Tyler in *The Tin Can Tree* where Joan lived like a guest, 'keeping her property strictly within the walls of her room' (TCT, 23). Tyler exposes family tensions not only in the recognised feud between Gram and her daughter-in-law, 'Gram said Ellen Hawkes was cold-hearted and Ellen Hawkes said Gram was soft-cored' (IMEC, 46) but also in the hidden disjunctions, articulated by Ben Joe who feels 'as if he and his family were a set of square dancers coming to clasp the palms of their hands to each others only their hands missed by inches and encountered nothing' (IMEC, 17). As referred to above, there is similar disjunction in the relationship between Bridget and Danny in *Winter Birds, Winter Apples*. In *A Slipping-Down Life* Tyler introduces the set piece of the family meal, a trope for domestic dysfunction which recurs through her work: 'At dinner they all outdid each other in compliments and small courtesies. They circulated serving dishes, spoon side outward; they leapt to pass the butter to whoever asked for it and they filled silences with hopeful questions. Like salesmen, they over-used each other's names' (SDL, 109).

It is Elizabeth's role, in *The Clock Winder*, to improve this sort of dysfunction, to 'de-clutter' the Emerson family. At first this is in a practical sense, as handyman, restoring and enlivening a house which 'had outlived its

usefulness. It sat hooded and silent, a brown shingleboard monstrosity close to the road but backed by woods, far enough from downtown Baltimore to escape the ashy smell of factories' (CW, 5). By mending, fixing and cutting through Mrs Emerson's 'tumble of possessions' (CW, 26) she restores order: 'From the day that Elizabeth first climbed those porch steps ... she had possessed miraculous repairing powers; and Mrs Emerson ... had obligingly presented her with a faster and faster stream of disasters in need of attention. First shutters and faucets and doorknobs; now human beings' (CW, 67). 'Now human beings' suggests that she also becomes involved in the emotional clutter of this extraordinary family: 'She had the sudden feeling that troubles were being piled in front of her, huge untidy heaps laid at her feet, Emersons stepping back waiting for her to exclaim over the heaps and admire them' (CW, 78). Now Tyler, concerned in this text to problematise boundaries concerning interference and responsibility, suggests that such involvement can be potentially damaging: 'They were always asking me to do something ... Step in. Take some action, pour out some feeling. And when I didn't, they got mad. Then once, one time, I did do something. And what a mess' (CW, 176). And Elizabeth is damaged and wounded, when she returns to the south, 'Pieces of Emersons were lodged within Elizabeth like shrapnel' (CW, 123).

Significantly, even in this early text, Tyler is concerned with the obliquity and ambiguity of boundaries; the word 'slant' peppers her novels and is present in this text. Timothy's eyes are 'narrow blue slits whose downward slant gave him a puzzled look' (CW, 37). And Matthew, whose voice here seems to conflate the Dickinson poems 'Tell all the truth but tell it slant' and 'There's a certain slant of light' alludes to Elizabeth's tendency to fictionalise:

'One of the things he [Matthew] had long ago accepted about Elizabeth was that she didn't always tell the truth. She seemed to view the truth as a quality constantly shifting, constantly reshaping itself the way a slant of light might during the course of a day' (CW, 95). Hence the opposition between order and clutter is not uncomplicated. Alongside Elizabeth's attempt to restore order to the Emersons, her personal clutter, a signifier for psychological unrest, remains. In the room in Baltimore 'there was a clutter of paperback detective stories and orange peels and overflowing ashtrays on the dresser' (CW, 29). Her packing before her wedding in Ellington lacks order: 'she dumped a handful of clock parts into a suitcase, and folded yards and yards of burlap down on top of them' (CW, 172). It is not until after Elizabeth has jilted Dommie, her parents' choice of husband, that she starts to take control of her own life. After leaving the church 'All she had left behind were two high-heeled shoes *placed neatly side by side* on the bottom step' (CW, 183, my italics).

Elizabeth returns to Roland Park five years later to care for Mrs Emerson who, largely due to a fraught conversation over childcare with her daughter Mary, has suffered a stroke. Because of this condition, she mispronounces Elizabeth's name, calling her Gillespie (CW, 199). This change of name signals a different identity for Elizabeth where she is prepared to take on responsibility: 'The name Gillespie rang in her ears - the new person Mrs Emerson was changing her into, someone effective and managerial who was summoned by her last name, like a WAC' (CW, 221). However, and this relates to confusions I shall return to later, the naming implications of identity and the role of language in this remain undeveloped. In fact Tyler does not pursue the linguistic issues and the relationship between language and power



foregrounded in *A Slipping-Down Life*. The only direct reference to the politics of words concerns Mrs Emerson's impotence when she is disabled by the stroke and where it is understood that someone who formerly had 'pulled all the family strings by words alone, was reduced to stammering and to letting others finish her sentences' (CW, 203).

In fact there are confusions concerning Elizabeth's role both within the Emerson household and within the text, which seems to lack structural cohesion. In Martin Levin's opinion it 'pursues a serpentine way, and any bend in the road might just as well be marked finis'.<sup>49</sup> Petry validly suggests that there is an ambivalence regarding the nature of self-reliance, which the Emerson family do not possess in spite of their name, and its association with responsibility, which Elizabeth has difficulty in coming to terms with. Petry suggests that Elizabeth's *apparent* independence in the first part of the novel is based on a tendency to indecision and a capacity to drift. She rightly identifies Tyler's preoccupation with the ambiguities of delineation and that for her (Tyler) 'there is a fine line between an adult character's actions seeming charmingly childlike - or irritatingly childish' and considers that Elizabeth 'crosses that line, as her seeming self-reliance is exposed as infantile selfishness'.<sup>50</sup> What is also puzzling in the text is that, despite her earlier resistance and her determination not to stay, immediately after Andrew has shot her Elizabeth consents to becoming one of the family; she 'laughed out loud, and opened the door to climb in among a tangle of *other* Emersons' (CW, 230, my italics). After jilting Dommie, she becomes an artist and teacher, having successfully assumed responsibility for the care of the old man Mr Cunningham. Apparently she has moved on. So why does she take a

seemingly retrogressive step and consent to becoming Gillespie? This leads to an ambiguous ending when Tyler places her back in the family, wife of Matthew, mother of two children, presumably fulfilling the roles of cook and housekeeper as well as handyman.

Not surprisingly, then, the ending of this text has been variously read. Sara Blackburn comments that 'the result smacks of a group of inert and inept people propping each other up to live a bearable cozy life'<sup>51</sup> and, according to Gilbert, *The Clock Winder* ends in a scene of 'homey ... family life; there the gathered clan, several generations, a new baby, a new bride, and the seven-year locusts symbolise the cyclical rise and fall of the welfare and troubles of the tribe'.<sup>52</sup> However, Tyler disagrees with the 'happy ending' view: 'I think Elizabeth does herself irreparable damage in not going farther than she does, but on the other hand what she does is the best and happiest for her. I think of it as a sad ending ... and I've been surprised that not everyone does'. This was her comment in a 1972 interview.<sup>53</sup>

Tyler is right that the ending can be read as 'sad'. Elizabeth's return and inclusion in the family implies a stunting of her creative potential and a lack of progression. She has become integrated within the family and her role as outsider has been taken by PJ, Peter's new wife, who articulates the claustrophobic co-dependency of the re-formed group:

That little closed family of yours is closed around nothing, thin air, all huddled up together scared to go out. Depending on someone that is like the old-maid failure poor relation you find some places, mending their screens and cooking their supper and fixing their chimneys and making peace - oh she ended up worse off than them. (CW, 250)

'Homey', perhaps - but the situation is certainly not unproblematic. Elizabeth has changed from disliking the responsibility of children through a rather unconvincing epiphanic moment, 'Isn't it amazing how hard people work to raise their children' (CW, 223) into embracing them like 'a broad golden madonna' (CW, 252). However, after nursing the baby, 'she rose, with the baby clinging to her like a barnacle' (CW, 253). Here 'barnacle' implies the 'damage' referred to by Tyler. This is how her baby 'clings'. This makes the image of the return of the locusts referred to by Gilbert all the more telling because, as well as being destructive and intrusive, locusts also cling. In fact Tyler returns to this trope in the short story 'A Woman Like a Fieldstone House', which she wrote for the Share Our Strength anthology *Louder Than Words* in 1989. Here the central character, as a child, is frightened by the locusts: 'She imagined how they would feel ... *barnacle-like* clinging with their prickly feet to her bare leg'.<sup>54</sup> In this story, and in the novel, the word 'barnacle' resonates with notions of restraint, even threat. Certainly Elizabeth/Gillespie has tamed 'the wilder shores of eccentricity' of the Emersons - but Tyler suggests that she has suffered as a result.

However, the possibility that, as clock winder, she has submitted to the monotonous routine and enclosed circularity that this activity involves is complicated by a title change. In the manuscript the book is entitled *The Button Mender*. Perhaps this change accounts for the confusions within the text as the two activities carry different implications and connotations. Critics have viewed the notion of winding clocks as fundamental, which flies in the face of Tyler's assertion that she 'reluctantly agreed to the current title'.<sup>55</sup> Betts suggests that the divisions into chapters with individual points of view 'match

the controlling metaphor since each character, even when synchronised with the others, will tick separately in the novel, just as the many clocks tick in the Emerson household<sup>56</sup> and Carroll states that someone is needed who 'accepts any invitation to tinker with the inner workings of a family'.<sup>57</sup> The breakdown of the system of winding the clocks has been caused by the death of Mrs Emerson's husband and is a trope for her subsequent lack of control. Part of Elizabeth's practical restoration of order is to start these up again. A clock winder keeps something going which is already in working order. A button mender's task is more complicated, s/he repairs something which is broken, in a kind of double attachment, putting together an object which will fasten something else. Interestingly the source of the original title is a recurring dream that Elizabeth experiences after Timothy's suicide and her return south. This dream is an antidote 'to every nightmare she had had this month, as boring and comforting as hot milk' (CW, 118). Later the dream is more specifically described: 'She dipped the metal loops in glue and set them into the pearls, holding them there until they dried, pressing them so tightly between thumb and forefinger that she could feel, even in her sleep, the dents they made in her skin' (CW, 139). Both titles anticipate the 'sad ending' referred to by Tyler. Gillespie, as 'button mender', perhaps experiences the labour and wounding the dream implies; Gillespie, as 'clock winder', has become the spare part necessary to keep the family in motion.

In these early texts Tyler's construction of eccentricity is under-developed and somewhat tentative. It can be related to the findings of Weeks and James who privilege and celebrate the quirky and present a benign, even indulgent, model of eccentric behaviour. Tyler advances beyond this view in her next

four texts, and this has been anticipated in the transitional phase of *The Clock Winder*. In this text Timothy's remark concerning 'the customs of the country' indicates that she is locating eccentricity within the ideological and the social. Furthermore she is acknowledging that such behaviour can be variously interpreted; Mrs Emerson's view of her family as special *because* they are out of the ordinary is juxtaposed with that of the neighbour Benny who likens their behaviour to madness. It is in the next phase of Tyler's representation of the eccentric that this distinction between the crazy, and potentially threatening, and the special, and potentially creative, is explored further.

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1 Theodore O'Leary, 'Nothing Matters So Much as the Death of a Child', *Kansas City Star*, 24 October 1965 (DU).

2 Orville Prescott, 'Return to the Hawkes Family', reprinted in Alice Hall Petry, ed., *Critical Essays on Anne Tyler*, New York: G.K. Hall, 1992, 61.

3 Diana Hobby, 'A Week at Home', *Post*, Houston, Texas, 11 October 1964 (DU).

4 O'Leary (DU).

5 Marguerite Michaels, 'Anne Tyler, Writer 8:05 to 3:30', reprinted in Petry, ed., 42.

6 Clifford A. Ridley, 'Anne Tyler: A Sense of Reticence Balanced by "Oh, Well, Why Not?"', reprinted in Petry, ed., 26.

7 Wendy Lamb, 'An Interview with Anne Tyler', reprinted in Petry, ed., 58.

8 Arthur S. Reber, *Penguin Dictionary of Psychology*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1995, 234.

9 Judy Pearsall, ed., *The Concise Oxford English Dictionary*, 10th Edition Revised, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002, 452.

10 James Chaplin, *Dictionary of Psychology*, Second Revised Edition, New York: Dell Publishing Company, 1995, 146.

11 David Weeks and Jamie James, *Eccentrics*, London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1995, 100.

12 Weeks and James, 10.

13 Weeks and James, 124.

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- 14 Anon, 'An interview with Anne Tyler about *A Patchwork Planet*', reprinted in [www.bookbrowse.com/index.ctm:\(page=author&author11\)=313&view=interview](http://www.bookbrowse.com/index.ctm:(page=author&author11)=313&view=interview) accessed on 15 July 2001.
- 15 This anticipates *Searching for Caleb* (1976) when the private detective finds that Caleb has been in New Orleans, acting as 'The lead man for White-Eye, an old coloured guitar man that used to play the streets' (SC, 253).
- 16 Carson McCullers, *The Ballad of the Sad Café*, 1953, reprinted Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1963, 65.
- 17 In the interview with Michaels Tyler commented that in her boxes of index cards she has a 'first sentence' category, Petry, ed., 41.
- 18 Here the opening of the published edition differs from the manuscript; 'six shelves of National Geographic' replaces 'six old shirts' and 'a battered microscope' replaces 'a scrapbook of poems cut without permission from several borrowed books'. Perhaps Tyler is assessing degrees of 'oddness' here.
- 19 In this interview Tyler's youth and femininity are emphasised. It opens with 'The slim brunette scrunched further down on the small of her back, re-arranged her stockinged feet on the coffee table and nibbled a chocolate cookie', quoted in Jorie Lueloff, 'Authoress Explains Why Women Dominate in South', reprinted in Petry, ed., 21.
- 20 Petry, ed., 22.
- 21 Petry, ed., 23.
- 22 Genette Bateson, 'Growing Pains', *News*, Savannah, Georgia, 10, January 1965 (DU).
- 23 O'Leary (DU).
- 24 O'Leary (DU).
- 25 Voelker also suggests a Faulknerian connection. He cites the possibility of an incestuous relationship between Ben Joe and Joanne and suggests that Ben Joe's view of his fellow passengers on the train 'is what Faulkner reads in Dilsey: tradition, stability, self-knowledge, a sense of one's place', Joseph C. Voelker, *Art and the Accidental in Anne Tyler*, Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1989, 21-23. Tyler, however, would be unlikely to accept any such influence: 'I read a bunch of books about Snopses, but they all ran together in my mind and I kept starting the same book over again thinking it was the one I hadn't read, and then finding I had read it or maybe I hadn't but

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- had read another one just like it', quoted in Alice Hall Petry, *Understanding Anne Tyler*, Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1990, 20.
- 26 As discussed in Chapter 6, Tyler returns to this sort of curiosity in *A Patchwork Planet* when she describes Barnaby's burglaries.
- 27 However, at times the writing can still be rather clumsy. For example, 'The word opened a door, letting through a flashing beam of anger which took her by surprise' (SDL, 73).
- 28 Petry, ed., 26.
- 29 Petry, ed., 42.
- 30 Voelker suggests that it may be significant that she wrote it at night (41).
- 31 According to Tyler he was 'the direct inheritance of days on the tobacco farm', quoted in Petry, ed., 26.
- 32 Sandra Gilbert, 'Anne Tyler', in Tonette Bond Inge, ed., *Southern Women Writers: The New Generation*, Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 255.
- 33 Millicent Bell, 'Tobacco Road Updated', *New York Times*, 21 November 1965 (DU).
- 34 Alice Hall Petry, 'Bright Books of Life: the Black Norm in Anne Tyler's Novels', *Southern Quarterly*, Volume XXXI, No 1, Fall 1992: 59.
- 35 Bell (DU).
- 36 Martin Lewin, 'Reader's Report', *New York Times*, 15 March 1970 (DU).
- 37 Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, 1915, reprinted, London: Fontana, 1974.
- 38 Rose Quiello, 'Breakdowns and Breakthroughs: The Hysterical Use of Language', in Dale Salwak, ed., *Anne Tyler as Novelist*, Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1994, 53.
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## CHAPTER 3

### **The double-edge of eccentricity: from *Celestial Navigation* through *Morgan's Passing***

'Anne Tyler is left with a story of weirdness - and weirdness, as a novelist subject, is simply not enough' (Eva Hoffman)<sup>1</sup>

In *Celestial Navigation*, Tyler again takes up the theme of eccentricity that had begun to emerge in *If Morning Ever Comes*, *The Tin Can Tree*, *A Slipping-Down Life* and *The Clock Winder*. However, in this fifth novel, published in 1974, critics acknowledged a change in her writing.<sup>2</sup> Importantly, this change can also be applied to her representation of eccentricity, for it is in this text that the artist, Jeremy Pauling, emerges as Tyler's first fully developed eccentric character. Furthermore, the first voice she employs in the novel is that of Amanda, his unmarried elder sister, and her view of Jeremy plainly demonstrates that eccentricity is defined by societal norms and the dominant ideological structures which determine what is to be considered normal and what is to be considered deviant, or even slightly insane. This is an advance from the first four texts, where, apart from Benny's passing reference to the 'craziness' of the Emerson family in *The Clock Winder*, Tyler's characters can be read as lovable individuals with endearing quirks. When Amanda emphasises Jeremy's difference: 'he is not like other people. He is always himself. That's what's wrong with him' (CN, 13), she condemns his behaviour, disapproving of his reluctance to answer the telephone and his inability to leave the block: 'I myself have sometimes wondered if he isn't a little bit

retarded. Some sort of selective, unclassified retardation that no medical book has yet put its finger on' (CN, 17). Yet it is just this sort of classification that Amanda articulates and, in this respect, she represents the dominant view of what is perceived as conventional and acceptable: 'Wouldn't it be easier to give up and act the way he is *supposed to?*' (CN, 29, my italics). Amanda also makes distinctions between what is normality and what is deviance: 'This is not *natural*, Miss Vinton' (CN, 14) and 'This is just not normal, Laura' (CN, 34). She views Jeremy's behaviour as somehow threatening and tries to make him conform by forcing him into the outside world: 'Just come out of this, jerk yourself up by your own bootstraps, it's all a matter of will' (CN, 36). This results in Jeremy's physical collapse as he '[j]ust crumpled in upon himself and folded onto the sidewalk, where he sat in a heap and shook all over ... he was looking *odder* than I had ever seen him' (CN, 39, my italics). This evident fear of the outside world has meant that Jeremy has been categorised as agoraphobic by critics; Voelker refers to 'a poetics of agoraphobia'.<sup>3</sup> Yet, significantly, this sort of psychological terminology is never used by Tyler. Such categorisation suggests a means of understanding of Jeremy that is informed by the sort of ideological classification she is questioning. This equals a shift in Tyler's representation of eccentricity, as in this text she makes it harder for the reader simply to embrace the benign view articulated in her first four novels. This 'loss' of benignity is double-edged in that it involves two dialogues. The first, a benign view of the harmless eccentric, is countered by the view of eccentric as threat, that held by Amanda, who locates Jeremy's behaviour firmly within the terrain of the odd and the aberrant and believes that this necessitates remedial action. This dialogue

between benignity/loss of benignity occurs *within* social norms. However, the text also involves a further dialogue *outside* social norms, within the oppositional; here eccentricity is 'benign' in articulating a more radical position and raising questions concerning the limitations of behavioural boundaries and arbitrary classifications. The 'loss' of benignity from this position views eccentric behaviour as escapism, a fleeing from social responsibilities and engagement.

This more complex view of the eccentric leads Tyler to experiment with multiple points of view which invite the reader to piece together other characters' perceptions of Jeremy's personality and behaviour.<sup>4</sup> And this piecing together is appropriate in a novel where a central issue is Jeremy's work, which is mainly collage.<sup>5</sup> Thus the view of a boarder, Miss Vinton, is set against that of Amanda. With characteristic obliquity Tyler suggests that these two characters are both alike and different. As Amanda says, 'I suppose she thinks we have something in common, both being spinsters in our forties, but thank heaven that is where the resemblance ends' (CN, 11). She is glad that 'the resemblance ends' because Miss Vinton's behaviour also deviates from the conventional, from what is considered seemly and appropriate for women of her age and station. She smokes, rides a bicycle and always wears 'a lavender cardigan over a gray tube of a dress' (CN, 11). Furthermore Miss Vinton resists the sort of interference Amanda delights in, as she says, 'When people cry I back off to give them privacy' (CN, 136). She is drawn as a sensitive character, attuned to Tyler's concern, evident in *The Clock Winder*, with the boundaries between privacy and neutrality, hence her remarks on

witnessing the relationship between Jeremy and Mary: 'It is very difficult to live among people you love and hold back from offering them advice' (CN, 138).

More importantly, Miss Vinton voices the (oppositional) benign view of Jeremy's behaviour, one that, while acknowledging his difference, suggests that he has no need to conform to conventional expectation: 'I also believe that everyone has the right to take his own leaps' (CN, 129). She hopes that Mary Tell will realise 'that this is a special man you're dealing with. A genius' (CN, 143). Miss Vinton, as this statement suggests, privileges Jeremy's difference and, relatedly, understands the relationship between Jeremy as individual and Jeremy as artist; that his behaviour is an integral part of his creative endeavour. Because of this, her address to the reader about him seems more perceptive and less condemnatory than Amanda's:

[h]ave you ever seen a television show that ends with stills from the scenes you have just finished watching ... The effect is distance. He lives at a distance. He makes pictures the way other men make maps - setting down a few fixed points that he knows, hoping they will guide him as he goes floating through this unfamiliar planet. (CN, 145)

Clearly Miss Vinton's remark relates to the notion of 'celestial navigation', introduced by the book's very title,<sup>6</sup> a term which juxtaposes ideas of direction and patterning with notions of the heavenly and divine. Miss Vinton compares Jeremy with the seemingly 'normal' Brian, the owner of the art gallery and, in effect, Jeremy's employer. When Brian is talking of a boat trip that he intends to make, he says, 'I'm going to do it old style. I'll eat what I catch, I'll sail by celestial navigation' (CN, 145). In Miss Vinton's opinion Jeremy also sails 'by celestial navigation and it is far more celestial than Brian's' (CN, 146). Alan Pryce-Jones' review in the *Washington Post Book World* takes issue with

Tyler's use of the term, stating that she 'stays too oblique' and that he remains puzzled: 'Who in her celestial navigation is sailing, and whither?'<sup>7</sup> However, this obliquity is one of the strengths of this text, in that Tyler is eschewing the sort of simplistic resolutions with regard to characterisation that Pryce-Jones seems to be demanding. Indeed Jeremy Brooks commends her 'necessarily oblique ways of communicating the unique mixture of diamond brightness and grainy darkness that is his experience of living'.<sup>8</sup> Rather I agree with Petry that Miss Vinton's perspective on Jeremy's 'genius' and vision works and is 'in keeping with the ancient notion that painters, poets and singers are closer to the gods than mere mortals'.<sup>9</sup> Amanda has condemned his lack of connection with the world, seeing him as '[a] man without landmarks' (CN, 36), whereas Miss Vinton privileges his association with other-worldliness. So Tyler presents these two views of Jeremy alongside each other in the text and sets up a dialogue between them.<sup>10</sup>

Furthermore Tyler complicates this dialogue by introducing the voice of Olivia, another boarder, a hippie girl hitchhiker. In the strange, chilly, fantasy world she inhabits with Jeremy after Mary, his partner, has left, Olivia becomes similarly reclusive: 'Sometimes we went days without speaking or looking at each other, and we never touched even accidentally' (CN, 242). In spite of this lack of physical contact, Olivia is hoping, in a sense, to become Jeremy, viewing his eccentricity as a means of self-definition. She states at one point, 'Now I was an artist too' (CN, 242). (Petry refers to the 'self-serving edge to her adoration'<sup>11</sup> and Voelker suggests an intimacy across realism where Olivia is not 'outside him'.<sup>12</sup>) At first Olivia almost sanctifies Jeremy's creativity, viewing herself as '[t]he last believer left in church faithful to him'

(CN, 244). Like Miss Vinton, she privileges his difference. Tyler makes this explicit when she has Olivia describe Jeremy's response to the ten-colour ballpoint pen she has given him as a present: 'I liked the way he held it in both hands, so respectfully, as if he understood it in some deeper way than ordinary people could' (CN, 231). Yet when his next piece of work reveals both the barrenness of their relationship and that it cannot provide the answers she wants, Olivia, like Amanda, judges and condemns Jeremy, classifying his behaviour as aberrant, even insane: 'There was a small trembling smile at the corners of his mouth. Only crazy people smile like that' (CN, 247). So Olivia oscillates between the interrogative Miss Vinton position, where, outside social norms, the eccentric remains benign, and the condemnatory Amanda position, inside social norms, which views eccentricity as potentially harmful.

From an oppositional point of view the benignity associated with Miss Vinton's position on Jeremy's behaviour is eroded when the issue of contextual engagement emerges. This point of view raises the valid criticism that entry into an eccentric 'world' can constitute an escape from political/social responsibility in the 'real' world and certainly this sort of escapism applies to Jeremy. According to Mary, in the section narrated at the time of the Vietnam war, 'When I was a toddler, for instance, other men his age were fighting World War II, but Jeremy wasn't. I don't have any proof he even knew about the war - not that one or the one we are going through now. Nothing outside touches him' (CN, 215). Here Tyler is depicting Jeremy as a figure seeking to be ahistorical where the demands of art render him impervious to time, a position Carson's comment that 'art comes to demand

isolation from life in order to complete itself'<sup>13</sup> endorses. However she has Jeremy regret this: 'What I mean is that the twentieth century has been wasted on me, don't you see?' (CN, 239). This suggests that she is raising the question, which she will return to later in *Morgan's Passing*, of the validity of such escapism, especially at such a traumatic time in American history as the period of the Vietnam war.

Clearly there are links here between Jeremy and Tyler, because it is just this sort of apolitical escapism which, as discussed in Chapter 1, some critics, mistakenly, identify in her work. However there are other, more valid, connections. At one time Tyler also wanted to be a visual artist.<sup>14</sup> She also aligns her writing strategies with Jeremy's artistic processes by using the same image to characterise the tension between the domestic and the creative. When family concerns intrude upon Jeremy it seems '[l]ike a string pulling him, some strong piece of twine pulling him away from some picture in his head' (CN, 155). Similarly Tyler said of herself, 'It feels like the sort of string I tell myself to loosen. When the children come home, I drop the string and close the study door and that's the end of it'.<sup>15</sup> More importantly, she still refers to Jeremy as 'the character I've felt most protective of'.<sup>16</sup>

Arguably, what Tyler feels she needs to protect Jeremy from is the construction of his behaviour articulated by Amanda which marginalises his difference, a difference which, like Miss Vinton, Tyler sees more positively, as an integral part of his creativity. The four Jeremy sections in *Celestial Navigation* are expressed in the third person and this combines focalisation from Jeremy's point of view and an authorial voice articulating a view, from the inside, of his psychological make-up. These sections are set against the other

six sections expressed in the first person which articulate the partial and unreliable views of him, from the outside, already referred to.<sup>17</sup> In the Jeremy sections the use of the third person is more effective, given the character's limited sense of self-awareness, his inability to articulate his thoughts and feelings and his tendency to view life from a distance. The use of the third person also provides Tyler with an opportunity to 'protect' Jeremy by undermining the dominant view of his eccentricity.

So Tyler, for the first time, confronts the psychology of eccentricity more directly, in an attempt to represent the way that Jeremy thinks. This is evident in the opening paragraph of the first Jeremy section:

Jeremy Pauling saw life in a series of flashes, startling moments so brief that they could arrest a motion in mid-air. Like photographs, they were handed to him at unexpected times, introduced by a neutral voice: Here is where you are now. Take a look. Between flashes, he sank into darkness. He drifted in a daze, studying what he had seen. Wondering if he had seen it. Forgetting, finally, what it was he was wondering about, and floating off into numbness again. (CN, 43)

Here 'flashes' and 'startling' indicate not only the swift suddenness of his perceptions but that they are unexpected and unnerving; indeed the syntax of the whole paragraph is abrupt and disjointed. The photograph, here associated with illuminating moments of perception, becomes a recurrent motif in Tyler's work. That these 'moments' are 'handed' to him suggests that he receives them passively. 'Neutral' is both telling and self-reflexive, for this is an intrusion of the authorial voice which points up the dilemma of writing in the third person from a sympathetic perspective, while attempting to maintain an authorial distance. Between the instantaneity of these perceptions is the 'daze' of uncertainty before the final 'numbness' and lack of feeling, which



characterises the state of mind he experiences until the 'series' begins again. This 'numbness' is expressed in the sea imagery, 'sank', 'drifted' and 'floating', which resonates through the text and which I will return to later. Voelker supports this view that Jeremy alternates between disorientation and insight.<sup>18</sup> This is evoked, in this passage, in the fluctuation from the confusion of the sinking to the illumination of the 'flashes'.

Clearly this way of thinking, and the behaviour Jeremy displays as a result, digresses from the conventionally 'normal' and impacts upon his personal life. Here, for the first time, the quirky comic tone which Tyler has adopted in the earlier texts to represent eccentricity is informed with the pathetic. She treats his courtship of Mary comically, as when he tries to adopt an appropriate dress code: 'He began wearing a pen and pencil set in his shirt pocket - a sign of competence, he thought' (CN, 98) and, for his second proposal, he sports a '[h]andkerchief tucked in his breast pocket the way his mother had taught him' (CN, 123). However, the long catalogue of his dreads makes painful reading: 'using the telephone, answering the doorbell, opening mail, leaving his house, making purchases. Also wearing new clothes, standing in open spaces, meeting the eyes of a stranger, eating in the presence of others, turning on electrical appliances' (CN, 86). As the instantaneity of his 'flashes' implies, his focus on the world is fragmentary: 'That was the way his vision functioned; only in detail. Piece by piece. He tried looking at the whole of things but it never worked out' (CN, 45). When attempting to woo Mary with the bunch of wild chicory, 'He kept his eyes on the flowers. It was important to see them safely into water. And then what?' (CN, 93). He could only recall the detail of his children: 'the exact curl of Abbie's eyes when she laughed, the way

Hannah rubbed the down on her upper lip when she sucked her thumb, the dimples like parentheses in Rachel's cheeks' (CN, 157). This fragmentation limits his responses and perhaps leads to an edge of sentimentality - an easy way of buying some engagement with the world.

Yet Tyler balances the potential limitations of Jeremy's way of perceiving the world with its possibilities. His intense perceptions are synaesthetic. Not only has he a heightened sense of hearing, seated in a chair, 'The ruffle kept making a scrunching sound against his shoulders' (CN, 52), but sound is reconstructed visually, so he refers to his boarders as a 'triangle of muted gray voices' (CN, 117). His response to the endpaper of the library book, expressed in the present tense to evoke the immediacy of one of his flashes, is particularly telling: 'Here is the endpaper from a library book ... With his eyes he traces maroons and blues and browns, a watery yellow, a touch of orange, all flooded with a slow radiance that is soaking into him' (CN, 52). There is a sense that he needs this 'radiance' because he lacks colour himself; Amanda describes him as 'pale and doughy and overweight. His eyes are nearly colourless' (CN, 14-15). His aesthetic pleasure here delineates him as artist and Tyler is making the point that his 'eccentric' way of viewing the world and dealing with life, of thinking and seeing, cannot be disassociated from his creative sensibilities and constructive re-envisioning. This is reflected in his personal relationships; Mary is a 'collection of textures' (CN, 102) and he pieces his daughter Hannah together in terms of colour: 'an orange scarf ... a puffy pink quilted jacket ... a red cardigan ... a plaid skirt ... bare white knees ... the cuffs of blue knee socks rising above floppy red boots' (CN, 181).

Clearly, because of this inter-relationship between Jeremy's reactions as an individual and his responses as an artist, his domestic and creative existences also inform one another. His pieces become more textured and more three-dimensional as he becomes more involved with family life. There is a suggestion here that initially fatherhood has enriched his creativity.<sup>19</sup> In his 'old man piece' he has used 'all the glittery things he had been able to lay his hands on - small skewers for trussing poultry, a child's gilt barrette, a pair of Abbie's school scissors with "Lefty" on the blade' (CN, 163). Jeremy uses domestic objects as the raw material for this, and other, pieces. This demonstrates that Tyler's characterisation of him as artist/eccentric is freighted with the distinction between order and clutter that she has formulated in the earlier texts and which she now articulates in a more intricate way. Gilbert, in her discussion of the novel, goes some way to acknowledging this when she suggests that 'one sees that life is clutter'.<sup>20</sup> However, this comment needs to be refined and explored further. What Tyler does in this text is to set up, and then complicate, an opposition between Jeremy's aesthetic order and Mary's domestic clutter which serves to shed light both on their relationship and Jeremy's creativity. Jeremy uses the clutter of his household, 'Ordinary objects are crowded into them - Dixie cups and bus tickets and his children's plaid shoe laces' (CN, 145) in order to enact a different sort of order, one that can be aligned to his creativity; an aesthetic order out of his own perceived disorder. Furthermore this sense of order is informed with the 'celestial navigation' of the title. As Miss Vinton has suggested he is guided by, and dependent on, such 'fixed points' as a child's shoe lace. These provide the

insights, the 'flashes', that facilitate the patterning that is the basis of his aesthetic endeavour.

However, Jeremy finds these ordinary objects difficult to take on in his personal, everyday life. He can only tolerate the familial disorder, which Mary comes to represent, when he can reconstruct it as his own. He feels oppressed by the 'Muzak of her discussions of washing machines, report cards, DPT shots' (CN, 153) and the clutter of their children: 'Clothes, vitamins, toothbrushes, baby aspirin, diapers, Edward's potty chair, Pippi's antihistamine, seven pairs of plastic pants' (CN, 192).<sup>21</sup> Yet, characteristically, Tyler blurs the aesthetic order/domestic clutter opposition she has set up in that Mary's clutter has its own sense of order. Jeremy is doubly overwhelmed, not only by her clutter but also by the order she imposes upon it 'as supplier, feeder, caretaker' (CN, 160). Ultimately Jeremy, as father, cannot be reconciled with Jeremy as artist/eccentric. The aesthetic order which informs his creativity cannot accommodate marriage and parenthood. Here the two dialogues concerning benignity and its loss emerge again. On the one hand, from a dominant position, this sort of attitude concerning the constraints of family life might be considered suspect in undermining its 'natural' order. On the other hand, from an oppositional position, Jeremy's visits to an individual and apparently eccentric kind of order serve to reveal the limits of the conventional ideology into which domesticity is so fundamentally enmeshed.

Consequently Mary takes their children and leaves him when he is so preoccupied with his current piece that he forgets that they are to be legally married. And it is, of course, significant that this piece is a statue of a solitary running figure, signifying Jeremy's need to escape from the domesticity which

has begun to oppress him. Yet Tyler complicates the domestic/aesthetic dialogue further by suggesting that Jeremy cannot achieve complete separation from the emotional underpinnings of family clutter. After his family has left, his next piece expresses the sense of loss he has experienced. This piece lacks humanity and evokes '[o]nly the feeling of people - of full lives suddenly interrupted, belongings still bearing the imprint of their vanished owners. Dark squares upstairs full of toys, paper scraps, a plastic doll bed ... Downstairs food, wheels, a set of jacks, a square of very bare green carpeting' (CN, 246). So he decides to brave the neighbourhood and visit his family at the boat yard where they go to live; one reviewer referred to this as his 'first and final act of heroism'.<sup>22</sup> This experience makes him realise the disparity between how he depicts humanity in his work and his experience of individuals on the street. He perceives that 'humanity was far more complex and untidy and depressing than it ever was in his pieces' (CN, 256) and here 'untidy' indicates the uneasy interface between his aesthetic order and the order defined by the dominant to which he cannot conform. His attempt at conformity, when he enters the street, is to wear his grey golf cap as a symbol of his public self, a talisman to give him courage and protection. It is therefore a signal of the end of his family life and of the public Jeremy that, when he braves the sea as he has braved the land, he watches 'his gray golf hat bob off across a wave and grow dark and heavy and finally sink' (CN, 274).

Tyler uses sea/island imagery when introducing the reader to Jeremy and she does so again in the metonymic suggestion that, with the sinking of the cap, his public self has drowned. Indeed the text resonates with these sort of images which Tyler uses to penetrate both Jeremy's perceptions of the world

and his creative processes. Such are his difficulties with the outside world that '[m]oving would be like swimming through egg whites' (CN, 47), with all the unpleasant slimy viscosity this image implies. In addition, she indicates that he perceives these experiences as not only unpleasant, but also potentially dangerous. On a rare excursion into the neighbourhood he feels 'marooned on an island surrounded on four sides by streets so flat and wide that he imagined he could drown in air just walking across them' (CN, 100). He feels that the atmosphere around him is almost tangible: 'He was conscious of particles of dark floating between people, some deep substance in which they all swam, intent upon keeping their heads free, their chins straining upwards' (CN, 53). There is a sense here that he is (literally) separated from other individuals. They have the ability to keep their heads above water and not sink, whereas, for Jeremy, to look directly at Mary would mean 'a suicidal leap into unknown waters' (CN, 88). Mary herself is perceptive enough to realise that Jeremy perceives the everyday, 'lost and lonely, sitting on an oilcloth watching the rest of the world do the butterfly stroke' (CN, 85). Petry has suggested that Tyler polarises such tropes as 'the ocean' of real life and 'the island' of creative endeavour.<sup>23</sup> However, Tyler dislodges this life/work dichotomy by suggesting that the ocean can be both destructive and productive. Certainly Jeremy is drowned by the clutter of the domestic: 'He pictured himself descending into the noise [the 'jumbled voices' of his family] as he would enter the sea - proceeding steadily with his hands lifted and his mouth set, submerging first his feet and then his legs and then his entire body, last of all his head' (CN, 185). However, his aesthetic order is rejuvenated and inspired by what might be viewed as a sea of creative inspiration: 'He plunged

into pictures; he drank them up, he felt how dry and porous he was, thirsty for things to look at' (CN, 115).

Yet Jeremy does ultimately retreat to Petry's island of creative endeavour. At the end of the text, after the failed visit to the boat yard, Jeremy withdraws even further and his marginalisation appears complete. He is increasingly dependent on Miss Vinton, as a kind of surrogate mother, and he rarely leaves 'his great towering beautiful sculptures' (CN, 276). Tyler discussed this ending in an interview in 1981. She revealed that, like several of her readers, she wanted a happy ending involving reconciliation but that attempting this had resulted in 'wooden' writing and 'jerky' sentences. She had, therefore, 'to let my characters go', the 'problem' being 'that those characters were two absolutely separate people, and they couldn't possibly have stayed together'.<sup>24</sup> Perhaps Tyler's attempt to close the text with reconciliation stemmed from her attempt to 'protect' Jeremy. Happily she did not achieve this, because ending the novel in this way would have provided an oversimplified resolution to the questions she is raising about the relationship between the artist/eccentric and society. Instead Jeremy remains beyond marriage and also 'beyond worry' (CN, 274), 'peaceful and distant, detached from his surroundings' (CN, 276). Furthermore, in a sense, this ending, beyond and outside marriage, has been anticipated by Mary. She becomes bored with fairy-tale closure: 'I play silent games with the tired old plots. I like to ponder the ending beyond endings. How about Rapunzel, are we sure she was really happy ever after? Maybe the prince stopped loving her now that her hair was short' (CN, 223).

Now this desire to re-write, and even subvert, the conventional endings of fairy tales, 'the tired old plots', indicates that Mary Tell is a more complicated character than is initially apparent. The binary between 'celestial' husband and 'earthbound' wife (CN, 225) can be undermined. Certainly Tyler delineates her as archetypal Mother, hence 'the blue from a madonna's robe' (CN, 92) of the chicory flowers that Jeremy attempts to woo her with and Miss Vinton's reference to 'the blue maternity dress that she'd worn day in day out for the majority of her married life' (CN, 129). For Mary Tell is persistently and radiantly pregnant, as Miss Vinton again comments, 'Mary glowed all over' (CN, 128) when about to give birth. Seemingly this is how she views herself, alleging that '[m]otherhood is what I was made for, and pregnancy is my natural state'. She is positioned in relation to men, the physically attractive Guy, whom she elopes with - reminiscent of Drumstrings Casey in *A Slipping-Down Life* - with his leather jacket, tooled boots and an eagle tattooed on his forearm; the sexist John whom she runs away with and the vulnerable Jeremy whose mother she literally replaces. (Before her death Jeremy and his mother had 'spent every evening of their lives together, huddled in that dim little parlour watching TV and drinking cocoa' (CN, 10).) Evans suggests that this pattern will persist and Mary will be rescued by Brian, the owner of the art gallery.<sup>25</sup> Indeed Mary herself acknowledges that 'every move I had made in my life had required some man to provide my support' (CN, 222).

However, this is to read Mary too simply and Tyler problematises a stereotypical interpretation of this character. She is not duped by 'the romantic, masterful hero' of soap opera and pulp fiction, stating that 'there are no heroes in real life' (CN, 211) and her attitude to motherhood is far from



sentimental. She views each baby as 'another rope, tying me down like a tent' (CN, 142). She feels the need to escape her children, so she rows out from the shack at the boat yard: 'It was the only place I could get free of the cramped feeling, those masses of hot little bodies tossing in a tiny cube of space, sticking to the red vinyl mats' (CN, 213). I agree, in part, with Godwin, who sees Mary as an unlikely blend of Earth Mother and Maverick.<sup>26</sup> She is 'maverick' in the sense that she does not always conform, chafing against the constraints of the maternal role and fantasising about living other lives: 'I looked out of the front window and watched people walking by, and I wanted to climb into every single one of them and be carried off to some new and foreign existence' (CN, 76).<sup>27</sup>

And it is Mary Tell as 'maverick' who anticipates that questioning of the parameters of motherhood which Tyler pursues in the character of Justine Peck in her next novel, *Searching for Caleb* (1975). This text marked a turning point in her career in that it was the first of her novels to gain national recognition. This was largely due to John Updike's enthusiastic review in the *New Yorker* which ends with the often-quoted comment, 'This writer is not merely good, she is wickedly good'.<sup>28</sup> Such acclaim from a respected (male) member of the literary establishment introduced Tyler to a wider reading public, furthered her reputation and promoted sales. Justine is the central character in *Searching for Caleb* and Tyler's first fully-fledged female eccentric.<sup>29</sup> Tyler depicts her as an eccentric *mother*, suggesting that her aberrant behaviour does not conform to the conventions, promulgated in a patriarchal society, of what the maternal entails. She is neither defined nor confined by her motherhood. Justine, like Mary, disrupts her daughter's

schooling. When Mary leaves Jeremy, Darcy says, 'But it's a school day. I have a math test' (CN, 193). There is a similar exchange when Justine moves her daughter Meg out of her senior high school year:

'At least we should consider my schooling ... I won't learn a thing moving around the way we do.'

'Teaching you to adapt is the best education we could give you,' Justine told her.

'Adapt! What about logarithms?' (SC, 20)

The reaction of these two mothers to their daughters' remarks is significant. According to Mary, 'Coming here was the most selfish thing I have ever done' (CN, 212), and Justine acknowledges that Meg hates the constant moving: 'I don't think she approves of us ... It kills me to see her bend her head the way she does' (SC, 48). Mary views her act as 'selfish' and 'it kills' Justine because they have been conditioned into a model of maternal self-sacrifice where the needs of their children necessarily take priority. It is this sort of expected selflessness that Tyler is calling into question in *Searching for Caleb*.

### *Searching for Caleb and Earthly Possessions*

From the outset Tyler makes Justine's difference explicit, and she has the character register this herself: 'Meg's afraid that people will think I'm eccentric' (SC, 27). The family move from one dilapidated house to another in each of which Justine 'neglects' the domestic freight of the maternal: 'There were two saucepans and a skillet. (Justine did not like cooking.) They owned a broom and a sponge mop, but no dustpan, no vacuum cleaner, no squeegee, scrub bucket or chamois cloth. (Justine did not like cleaning either.)' (SC, 31). These parentheses act as collusive asides to the reader and highlight that Tyler is

not condemning such behaviour. However, to Meg her mother's behaviour *does* seem like irresponsibility. She refers to her parents' 'angular slapdash lives, always going off at some tangent' (SC, 172). Here the obliquity of 'at some tangent' is set against the verticality of Meg, who represents both domesticity and order; she is a 'housewifely, competent little soul ... For her seventh birthday she asked for a pop-up toaster' (SC, 150) and she compiled a 'scrap book full of model homes - French windows and carpeted kitchens and white velvet couches. She straightened up her closet with all her shoes set side by side and pointing in the same direction' (SC, 172-3). Because Justine is 'fast moving and kaleidoscopic' (SC, 152), she fails to provide her daughter with the support Meg needs after she has fled the impermanence of home. However, marriage has not emerged as a satisfactory alternative and she feels suffocated by the religiosity of her new husband, Arthur Milsom, and his domineering mother, whose fingers felt 'like damp spaghetti' (SC, 233). Justine offers to assist at the church bazaars but this is of little help and she feels, herself, that 'She should have offered something plainer and sturdier' (SC, 241).

In her characterisation of Justine as mother Tyler calls into question the boundaries which adhere to motherhood, as defined by the social dominant, because she is careful not to condemn her 'eccentric' behaviour. She suggests that Justine is not completely irresponsible with regard to Meg. Having developed a fear of fire she formulates an unrealistic escape plan, where 'she could snatch up the baby, climb out of the kitchen window ledge, and make a long, desperate leap to the roof of Uncle Ed's back porch' (SC, 195). When Justine is sorting through the belongings Meg has left behind,

Tyler indicates, with the compassionate precision which is so characteristic of her writing, that not conforming to the stereotypes of mother does not necessarily imply lack of feeling: 'Each object she handled very gently and lovingly. Taking much longer than necessary. She rolled a stray belt ... tucked it in beside a mildewed high school almanac, held each pebble up to the light and smoothed it with her fingers before replacing it' (SC, 317).

Similarly Charlotte Emory, in *Earthly Possessions*, Tyler's next book, published in 1977, is not confined by prescribed notions of the maternal. However, whereas Justine moves *around*, Charlotte moves *away*. Again Tyler has Mary Tell anticipate the possibility of such movement by voicing a dilemma facing her women characters which persists through the novels: 'I don't know which takes more courage: surviving a lifelong endurance test because you once made a promise or breaking free, disrupting your world' (CN, 75).<sup>30</sup> However, Charlotte's 'escape plan' is more realistic and significant than Justine's. In fact since childhood she has fantasised about escape due to a childhood incident where she was kidnapped by a refugee. In her fantasy she fuses the image of this woman with an image of herself: 'I am walking down a dusty road that I have been walking for months' (EP, 33). Yet Charlotte remains entrapped and escape has been thwarted twice. She has to return home from college when her father dies in order to take care of her mother who is incapacitated by obesity. After this, in spite of 'thoughts of running away' (EP, 63), she remembers, 'I saw my life rolling out in front of me like an endless mildewed rug' (EP, 56). A second opportunity to leave the parental home fails when her husband Saul moves in with her mother and herself. Her husband takes to religion and the letter accepting him at Hamden

Bible College makes Charlotte feel that '[t]hey were keeping me here forever, all the long slow days of my life' (EP, 85).

Now Charlotte's role as mother interacts with these notions of escape. She attempts to leave Saul but this fails when he tracks her down and reveals his (correct) suspicions that she is pregnant. Later, feeling guilty after a miscarriage, she considers whether her body has purposely aborted the prospect of another baby because it would prevent her from leaving. Not conforming to stereotypes of the maternal, Charlotte sees children as an encumbrance to her escape, 'Not to mention their equipment: their sweaters, Band Aids, stuffed animals, vitamins' (EP, 37). At first she plans to take her daughter along: 'At all times now I carried a hundred-dollar traveller's check in the secret compartment of my billfold. I had bought my walking shoes. I planned to take nothing but Selinda - my excess baggage, loved and *burdensome*' (EP, 113, my italics). However, when she does eventually leave, spurred on by a Keep on Truckin' badge falling out of her cereal packet at breakfast, she leaves not only Selinda ('What did I have to do with Selinda anyway?' (EP, 186)) but also Jiggs, her adopted child, one of the charity cases Saul has brought home.

Again the clutter/order motif emerges, for such charity cases are part of the clutter which penetrates Charlotte's life and which she is trying to rid herself of. Gilbert relates the title, *Earthly Possessions*, to the 'cluttered minutiae of life'<sup>31</sup> and Petry to 'the material and emotional impedimenta of quotidian reality'.<sup>32</sup> Indeed it is the implications of such clutter, as it informs a nexus of the domestic and the maternal, that Charlotte is reacting to. She tries to 'get rid of all belongings that would weigh me down on a long foot-march' (EP, 36),

and aims for 'a house with the bare and polished look of a bleached skull' (EP, 186), this image implying the need for domesticity to be dead. However, clutter continues to accumulate, not only the 'material' clutter of her mother-in-law Alberta's house which has duplicated their own furniture, but also the 'emotional' clutter of the 'homeless visitors and sinners from the mourner's bench' (EP, 111) together with, ultimately, the return of Saul's four brothers.<sup>33</sup> In addition, this clutter is intensified by Linus, the depressed brother, who seems obsessed with filling the house with doll's house furniture. His determination to reproduce small-scale accoutrements of domesticity occurs as Charlotte is growing disenchanted with family life. Hence Linus's replication of 'earthly possessions', but in miniature, suggests that Charlotte's view of family life is becoming increasingly diminished.<sup>34</sup> On the day of her escape she attempts a final de-cluttering, 'dispensing with all the objects that had sprouted in the night - rolled socks, crumpled homework papers, and a doll's toy dollhouse no bigger than a sugar cube, filled with specks of furniture (EP, 189).

So Tyler is depicting Charlotte, like Justine, as an eccentric mother, their eccentricity resting, in part, upon the fact that they do not perceive themselves primarily in relation to their children. Justine runs from place to place at the expense of Meg. Charlotte runs away from Selina and Jiggs. Conventional readings of motherhood would condemn these acts as selfish neglect and thoughtless abandonment. However, Tyler, by presenting these characters uncritically and avoiding narrative intrusion, encourages the reader to question such judgement. She also suggests that the behaviour of Justine and Charlotte leads to a redefining of themselves as women where both come to

an enhanced knowledge of self. Here eccentric motherhood has facilitated and enabled a new sense of womanhood. Furthermore, the fact that Justine 'runs with' and Charlotte 'runs from' indicates a shift in Tyler's questioning of motherhood. Justine's development of self can be viewed in relation to that aspect of Peckness which Meg represents, and which I will return to later, whereas Charlotte needs distance from her children.

So Charlotte's greater self-knowledge is facilitated by running from her family. In fact she has to be without her children for this to happen. This escape is complicated by the fact that, when she is withdrawing money for her journey, she is kidnapped by the would-be bank robber, Jake Barnes. As Stout suggests, this has exercised feminist critics: 'It is frequently objected that though she is initially offered as a woman wanting to escape domesticity, Charlotte is denied volition by having her escape turned into a kidnapping'.<sup>35</sup> This is to ignore the accretive emotional freight involved in her choosing to run away. The 'personal message' (EP, 190) of the badge speaks to her, finally articulating the need to leave which has been accumulating for years. The growth of this need drives the narrative where contrapuntal chapters alternate between the present and the past in a double journey; geographically, as she travels as hostage, and temporally, as she revisits memories of childhood, adolescence and womanhood. It is this mental journey which enables both a changed sense of self and leads Charlotte to recast her relationships with her mother and her husband.

From the outset, as Charlotte tells her own story in the first person, it becomes clear that, as readers, we are being offered an unreliable account. This is complicated by the wryly comic tone that Tyler gives to Charlotte's

narrative which also provides the character with a strategy to combat her feelings of entrapment. As she says: 'Then in order not to mind too much I grew to look at things with a faint humorousness that spiced my nose like the beginnings of a sneeze' (EP, 113). This also serves to elicit the sympathy of the reader. Charlotte's tone is evident in her description of a parade in one of the small towns on her journey as hostage with Jake:

A team of Clydesdales clopped past with a beer wagon, and my eyes followed their billowing feet in a long restful journey of their own. The Clydesdales left great beehives of manure. I enjoyed noticing that. There are times when these little details can draw you on like spirals up a mountain, leading you miles. (EP, 131)

This passage demonstrates how a detail like the 'great beehive of manure' can stimulate Charlotte's imagination and inform her fantasies of escape. But it also draws attention, meta-narrationally, to the specificity that is also fundamental to Tyler's method in her third-person narratives. She uses such sharply observed detail for comic effect, hence the comparison referred to above in *Searching for Caleb* where Mrs Milsom's hands feel like 'damp spaghetti'. Yet the effect is more than comic and the implications of this detail contribute to the characterisation of Meg Peck's mother-in-law. Tyler uses her clammy, limp handshake metonymically to evoke her unwelcoming personality, and in this way the reader is drawn on, experiencing the imaginative leap to which Charlotte alludes.

However, the reader also has to make a more conceptual leap and take account of the fact that Charlotte's account is not only unreliable because of the tone in which it is expressed. Tyler makes it clear through the narrative that this character's feelings of passivity and worthlessness are at odds with



her evident strength. Charlotte takes on the human clutter referred to above, she resists acceptance of Saul's religion and she nurses her mother. This had always been a problematic relationship as it originated from an 'untrue pregnancy'; her mother convinced, until the birth, that the swelling inside her was a tumour, 'a sort of overripe grapefruit', with all the connotations of malignancy that this suggests. In turn Charlotte was regarded as an 'untrue baby', not her real daughter, due to a mix-up in hospital.<sup>36</sup> But remembering her mother's death helps Charlotte to acknowledge that she had misread the relationship, that she really had loved her and that '[m]aybe I'd made her fatness up too' (EP, 182).

Similarly, she comes to see her husband differently, realising that it was her perception of his view of her that had been destructive. That she goes back to him with a clearer vision of herself undermines the notion that this return is a capitulation. Charlotte may not be a feminist hero but, by the end of the text, because she has escaped the confines of motherhood, she can see both herself and her past more clearly. Jones and Macpherson support my view; Jones identifies a change from 'a passive and unreliable narrator' into an 'active and reliable one'<sup>37</sup> and Macpherson points to the use of the present tense in the last chapter and suggests that the 'recounting of the tale leads to the present and that the chance to tell her tale - over and over again - is her true escape, released from the past by recounting it'.<sup>38</sup>

This is similar to the way that, in *Searching for Caleb*, Justine's eccentric motherhood leads to a more empowering sense of self. This begins in an epiphanic moment,<sup>39</sup> when she remembers when she had rushed to the top of a lighthouse, leaving Meg behind. Her memory of this and her subsequent

recognition that 'she had only speeded up with every year gathering momentum' leads her to acknowledge that 'what she had mislaid was Justine herself' (SC, 272). Tyler here is articulating the view that Justine's identity is stable and partly determined by her family history. Justin Peck, Justine's grandfather, had established a bifurcated dynasty where divided traits are accounted for by two marriages and where what Petry refers to as the 'Danielesque'<sup>40</sup> represents the conservative, static, respectable side of 'Peckness' which sits alongside the traits associated with the runaway Caleb of the title - those of creativity and restlessness. That Justine needs the 'Danielesque' explains why she runs with and not away from Meg who represents these traits. It is after Meg has left that Justine finds Caleb in the Evergreen County Home for the Elderly in New Orleans<sup>41</sup> and meeting with him furthers her self-enlightenment as she recognises in him her own passive agreeableness. This leads to her acknowledgement that what she has 'mislaid' is the 'Danielesque' part of herself which she needs to integrate with the positives of the 'Calebesque' she possesses, in a process, given the polarisation of the Peck traits, that might be viewed as dialectical.

However, Tyler, though still endorsing an essentialist view of identity, undermines the fixity of dialectical synthesis. When Justine translates insight into action and Duncan and herself join Alonzo's circus, this provides both the possibility of access to Baltimore and respectable Peckness and the free-spiritedness of living in a trailer and engaging in the 'disreputable' occupations of fortune-teller and handyman. Her acknowledgement of the hold the past has had on her erodes the idea of heredity as fate and offers the potential for change. This process is dialogic, rather than dialectic, and makes for a more

open ending which offers the more fluid possibility of constant encountering. Critics have disagreed about this ending. Tack supports the view that it is 'wonderfully inconclusive',<sup>42</sup> yet Petry views Justine's compromise more dialectically, as 'the ideal symbol of integration'.<sup>43</sup>

The letters between her editor, Judith Jones, and Tyler also reveal some disagreement. Jones suggests that 'the about-face' when the couple decide not to return to Baltimore 'isn't fully convincing'.<sup>44</sup> Tyler counters this with 'I would like Justine's decision to be at least slightly surprising, so I would rather not have her do too much reasoning out beforehand'.<sup>45</sup> Here it is significant that Tyler refers to 'Justine's decision', for it is Justine who takes the lead in determining both her own and Duncan's future. She is literally ahead of him as expressed in the last sentence of the novel: 'he was too intent on catching up with Justine, who by now was only a puff of smoke in the distance' (SC, 328). Arguably Tyler wanted this ending to be 'at least slightly surprisingly' to suggest that Justine has still retained her capacity for spontaneous action.

This has led to Politt's comment, in her article in the *New York Times Book Review*, that Justine 'emerges triumphant, her own woman at last'<sup>46</sup> and Stout to suggest that Justine is Tyler's 'single, most triumphant female character'.<sup>47</sup> In her attempt to position Tyler within a feminist frame, Stout identifies two strands of feminist thought, 'political feminism, seeking to develop a firm self with equality and autonomy, and the feminism of difference, seeking to disperse the core of the self in merging and a distinctly female jouissance expressed by "writing the body"'.<sup>48</sup> She comes to the conclusion that Tyler cannot be identified with either. However, even though her writing style is, of course, far removed from that jouissance advocated in 'The Laugh of the

Medusa',<sup>49</sup> there is a sense in *Searching for Caleb*, when Justine tells her own fortune, that Tyler does merge the two positions referred to by Stout. The outcome of this fortune-telling and its advocacy of 'journeys beyond other journeys' (SC, 323) empowers her decision-making. However, perhaps surprisingly, there is a Cixousian element here if fortune-telling is read as a gendered occupation, which involves flights of intuition, ambiguity of meaning and challenges to rationality, and this informs Tyler's comment, in her letter to Jones, on Justine's lack of 'reasoning'. In a sense, too, Tyler's approach to the characterisation of Justine rests on the intuitive rather than the rational: 'Haven't you ever been tempted to have your fortune told? It would have killed it off instantly if I'd ever gone to one. Instead I bought a little dime-store Dell book - just to pick up the names of some of the card formations. It's a lot more fun to make things up'.<sup>50</sup> This remark indicates that, instead of researching or actually experiencing fortune-telling, she preferred to engage imaginatively with the activity.

That Justine tells fortunes, then, is clearly significant but there was some dispute between Tyler and Jones about whether *The Fortune Teller* should be the title of the novel. Jones' opinion was that it should: 'And the more I think about it, the more strongly I feel that something as direct and provocative as *The Fortune Teller* is the right title'.<sup>51</sup> However, Tyler disagreed: 'I really strongly dislike *The Fortune Teller*, it's vague, I see books with that title every day in the Psychic Sciences section in the book store and the novel begins with those words'.<sup>52</sup> Jones also disliked 'the undercurrents of violence'<sup>53</sup> in *Hunting Caleb*, one of Tyler's provisional titles. So the subsequent agreement on *Searching for Caleb* was something of a victory for Tyler, hence Jones'

comment: 'So after all our backing and forthing we're really not too far from what you had in the first place, and I suspect that gives you a good bit of secret pleasure'.<sup>54</sup> This title does seem appropriate, where the notion of 'searching', with its connotations of frustration and possible loss, lacks the idea of the predatory that informs 'hunting'.<sup>55</sup> The successful hunt aspect is played down by the use of the present continuous tense in the title and the sense of 'searching' still relates to the openness referred to earlier with regard to the ending.

However, regardless of the title, the novel certainly foregrounds the significance of Justine telling fortunes, and, equally important, is the fact that Charlotte is a photographer. Seemingly these two activities, which demonstrate Tyler's interest in the vagaries of time, are very different. A fortune-teller looks forward, predicting the future, initiating change. As Madame Olita, Justine's mentor, suggests, 'Fortune telling is only good when you forecast a happening' (SC, 134 ). On the other hand the photographer fixes a moment in the present, maintaining stasis. As Charlotte says, 'It seemed to me that photos froze a person' (EP, 56). Arguably 'the tools of these trades' have a similar function as facilitators. Justine has an inborn aptitude to foretell the future because she can anticipate changes, such as her father's death and Meg's elopement, 'as delicately as a cat chooses where to set its paws' (SC, 14). She can use her cards, which Madame Olita refers to as '[t]ags with strings attached, like those surprise boxes at parties ...These cards will pull out what you already know, but have failed to admit or recognise' (SC, 137), to catalyse further knowledge. So, in a sense, fortune-telling 'fixes' the flow of insight. Similarly photographs can provide insight, as

when Charlotte feels a connection with the image of the small girl who she believes is her mother's real daughter, but who is actually her mother as a child: 'It seemed that the other girl's photo had released me in some way, let me step back to a reasonable distance and finally take an unhampered view of my mother' (EP, 174). (Tyler describes a similar sort of insight when she describes her reaction, in her review of the book, to one of the photographs in Josef Koudelka's *Gypsies*: 'It's barely a photograph. It's life on the page - so recently suspended, so ready to start again, that you have the feeling you've opened a door on somebody else's world by accident'.<sup>56</sup>)

Relatedly, the qualities demanded by their occupations contribute to Justine's and Charlotte's discovery of a different sort of womanhood. Hence Justine's intuition, the basis of her ability to tell fortunes, leads to her moment of epiphany which precipitated her search for self. Charlotte's imagination enables her revisiting of the past. She displays such imagination in the telling of her story, not only in recounting her fantasies of escape, but also in revealing the nature of her photography. When her father dies, she comments, 'All around and above him were pictures of unsmiling people, but none was any stiller than my father was' (EP, 60). It is this sort of stillness, with its connotations of death, that Charlotte wants to relinquish. She dislikes the notion of a photograph of a person which 'pinned him to cardboard like a butterfly' (EP, 56), an image which resonates with the notion of the individual as specimen, entrapped and mutilated. A fantasist herself, she indulges the fantasies of her clients, who dress up in the props of her mother-in-law's discarded clutter. Here Tyler aligns Charlotte's creativity with that of Jeremy Pauling in *Celestial Navigation*, another character who uses the detritus of the

familial to create art.<sup>57</sup> Miss Feather, a fugitive from the mourner's bench, is photographed 'swathed in a black velvet opera cape, holding a silver pistol that was actually a table lighter' (EP, 176). Here the phrase 'actually a table lighter' underlines the fantasy element in these photographs, and the fine line between the real and the illusory.

So both Justine's fortune-telling and Charlotte's photography are freighted with illusion and possibility. Justine's illusion involves the magic of her cards, Charlotte's photographs exploit the uneasy boundary between reality and illusion which Tyler also suggests when she has Charlotte's daughter Catherine become her own imaginary friend. Both Justine's predictions and Charlotte's photographs suggest possibility, of changing circumstance and of different identities. This is the sort of possibility which informs Tyler's next published novel, *Morgan's Passing*, which also engages with the playing of roles. Again, as in *A Slipping-Down Life*, a newspaper clipping acted as a stimulus. A photograph of Paul Kitonis dressed as a clergyman and a headline 'Phony Doctor Practising in Mexico'<sup>58</sup> provided a starting point for the eccentric central character of Tyler's eighth novel, published in 1980.

### *Pantaleo*

However, before *Morgan's Passing*, Tyler wrote *Pantaleo*, a novel which also originated visually: 'a picture came very clearly into my mind from out of nowhere of a young man walking down a street of row houses in east Baltimore pushing an empty baby stroller from the 1940's - one of those blue things with little white canework insets'.<sup>59</sup> This 'picture' is replicated in the text when Pantaleo finds a stroller in the attic - 'a dirty blue contraption with

artificial canework insets that had once been white but were now ivory-coloured' (P, 93-4). Tyler alleged that this visual image gave rise to questions: 'There he went, and if you ask who he is and why on earth he's pushing an empty baby stroller - is he a man trying to take care of a small child ? What are the complications? - then you can see a novel'.<sup>60</sup> Unfortunately the novel Tyler 'saw' proved unsuccessful. *Pantaleo* remains unpublished, a failed project abandoned by Tyler: 'After *Earthly Possessions* I wrote a novel that I ditched. A year's work out of the door' ... 'Well, I sent it to my agent, who didn't like it; so I said, don't send it out. Now if I had really liked it myself, nothing would have stopped me'.<sup>61</sup>

This decision was applauded by her editor: 'I can't tell you how much I admire your integrity, being able to put a novel aside like that and asking only the best of yourself'.<sup>62</sup> However, it must signal a crisis in her literary career, after the successful publication of seven novels and having received, in 1977, the Award for Literature of the American Academy Institute of Arts and Letters. Similarly it signals the crisis in her representation of eccentricity, which had been anticipated, to some extent, in *Earthly Possessions*. With regard to this earlier text, the reviewer Sullivan mentioned that he had a sense that Tyler was in 'pursuit of the peculiar'.<sup>63</sup> Certainly she peppers the novel with the word or its synonyms. Even the dog Ernest is 'a peculiar kind of animal' (EP, 150). Similarly Delbanco remarked, 'There's a way in which eccentricity becomes its own system and demands that every character be somehow peculiar, particular; there is a rigidity to these seemingly random associations that can wear thin'.<sup>64</sup> He seems to be implying here that eccentricity has become somehow self-fulfilling and consequently unconvincing and unsatisfactory.



That Tyler herself was not entirely satisfied with *Earthly Possessions* can be inferred from a comment in a letter from her editor referring to Tyler's reactions to the novel. Jones says, 'I can't think why you thought it was such a dog'.<sup>65</sup>

Arguably Tyler, aware of this tendency, attempted to defuse and tone down this sense of the 'peculiar'. In *Pantaleo* she returns to a central male protagonist, but one whose difference from accepted patterns of behaviour norms is more muted than that of Jeremy Pauling, her first fully developed eccentric individual. Yet Sam Pantaleo does have certain affinities with Jeremy the artist. He becomes a craftsman who makes wooden toys and clearly relishes the creative process. While carving a rocking unicorn, he experiences 'notions that wandered into his head for no reason; whimsical notions that came, and made him smile, and went. He felt contented, dreamy. The wood took shape beneath his fingers like something growing on its own' (P, 194). Significantly he is carving a rocking unicorn rather than a rocking horse, for Tyler is attempting here to indicate his difference through the fanciful nature of his style and subject-matter. However, this failure to conform leads to a failure to sell: 'not many people in Tully ever placed an order for his animals. People considered them too plain and chunky, he supposed - and as for his dragons, centaurs and phoenixes: well, who would give a child a thing like that?' (P, 339). Pantaleo is akin to Duncan Peck in *Searching for Caleb*; he also takes on a series of occupations in order to resist conformity. At the beginning of the novel he is working as a teacher and Tyler emphasises that he differs from the other teachers who 'dragged and coaxed and prodded their pupils inch by inch through the endless days'. Instead Pantaleo 'won these

children in a second'; he acts like a performer; he 'darted on stage and off' and attained celebratory status where his students gave him 'starry, adoring looks'. He frequently left his class for no reason: 'Pantaleo had disappeared. His door was open, his desk was empty, and his students were sailing paper airplanes down the aisles ... he'd just walked out again' (P, 120). He indulged in unconventional pedagogic activities like distributing balloons: 'The sky was full of red and yellow and green balloons'. This trope seems a rather clichéd way of indicating that he is something of a free spirit: 'and there went Pantaleo, far across the street now, running free with his hood streaming back, and his hair pluming out, and a single red balloon tearing along behind him' (P, 34).

Clichéd and also unconvincing; indeed Pantaleo's eccentricity disappears altogether as the novel progresses. Tyler's depiction of his behaviour is less successful than her representation of Jeremy Pauling's eccentricity, where she provides the reader with subtle insights into his patterns of thought and the complications of his creativity. She suggests that this involves compulsion: 'he seemed to think pieces came out of him like olives out of a bottle, and he had no choice but to let the first one out before he could get to the second' (CN, 228);<sup>66</sup> passion; 'when he was in the middle of a piece some kind of feverishness came over him' (CN, 184); and pain; where 'little seams of blood mixed with the paint' (CN, 186). On the other hand, in *Pantaleo*, the nature of the creative processes associated with Pantaleo's craftsmanship is never alluded to. There are only cursory references to his psychological state, such as his reaction to the doll belonging to Parker, his girlfriend's son: 'In this

strange state he was in - his mind veering wildly, catching on irrelevant objects, Sam became fascinated by her teeth' (P, 42).<sup>67</sup>

More importantly, Tyler does not pursue the implications of the loss of a benign view of eccentric behaviour that she had mapped out in *Celestial Navigation*. Pantaleo's eccentricity is celebrated and favoured by Mrs Arley, a fellow teacher, who is 'knocked literally breathless by the sight of Pantaleo dashing down the corridor - a flash of a man, all dark lights and suddenness. Even his perpetual giving up required more passion than she could imagine mustering. Even his hopelessness (so dramatic, so extreme) implied the existence of more hope than she would ever have again'. His difference gives her a 'glimpse of her life from another angle' and an ability to reconsider her relations with her daughter, 'a slow lump of a girl with frail, patchy hair and a thick tongue' and with her husband, 'so permanently and wearily depressed that she sometimes imagined he had simply propped his body in front of the TV years ago and left her' (P, 21).

What is significant here is that Tyler does not temper this point of view with that of any other character. Whereas in *Celestial Navigation* the Miss Vinton position casts Jeremy Pauling's behaviour in a similarly indulgent manner, in this text there is no juxtaposition with an Amanda Pauling point of view, which identifies the aberrant and threatening aspects of his conduct. Because of this there is no sense of a questioning of the dominant position which would condemn any deviation from the norm and complicate any representation of eccentricity. Tyler returns to the benign and indulgent view of the eccentric that characterised her position in the earlier texts up to *The Clock Winder*.

Initially, however, she does seem to be adopting a more radical position by interrogating, as she had done in her characterisation of Justine Peck and Charlotte Emory, the givenness of the maternal. When Pantaleo's girlfriend Naomi is killed in a car crash, he adopts her son Parker: 'He was two or maybe three years old, hardly more than a baby, fair-haired and fat-cheeked, with eye-brows curled in knots above his squinched eyes' (P, 2). Here Pantaleo takes on the role of male nurturer and single parent, an unusual step, according to his mother: 'Oh, Sam, if you wanted a child couldn't you just get married and have one, like *ordinary* people?' (P, 178, my italics). Because of this he experiences a set of concerns and experiences conventionally associated with motherhood. He has to cope with 'the brownish marks that blueberry jam had left on Parker's shirts ... The fears that caused him to go white and rigid: motorcycles and power mowers and the elbowed kind of spider. The nose bleeds, the shoe-blisters, the unexplainable rashes that turned him homely and pathetic for days on end' (P, 130). He feels guilty because of the consequences of not seeking medical attention about Parker's broken leg: 'The limp that wouldn't go away, that jogged unevenly through Sam's conscience like a constant nagging reproach' (P, 131). Yet his increasing emotional involvement is indicated by Tyler with unsubtle sentimentality: 'Then Sam stood alone in the dark, looking down at him, and found himself wrung by something almost unbearable - a permanent, gutting, racking anguish that made mere love seem as pallid as ghosts' (P, 133).

Pantaleo's (and Tyler's) solution to the problems of raising a child alone is equally unsubtle, indeed ultra-conventional. It dissipates any sense of the eccentricity associated with him in the text, either as an individual character or

as a means of calling the parameters of parenting into question. He finds the 'good woman' Cobb to share the burden of looking after Parker and even reflects, later in the text, 'that he never would have married her, if not for his unusual circumstances' (P, 313). Not only does this marriage eradicate the potentially fruitful notion of male nurturing, it is also the cause of textual confusions. Pantaleo's realisation of his attraction to Cobb's physicality: 'the cushiony dimples in her elbows ... One of her breasts would be a great, warm, heavy weight in his palm' (P, 201) is clearly from his point of view. (Tyler returns to a Southern mode of story-telling here by prefacing this with, 'This was how it happened' (P, 210).) However, with the introduction of Cobb, there is a shift to her point of view which is too abrupt and which fractures the coherence of the narrative. Her insecurities are made obvious in her reminiscences about her first husband: 'I called him 'Dr Halsey' in my mind for months even after we got married', in her sleeplessness: 'Sometimes, in the night, she cried' and in her maternal regrets: 'And where, oh where, were her twin babies, like as peas, cute as buttons?' (P, 226, 266, 278). So the subsequent voicing of a new-found independence seems unsatisfactorily unexplained: 'She'd rest on the windowsill, glad to be as big as she was, proud of her strength, pleased to know she was the kind of woman who took what steps she could' (P, 302). Her assertion here also sits uneasily alongside Pantaleo's perception of 'her easy tears, her galumphing gracelessness and her spurts of absurdity' (P, 313).

Clearly then, as a development in Tyler's representation of the eccentric, *Pantaleo* marks something of a crisis. By depicting an eccentric male who is also a single parent, she has attempted, unsuccessfully, to combine two

aspects of the eccentric in one character; questioning the boundaries of individual difference (as she does with Jeremy) and the borders of maternal behaviour (as she does with Justine and Charlotte). Moreover, this shortcoming is compounded by a lack of innovation in (now) familiar motifs. This sense of *déjà vu* and the rehearsal of old ideas is borne out by Tyler's own verdict: 'The problem was that it was boring'.<sup>68</sup> Again verbal communication is a concern and, at a family dinner, she points up a lack of interaction where '[t]he loudest sound was people chewing' (P, 322). She emphasises Parker's lack of language as a child by referring to him as 'this little locked in box of a person' (P, 42) and indicating Cobb's role in breaking his silence, 'she'd worked so hard to open him up, like a stubborn little can of something - patiently tolerating his unbroken silence' (P, 269). Given Tyler's former interest in language it is indicative of a lack of originality that she fails to pursue the implications of this reluctance to communicate and also the peculiarities of Parker's speech: "'It's account of she's soft couch'"... He couldn't seem to manage his possessive pronouns' (P, 126).

Relatedly she returns to the opposition between clutter and order only to rehash old ideas. Naomi's clutter is as feminised as the Hawkes' family's was in *If Morning Ever Comes*: 'her clutter was everywhere: lipsticked tissues, crumpled dresses, kicked off shoes, a purse sprawled on the pillow and a stack of fashion magazines on the nightstand' (P, 51). It acts as a trope for her agitated state of mind as Elizabeth's clutter did in *The Clock Winder*. Hence the 'flowing ashtrays, smudged glasses, yesterday's newspapers hastily refolded' reveal to Pantaleo that '[p]lainly she'd been going through one of her restless spells' (P, 52). Pantaleo himself, like Charlotte Emory, needs to divest

himself of 'earthly possessions' in order to attain peace of mind. He longs for 'not his own warm, crowded boyhood room but something starker, purer ... His sleep, he always felt, was too cluttered - too many brief wakings, patchy dreams whose plots failed to hang together. In a plainer bedroom, wouldn't his sleep be plainer too?' (P, 135).

Nor is there generic innovation. I disagree with Croft's assertion that the novel is an 'interesting departure for Tyler. It marks her attempt to master the genre of the mystery novel'.<sup>69</sup> Certainly the text does contain certain conventions associated with the detective novel: clues, a central enigma and suspense. The clue to the central enigma, the identity of Parker's father, is a letter 'dated July 21, 1957 and signed "Lucius"', which contains the instructions 'You may get in touch with me through my lawyer if any difficulties arise' (P, 66). There is suspense as Pantaleo, afraid of losing the boy, initiates a series of moves to avoid the private detective, the man seen 'inching, slithering and looking all about him' (P, 96), who has been hired by Parker's 'real' father.

However, the *earlier Searching for Caleb* can also be read as a detective novel. Indeed in the influential review where John Updike famously refers to this text as 'wickedly good', he also acknowledges that it is 'among other things, a detective novel' with elements of the 'spooky and suspenseful'.<sup>70</sup> Indeed the newspaper clipping referred to in the opening paragraph of the text is a clue that might resolve the mysterious disappearance of Caleb Peck, who left the family home in 1912, and whose whereabouts Justine and Daniel have been investigating for many years. Within the formulaic parameters of detective fiction, the structural mechanics of narrative become evident where

'by comparing the order and duration of events ... we can see how "story time" is actually invented through narrative time'.<sup>71</sup> Here the prioretic code<sup>72</sup> organises the sequencing of events where narrative time lasts a year, from 1972 to 1973, but the series of occurrences which constitute the mystery of Caleb's whereabouts started sixty-one years before the opening scene of the novel. But *Pantaleo* lacks this sort of narrative subtlety and the central enigma is contained within the narrative of the novel from 1959 to 1975, conveyed in what Croft describes as 'the rather complicated, circuitous and overly long plot'.<sup>73</sup>

Because of these flaws Tyler was wise to 'ditch' this novel - but does it constitute, to return to her verdict, 'A year's work out the door'? According to Cook, 'she simply scuttled the project right then and there - withdrew the manuscript and never gave another thought to it'.<sup>74</sup> Conscious thought perhaps, but the text does contain pre-echoes of subsequent novels. Pantaleo's perception that 'with twins, one twin tends to look serene and even-featured, while the other gives an impression of nervousness, the face irregular, the features not quite settled in together' (P, 225) becomes Delia's comment on her sister's twins in *Ladder of Years* (1995): '(Therese was the uneven-featured twin, her face less balanced, less symmetrical, which made her appear slightly less anxious. There was one in every set Delia had noticed)' (L, 45). Similarly in this text Pantaleo's neighbour, Mrs Denney, with her hair 'rising in a tall terraced mountain with little stray bows and rhinestoned combs and fingerwave-clips poking out at unexpected intervals' (P, 89) reappears as Belle, Delia's landlady, her hair 'a towering dessert tray of lavish golden curls' (L, 89). However, *Saint Maybe* (1991) is the novel which has



more fundamental affinities with *Pantaleo*. Ian, the central character of this much later text, is Sam Pantaleo's successor; he also works with wood but, more importantly, he is another male nurturer with an acute sense of responsibility, raising children with whom he has no blood relationship.

### *Morgan's Passing*

More immediately, Pantaleo, in one sense, anticipates the eponymous protagonist of *Morgan's Passing*, Tyler's next novel, published in 1980. His 'spirit, which was as large as his wide, swooping, rather overstated gestures' (P, 21) is a pre-echo of the spirit of Morgan Gower, pose(u)r and puppeteer, who emerges as Tyler's most extreme exponent of eccentricity. However, *Morgan's Passing* intensifies rather than resolves the crisis in Tyler's representation of eccentricity. And, in order to set about identifying this, it is necessary to consider, as in *Pantaleo*, in what ways Morgan's eccentricity differs from that of Jeremy Pauling, the first male eccentric in this phase. The novel opens when Morgan presents himself as a doctor and helps to deliver Leon and Emily Meredith's baby. This is one aspect of his eccentric behaviour where 'passing' in the title *Morgan's Passing* can be glossed as 'passing for', as Morgan constantly takes on outfits, his Klondike and jungle costumes, his Daniel Boone outfit, his short-order cook's clothes.<sup>75</sup> Significantly these clothes are not merely costumes but identities. When wearing these costumes Morgan feels 'stripped and free' as he purposely and purposefully sinks into other people's lives, as cobbler, as artist, as husband of his assistant at the hardware store where he works, as Father Morgan 'the street priest of Baltimore' and as an official from the Bureau of Parks and Safety at Bethany

Bay (MP, 34,100, 37, 39, 161). In doing this he becomes both poser and poseur. The impersonator becomes a poseur in that he adopts poses in order to impress. In this light Morgan's eccentric behaviour can be viewed as not only conscious, but also self-conscious. He needs to create interest, to be enigmatic and, most importantly, to be viewed like a child who is confident he is the centre of attention (MP, 118, 253, 243, 129).

This self-consciousness is fundamental to Tyler's depiction of Morgan and points up a key difference in the way she is now representing an eccentric male protagonist. An essential element of Jeremy Pauling's eccentricity is that it is unintentional, he can do nothing about the fears which entrap him and marginalise him from accepted behavioural patterns. However, unlike Jeremy, Morgan knows exactly what he is doing when he adopts different roles and this is so recognisable that his wife, Bonny, can read the signs when he plans to adopt a new costume:

Then she said, "Who is it this time?"  
"Who is what?"  
"Who is it that wears those clothes?"  
"No one," he said. "What do you mean?"  
"You think I'm blind? You think I haven't been through this a hundred times before?" (MP, 49)

When Bonny refers to 'this', she means the taking on of the costume/identity of the life he wants to enter. She also describes the rapidity of his role-playing, his 'passing for':

Bonny smiled at him and shook her head. "You step out of the house for two minutes to buy milk, leaving him safe home in his pyjamas, and coming back you pass him on the corner in a satin cap and purple shirt, telling four little boys the secret that made him the only undefeated jockey in the history of Pimlico." (MP, 131)

Although he is an artist like Jeremy - for, in a sense, Morgan's poses are a series of self-portraits - his eccentricity is intentional and motivated rather than an integral part of his personality. Paul Binding identifies this as self-indulgence in his review: 'For all its felicities of observation and incident *Morgan's Passing* does not come up to the high standard of Anne Tyler's other recent work. There is a self-indulgence in the portraiture of Morgan himself whose numerous identity assumptions become for me merely tiresome'.<sup>76</sup> Even Emily, who subsequently lives with him, 'thought less of Morgan' when she realises that 'he knew exactly how people saw him, and that he enjoyed the astonishment and perhaps even courted it' (MP, 132). It is his sense of a 'faux eccentricity' that contributes to the text's sense of crisis.

This sense of crisis also relates to the dialogues between benignity and loss of benignity. There is less sense than in *Celestial Navigation* of a loss of benignity from within social norms. Other characters do not see Morgan as threatening or insane. Tyler seems to be encouraging a positive reader-response to his zaniness by informing it with his vibrancy and his imagination. There is no sense of Morgan, like Jeremy, being marginalised as aberrant by society's construction of what is normal and what is not. He is persistently indulged rather than castigated. Furthermore Morgan adopts the conservative/dominant position himself. This self-styled eccentric strongly disapproves of divergencies from conventional behaviour in other family members, his forgetful mother and his sister Brindle who constantly wears a mouldy old dressing gown and obsessively re-lives old relationships. His remark to Emily that 'We're living in a house of lunatics' (MP, 261) sits uneasily alongside his own contrived deviations. It could easily have been

voiced by Amanda Pauling, insensitive as it is to the involuntary vagaries of old age or the signifiers of depression. That this is an important moment in the text, one which focuses Morgan's attitude, is signalled in Emily's reaction to his comment: 'It was if he'd twisted some screw on a telescope' (MP, 261).

However, this emphasis on Morgan's questionable attitude to eccentric behaviour suggests that Tyler *is* attempting to blunt his appeal. As Edmund Fuller says, Tyler 'faces the always delicate problem of persuading the reader to have a tolerant affection for a type of person who is amusing to watch from a distance, but who would drive you mad if you had to be closely associated with him'.<sup>77</sup> She depicts Morgan's deliberate role-playing as not only self-indulgent but, when coupled with his tendency to interfere, as manipulative and disturbing. He misleads in order to control. At his daughter's wedding, he plans to pretend helplessness in order to stay in her life: 'he would arrive perhaps without buttons on his shirt and would ask her to sew them on for him ... Actually Morgan was very good at sewing on buttons. Actually he not only sewed on his own buttons but also Bonny's and the girls. Actually Amy was aware of this' (MP, 96). Early in the text Emily says of him, 'It was nobody dangerous. It was only one of those eccentric people you often see on city streets acting out some elaborate inner vision of themselves' (MP, 53). Yet this does not seem to be Tyler's position. If Morgan's 'inner vision' involves deceit and pretence, there could well be dangers. This would explain her suggestion, discussed in Chapter 1, that Morgan can be associated with Richard Nixon.

So Tyler returns to the issue of the relationship between eccentricity and social/political context. Here she engages again with the benignity/loss of

benignity dialogue, from outside social norms, where eccentricity can be constructed as escapism. In *Celestial Navigation* she justifies Jeremy's distance from the world, his lack of involvement in World War Two and Vietnam, by suggesting that, given his behavioural difficulties, this had been unavoidable and unintentional. This is not the case with Morgan, who intentionally maintains a distance from the world from a position of self-interest. He prefers not to know about current affairs: 'he never felt the news had anything to do with him' (MP, 135). In a self-reflexive moment, in the sense that Tyler, in her writing, attempts to maintain a similar sort of distance, she has him say, "but somehow it's as if this were all a story. It's as if I'm watching from the outside, mildly curious, thinking" (MP, 191). This lack of engagement has been evident from the opening of the novel where the comment 'It would have been a better fair with no human beings at all' (MP, 5) is from his point of view. This distance is both self-imposed and empowering, allowing him the sort of vicarious view of life he gets from the small ads: 'I love the classifieds ... They're so full of private lives' (MP, 29).<sup>78</sup> It is not the sort of strategy for survival adopted by Jeremy Pauling.

There are confusions, then, in Tyler's characterisation of Morgan in that she does not resolve the 'delicate problem' referred to in Fuller's review. She does suggest that the imagination involved in playing the role of eccentric has a darker side. However, Morgan is drawn as fundamentally endearing, which undermines his dubious endorsing of the dominant view of eccentricity. Because of this, the text lacks a radical edge by no longer questioning the validity of ideologically imposed social structures. Neither does Tyler call into

question the parameters of the maternal by depicting characters like Justine Peck and Charlotte Emory, who can be read as eccentric mothers.

Two women have a relationship with Morgan, his wife Bonny and his friend/mistress/partner Emily. Both are reminiscent of the quirky characters of the earlier texts; Bonny, amenable and untidy, displays the sort of unexplained eccentricity of Gram in *If Morning Ever Comes*. When Morgan leaves her she smokes constantly, phones incessantly and decides to write a short story 'composed entirely of thirty years' worth of check stubs and budget book entries' (MP, 253). Emily is more developed but her perennial leotards and ballet shoes, which Morgan mis-reads 'as coded evidence of her innocence',<sup>79</sup> re-evokes a thinner version of Violet, in *A Slipping-Down Life*, whose own eccentricity is coded through the purple and chartreuse of her voluminous skirts. Their motherhood is barely addressed. Like Justine, Bonny has little sense of order but her disorganisation lacks Justine's pace and spontaneity. She is content to stay at home, involved with the nurturing of her seven daughters through a succession of mishaps and pregnancies, even after they have married and left. Emily does take up jogging as the marriage with Leon is failing, but her escape plan is barely articulated, and she lacks Charlotte's sardonic edge. When Gina, Leon's daughter, leaves, she relinquishes any former spirit, feeling that: 'There was something restful about simply giving in, finally - abdicating, allowing someone else to lead her' (MP, 264). This 'someone' is Morgan and she cares for their son, Josh, 'whose solid little trunk, barrel-shaped, was faintly sticky, and he trailed a silvery cool thread of spit down the back of Emily's hand' (MP, 237). This is the sort of intimate

physical contact between mother and child that even Mary Tell, the eternal mother, has balked at. But Emily seems content.

Tyler's depiction of Morgan's self-conscious eccentricity, then, has led to a novel which seems somewhat strained and lacking in cohesion, self-consciously written in fact. Tyler has reverted to the heavy-handed, and, in one description of Morgan, she piles up almost gratuitous detail: 'His manners were atrocious (she often thought); he smoked too much ... scattered ashes down his front, chewed his cuticles, picked his teeth, meddled with his beard. He wore rich men's hand-me-downs, and, over them, an olive-drab bunchy nylon parka. He smelled permanently of stale tobacco ... He was excitable and unpredictable' (MP, 191). Significantly Jones takes issue with this passage in a margin note on the manuscript, 'it seems surprising for the author's voice to make these observations at this stage, particularly when the point about tobacco has already been made'. She suggests that Tyler indicate 'subtly' that this is vocalised by Emily.<sup>80</sup> Hence, in the published version, Tyler inserted the parenthesis '(she often thought)'.

In addition, the fairy-tale motif which recurs through the text is overdone. Emily and Leon are 'like two children in a fairy tale' (MP, 279). Leon's sulkiness is likened to an evil spell (MP, 54) and, as their marriage deteriorates, the '[f]airytales fell into fragments, every line a splinter' (MP, 174). Morgan thinks of himself as a toad (MP, 50), and is viewed by Emily as a gnome or elf: 'the baby elf, the troll, the goblin who finds children under cabbage leaves and lays them in their mother's arms and disappears' (MP, 21). In a sense he becomes the Beast/Prince who changes Emily's life. Significantly Beauty is the first puppet she makes (MP, 54) and *Beauty and*

*the Beast* is her favourite fairy tale. All this is over-done, like the larding of the eccentric. The novel's structure is also over-worked, particularly the ending. Petry rightly suggests that this is too neat<sup>81</sup>, this is the happy-ever-after ending that did not occur in *Celestial Navigation* and a far cry from Mary Tell's need to re-work 'tired old endings'.

Perhaps this sort of writing is what led Updike to refer to the text as a work which is 'so forcedly buoyant, so scattered and manic in its episodes, so enigmatic and - dare we say - fey in its central character'.<sup>82</sup> Furthermore Updike makes the connection between character and author, which Tyler has also acknowledged: 'But I really think my kinship with imposters has to do with my being a writer. We go in and out of other lives all the time'.<sup>83</sup> He identifies the melancholic nature of the text, which he refers to as the 'puppetmaster's ennui', and relates this to Tyler's writing: 'And it is tempting to ascribe some of this fatigue to Miss Tyler herself'.<sup>84</sup>

Certainly there is a sense of fatigue in the over-egging and confusions in this text. Indeed Tyler as puppeteer/author has lost some control of the strings; hence the sense of crisis in the text concerning eccentricity. Several remarks made by Tyler in an interview with Mary Lamb suggest that this was the case. Here she admits to a lack of confidence, following the setting aside of *Pantaleo*, adding that '[t]his new novel Morgan is giving me a hell of a time' and admitting that, when domestic crises intervened, she 'could see Morgan, in his broad-brimmed hat, fading away'. Her sense of loss of control is summed up in the comment, 'This Morgan and I have been wrestling together for so long I'm not sure the novel will ever see the light of day'.<sup>85</sup> On the interview transcript there is a handwritten note from Lamb: 'I hope this was an



uneventful summer, so that Morgan has been able to make real progress - All best Wendy'.<sup>86</sup> In fact this was an illuminating, but fateful, interview; fateful because Tyler is a deeply superstitious writer<sup>87</sup> and she related the book's lack of critical acclaim to the fact that she had voiced such problems about her work. She has subsequently refused to discuss her writing processes.

Arguably this text is flawed, not because of nemesis, but because it resonates with a distrust of the eccentric. Her recognition of the possible meshing of eccentricity, self-indulgence, deceit and escapism has eroded the radical interrogative edge present in the three texts which precede it. Perhaps this sense of crisis is epitomised in the title. This is evidence of a further heavy-handedness in the way Tyler has loaded the title with the weight of various meanings, each raising unresolved questions. 'Passing' as 'passing for' implies the role-play - yet is the reader to applaud the imagination this demands or take issue with the deceit it involves? 'Passing' can also be read as 'passing away'<sup>88</sup> where Bonny, in revenge, places a mock obituary in the local paper - does this suggest that Morgan has lost a coherent sense of self or does he live on in a series of acquired identities?<sup>89</sup> 'Passing' as 'passing through' relates to his distance as his disguises enable the detachment and neutrality which maintain a boundary between himself and his context - but why does he adopt this escapist position? One reviewer commented that 'whenever Tyler strives to reach beyond her role as caricaturist and attempts to transform Morgan's exploits into profound statements about the human condition - about fulfilment and identity - she fails'.<sup>90</sup>

Although the novel received the Janet Heidinger Kafka prize for fiction, it was neither a critical nor a commercial success. Voelker dismisses it in a

paragraph in *Art and the Accidental in Anne Tyler*. I concur with his verdict that '*Morgan's Passing* operates on a level so narrowly aesthetic - the poetics of posing - that it abandons the psychological plausibility - or sense of discovery of *Celestial Navigation*'.<sup>91</sup> Similarly Shelton refers to the novel as 'unruly and untidy, it is overlong, repetitious and at times wearying to read'.<sup>92</sup> Nor did it sell: 'Tyler's editors and publishers had hoped that *Morgan's Passing* would prove to be Tyler's "breakthrough book" but their high hopes proved unfounded. Morgan sold a disappointing 15,000 hardback copies'.<sup>93</sup> Perhaps this lack of success resulted from Tyler's attitude to eccentricity at this stage in her writing. Although she still distrusts arbitrary behavioural parameters, she also distrusts the sort of eccentricity that can cause harm through selfishly fleeing from social responsibilities or escaping from political engagement. This led to a new phase in her writing, suggesting that 'weirdness as a novelistic subject, is not enough'.<sup>94</sup>

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1 Eva Hoffman, 'When the Fog Never Lifts', reprinted in *Critical Essays on Anne Tyler*, Alice Hall Petry, ed., New York: G.K. Hall, 1992, 97.

2 Sandra Gilbert identifies 'intensity', 'immediacy' and 'density' and comments that '*Celestial Navigation* is a great advance and a different direction from earlier works', 'Anne Tyler', in Tonette Bond Inge, ed., *Southern Women Writers: The New Generation*, Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 260.

3 Joseph C. Voelker, *Art and the Accidental in Anne Tyler*, Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1989, 69.

4 Tyler has divided the novel into ten sections. Six are in the first person; Amanda and Olivia have one each; Mary and Miss Vinton have two.

5 Susannah Clapp suggests that 'her book is made up, collage-like, of different though not incompatible views of life and Jeremy', 'In the Abstract', reprinted in Petry, ed., 69.

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- 6 According to Robert F. Moss 'only Miss Tyler seems to have actually given birth to a title first and then written a novel for it. "I always loved the phrase 'celestial navigation"', she said. "I even had a cat by that name". At last in 1974 the cat became a novel', 'How Novels Get Titles', *New York Times*, 7 November 1982: 13 (DU).
- 7 Alan Pryce-Jones, 'Five Easy Pieces: One Work of Art', reprinted in Petry, ed., 74.
- 8 Jeremy Brook, 'Review of *Celestial Navigation*', *Sunday Times*, 13 April 1975 (DU).
- 9 Alice Hall Petry, *Understanding Anne Tyler*, Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1990, 118.
- 10 See Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, Austin: University of Texas Press, 1991.
- 11 Petry, 107.
- 12 Voelker, 81.
- 13 Barbara Harrell Carson, 'Art's Internal Necessity: Anne Tyler's *Celestial Navigation*', in C. Ralph Stephens, ed., *The Fiction of Anne Tyler*, Jackson: University Press of Missouri, 1990, 47.
- 14 The manuscript of *Celestial Navigation* contains sketches of the boarding house with details of the location of the bedrooms.
- 15 Anne Tyler, 'Still Just Writing', in Janet Sternburg, ed., *The Writer on Her Work*, 1980, reprinted London: Virago, 1992, 29.
- 16 Petry, 20.
- 17 It is clear that Tyler was exercised by the centrality of Jeremy and how many sections to give him, as there are alterations in the plan in the manuscript (DU).
- 18 Voelker, 68.
- 19 This can be applied to Tyler too: 'It seems to me that since I've had children, I've grown richer and deeper', Sternburg, 28.
- 20 Inge, 259.
- 21 Jeremy's increasing resistance to this sort of clutter becomes obvious when Mary is in hospital having yet another baby. In spite of the fact that Mary and Jeremy produce six children, as ever with Tyler the physical is under-played. As Heidi Macpherson says, 'sexual activity is relegated to nuance and innuendo', *Women's Movement*, Amsterdam: Rodolpi, 2000, 134.
- 22 Gail Godwin, review of *Celestial Navigation*, reprinted in Petry, ed., 72.
- 23 Petry, 98.

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- 24 Wendy Lamb, 'An Interview with Anne Tyler', reprinted in Petry, ed., 55.
- 25 Elizabeth Evans, *Anne Tyler*, New York: Twayne, 1993, 102.
- 26 Petry, ed., 71.
- 27 Tyler entitled her *Washington Post* article 'Because I Want More Than One Life', reprinted in Petry, ed., 45-50.
- 28 John Updike, 'Family Ways', reprinted in Petry, ed., 79.
- 29 Evie Decker, pregnant at the end of *A Slipping-Down Life*, is 'eccentric' in that she anticipates single parenthood.
- 30 Petry also refers to the difference between passivity and endurance in *Earthly Possessions*, 155.
- 31 Inge, 262.
- 32 Petry, 156-7.
- 33 'I got confused once or twice by which brother was which but it may have been only reading groggily late at night', letter to Anne Tyler from Judith Jones, June 21 1976 (*DU*). It may be that this confusion arises from Tyler's attempt to point up family influences and inter-connections. She does suggest that the brothers' characters blur, that 'Julian was collecting weaknesses ... Saul's old trouble with girls was Julian's now and so was Linus's tendency to break down' (EP, 147).
- 34 This miniaturising sheds light on Linus's state of mind. According to Bachelard, 'The cleverer I am at miniaturizing the world, the better I possess it', Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1994, 150.
- 35 Janis P. Stout, *Through the Window, Out the Door*, Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 1998, 128.
- 36 Macpherson sees the relationship between Charlotte and her son Jiggs as one of fellow changelings, 139.
- 37 Anne G. Jones, 'Home at Last, and Homesick Again: The Ten Novels of Anne Tyler', *Hollins Critic*, Vol. 23, No. 2, April 1986: 8.
- 38 Macpherson, 142.
- 39 Gilbert refers to this as Tyler's tendency to bring her characters to 'a still moment of vision', Inge, 273.
- 40 Petry, 140.
- 41 In her attempt to depict the South, Tyler is again guilty, in her descriptions of New Orleans, of more than an element of geographical stereotyping when she

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- refers to 'lacy balconies, secret fountains splashing, leprous scaly stucco' (SC, 249).
- 42 Martha B. Tack 'Pecking Order', *The Village Voice*, 21, 1 November 1976: 95.
- 43 Petry, 150.
- 44 Letter to Anne Tyler from Judith Jones, 29 January 1975 (DU).
- 45 Letter to Judith Jones from Anne Tyler, 3 February 1975 (DU).
- 46 Katha Pollitt, review of *Searching for Caleb*, reprinted in Petry, ed., 83.
- 47 Stout, 127.
- 48 Stout, 128.
- 49 Helene Cixous, 'The Laugh of the Medusa', in *New French Feminisms*, ed., Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron, Brighton: Harvester Press, 1981.
- 50 Marguerite Michaels, 'Anne Tyler, Writer 8:05 to 3:30', reprinted in Petry, ed., 42.
- 51 Letter to Anne Tyler from Judith Jones, 29 January 1975 (DU).
- 52 Letter to Judith Jones from Anne Tyler, 3 February 1975 (DU).
- 53 Letter to Anne Tyler from Judith Jones, 21 February 1975 (DU).
- 54 Letter to Anne Tyler from Judith Jones, 2 April 1975 (DU).
- 55 However, Tyler might dispute this. She does not take the word 'hunting' literally: "Where I was raised you could say, "Go hunt your brother for supper." It just meant you were going to find him", quoted in 'How Novels Get Titles', Moss: 13 (DU).
- 56 Anne Tyler, 'When the Camera Looks, It Looks for All of Us', *The National Observer*, 14 February 1976: 19.
- 57 According to Updike, 'She seems less a character than a creator, who among the many lives that her fantasizing, empathizing mind arrays before her, almost casually chooses to live her own', 'Loosened Roots', reprinted in Petry, ed., 91. He misses the point here in that the way in which Charlotte 'chooses to live' her life is not attained 'casually'.
- 58 Anon, 'Phony Doctor Practising in Mexico', *Baltimore Evening Sun* (DU) (the clipping contained neither a date nor a page number).
- 59 Petry, ed., 42.
- 60 Petry, ed., 42.
- 61 Petry, ed., 54.
- 62 Letter to Anne Tyler from Judith Jones, 3 February 1978 (DU).
- 63 Walter Sullivan, 'The Insane and the Indifferent Walker Percy and Others' reprinted in Petry, ed., 92.

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- 64 Nicholas Delbanco, review of *Earthly Possessions*, reprinted in Petry, ed., 84.
- 65 Letter to Anne Tyler from Judith Jones, 21 June 1976 (DU).
- 66 Again Tyler aligns herself to this process, 'Olives out of a Bottle' (discussion with Anne Tyler at Duke), reprinted in Petry, ed., 31.
- 67 This doll 'made of a particularly naked-looking, crazed pink plaster. Her eyes, which were meant to close when she was lying down, appeared to have frozen open' (P, 42) reappears in *Saint Maybe* (1991) as Thomas's doll Dulcimer: 'a large, naked doll with a matted wig' (SM, 19), with a 'numb, blank face' and 'unseeing eyes' (SM, 22).
- 68 Petry, ed., 42.
- 69 Robert W. Croft, *Anne Tyler: A Bio-Bibliography*, Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1995, 56.
- 70 Petry, ed., 77.
- 71 See Christian Metz, *Film Language: A Semiotics of the Cinema*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1974.
- 72 Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, New York: Hill and Wang, 1974.
- 73 Croft, 52.
- 74 Bruce Cook, 'A Writer - During School Hours', reprinted in Petry, ed., 51.
- 75 According to Margaret Morganroth Gullett, his clothes 'are ordinary things, yet they have an extraordinary presence', 'Anne Tyler: The Tears (and Joys) Are in the Things', in Stephens, ed., 97.
- 76 Paul Binding, review of *Morgan's Passing*, *New Statesman*, 5 December 1980 (DU).
- 77 Edmund Fuller, 'Micawber as a Hardware Store Manager', *Wall Street Journal*, 21 April 1980 (DU).
- 78 Indeed Jones suggests that the title *Personal Notices* would have 'a provocative ring', letter to Anne Tyler from Judith Jones, 7 August 1979 (DU).
- 79 Ruth O. Saxton, 'Crepe Soles, Boots and Fringed Shawls: Female Dress as Signals of Femininity', in Dale Salwak, ed., *Anne Tyler as Novelist*, Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1994, 72.
- 80 Manuscript of *Morgan's Passing* (pages not numbered).
- 81 Petry, 112.
- 82 John Updike, 'Imagining Things', *New Yorker*, 23 June 1980 (DU). In a British review Jim Grace has similar reservations concerning structure: 'the paucity of

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both event and narrative energy finally undermine the novel's intrinsic charm',  
*Sunday Times*, 2 November 1980 (DU).

83 Petry, ed., 52.

84 Updike (DU).

85 Petry, ed., 56.

86 Note to Anne Tyler from Wendy Lamb, 9 August 1979 (DU).

87 Petry chronicles fears and rituals, 101-3.

88 Jones suggested the title '*Passed Away, Passing Through* ... something that  
might be a play on that hideous expression people use because they can't  
say die', letter to Anne Tyler from Judith Jones, 5 September 1979 (DU).

89 It is not until *Ladder of Years* (1995) that Tyler returns to questions of identity.

90 Robert Wyatt, 'Anne Tyler's "Morgan's Passing"', *Tennessee Sunday Bookcase*,  
20 April 1980.

91 Voelker, 87.

92 Frank W. Shelton, 'The Necessary Balance: Distance and Sympathy in the Novels  
of Anne Tyler', in Petry, ed., 155.

93 Croft, 59.

94 Hoffman, 97.

## CHAPTER 4

### **'Free to be playful': the short stories**

'I'm very conscious between writing periods of having to get filled up again ... writing short stories for me is almost like getting filled up because it's not an exhausting business to write short stories and you can sort of be playful in them' (Anne Tyler)<sup>1</sup>

At the beginning of her career Tyler was a prolific writer of short fiction<sup>2</sup> and between 1959 and 1977 she published thirty-six short stories<sup>3</sup> in a variety of magazines, including the *New Yorker*, the *Washington Post Magazine*, *Cosmopolitan*, *Mademoiselle* and *McCall's*. As an interview in 1972 indicates, she used such writing as a respite between longer efforts: 'We didn't talk nearly enough about the short story, which is the lady's real passion, her "dessert" after finishing a novel: "You don't have to feel you're committing yourself over the long haul; you can say something for exactly as long as it pleases then drop it"'.<sup>4</sup> Subsequently, Tyler has redefined herself primarily as a novelist and has tended to dismiss her short stories. Indeed she has issued written instructions that these stories 'are not to be re-published, anthologised, or put in any collections due to inferiority',<sup>5</sup> stating that the reason for this 'is that I don't have enough that I really like'.<sup>6</sup> However, in spite of this perceived 'inferiority' she has won O. Henry awards for 'The Common Courtesies' (1968) and 'With All Flags Flying' (1971) and has been anthologised: 'Your Place is Empty' in *Best American Short Stories* (1977) and 'The Geologist's Maid' in *Stories of the Modern South* (1978). Furthermore she has maintained her



interest in the genre by judging short story competitions<sup>7</sup> and reviewing collections. Her review entitled 'The New Improved Short Story' identified such changes as a 'gradual opening out' and a 'sense of immediacy', concluding that 'the short story remains alive and very, very well'.<sup>8</sup>

Similarly, and again, in her introduction to *Best American Short Stories* (1983), she:

[d]efends the short story as a valid art form that is in no way inferior to the novel. She admonishes authors to have a generous spirit and not to hoard their best ideas for the next novel. What she admires most is writing that has a certain vitality - writing that is "stuffed full" of suggestive details until it is "bursting at the seams", with vivid, spunky characters who are survivors.<sup>9</sup>

She had selected these stories with Shannon Ravenel, who wrote an appreciative response to Tyler's review of *New Stories from the South* in 1986.<sup>10</sup> And Tyler has sustained her interest in the Southern short story, hence her introduction to *Best of the South* (1996). Here she returns to an examination of the Southernness which had characterised her early novels. She identifies 'three factors'; the Southern accent 'that makes most snatches of dialogue as seductively reproducible as jump rope rhymes', an approach to narrative which 'affects the path and the pace of the plot' and a sense of belonging to a group which 'is not unique to the South, but in combination with the accent and the narrative style it makes for something that *is* unique'. She suggests that, because of this, 'the South exerts a gentle but pervasive influence on the substance of the fiction produced there'.<sup>11</sup>

Arguably, this sort of influence can be detected in Tyler's own early short stories where, as in her early longer fiction, the eccentric characters she

depicts can be related to the literary context of the South. Here her representation of eccentricity simultaneously questions and celebrates the transgressing of conventional parameters. Such questioning is tentatively evident in her first published short story, 'Laura',<sup>12</sup> whose death is the central event of the story. This story is set in an isolated community not unlike Celo where Tyler spent her early years. Tyler depicts this central character as eccentric - an eccentricity chiefly emerging from her fanatical belief in the literal authenticity of the Bible. Furthermore she makes her eleven-year-old narrator have the 'eccentric' response of laughing when she hears of Laura's death. This response, which could be deemed inappropriate, demonstrates at an early stage Tyler's awareness of the importance of the boundaries of conventional behaviour, and how transgression of these boundaries broaches notions of propriety.

Tyler's celebration of the eccentric in these early stories is evident in her depiction of central female figures. Evans suggests that such characters 'transcend the "normal" to become "grotesque"'<sup>13</sup> and certainly there are resonances of the domestic Gothic in a story like 'As the Earth Gets Old', her first to be published in the *New Yorker*.<sup>14</sup> This concerns the acrimonious relationship between a rich old woman and her unmarried daughter. Mrs Brauw's size confines her to a purple velvet chair, apparently her throne, yet one where she sits incongruously 'like a hump of doughy circles - an old thin-mouthed moon face, a huge bosom, a stomach, which was the most perfect circle of all' (E, 60). Yet the comedy of this depiction, as the thin mouth and the reptilian 'small hooded eyes' suggest, is shot through with the sinister. Mrs Brauw is manipulative and mean, exercising her power and wealth by playing

with real estate by day and cheating at Scrabble in the evening. This game is a trope for the mother/daughter relationship where Mrs Brauw does battle with her 'old-maid daughter', Miss Beatrice, from whom she has exacted a promise to 'look out for my every need until I died'. Miss Beatrice's 'very thin and faraway' voice anticipates an ultimate defeat in that, when their house is on fire, she chooses to be burnt alive rather than remain with her mother. As they play Scrabble their reflections are 'framed by dusty lace curtains ... Miss Beatrice looking down at her hands, with her long thin nose casting a sharp shadow, and Mrs Brauw craning her neck intently toward the board' (E, 62). Clearly this image is derivative of that trace of Gothic horror running through Southern literary representations which Tyler had leant on in her early novels. Here, again, she does this rather heavy-handedly. For example her description: 'The silence of those flames eating away at the huge pillared house had seemed as strange and eerie as another nightmare' (E, 63) lacks the more subtle detail of her depiction of Mrs Brauw as a frightened old lady attempting to escape, exposed without her 'flesh-coloured stockings' trying, 'with one hand to pull her night-gown down' (E, 63) because she feels deprived of social masking.

If Mrs Brauw is reminiscent of O'Connor or McCullers, the tone of Miss Lorna's interior monologue and the humour of her remembrances in 'The Common Courtesies'<sup>15</sup> would not seem out of place in a short story by Welty. Once more Tyler's focus is a mother/daughter relationship and again the central character is immobilised by her grotesque size, though she still wears 'crepe-soled walking shoes every day and heavy-duty stockings with crooked seams' (CC, 121), 'crooked' being an early reference to her nature. She is

seen at both the outset and the end of the narrative on the front porch, 'a large, ugly woman sinking through the seat of a wicker arm chair, chewing Sunshine biscuits and looking like Andy Devine in a golfing costume' (CC, 130). This wicker chair is 'splintered and darkened with age' but she has refused the 'reclining Strato-Lounger'.<sup>16</sup> Miss Lorna, the mother in the story, is another strong-willed woman; she too exercises power, exacting an apology from her daughter because of the pain and anxiety she has caused her mother by becoming pregnant and giving birth. However, in spite of a similar central relationship, this story has none of the Gothic resonances of 'As the Earth Gets Old' - no spooky house or eerie shadows. Miss Lorna's selfish concern for her own health: 'I have to watch over my heart, Ida. The slightest thing I do, it leaps up and flips over inside of me' (CC, 124-5) and the snobbish discretion of her attempt at sex education: 'What with your delicate health and all, I do hope you'll be *careful*' (CC, 124), are too ludicrous to be in any sense threatening.

In fact Miss Lorna is rendered pathetic. She is fast losing sight of the present, constantly rehearsing past memories of performing old-style songs where '[s]ometimes the more elderly people in the audience just broke down and wept' (CC, 127). Reminiscing in this way involves 'going over the words she knew so well that they came ready-made to her mind, set in a pattern' (CC, 129), and Tyler re-uses this notion in her third novel, *A Slipping-Down Life*, written two years later. Evie, the central female character, is learning to master language and in this process '[w]ords popped forth ready-made' (SDL, 95). These references to how and why language emerges are an indication

that, even in these early stories, Tyler is concerned with its idiosyncrasies and will return to issues relating to signification and reference.

This is particularly evident in another story for the *New Yorker*, 'The Feather Behind the Rock',<sup>17</sup> a somewhat crude anticipation of *A Slipping-Down Life*, about a boy travelling across America with his grandparents. Evie, in the novel, ultimately learns to read signs and 'crack the code' of Drum's singing. Similarly the grandmother learns to read the conventions of the Western film, the white flag as a sign of peace, yellow painted marks as a sign of war and 'the feather behind the rock' as a sign that the Indians are coming. Furthermore Tyler evokes Barthes' proairetic code<sup>18</sup> by experimenting with the relationship between narrative and journey. She sets up a layered narrative where an outer layer concerns the journey made by Joshua and his grandparents, from Wilmington, North Carolina, to San Francisco, California. It is significant that this tightly structured narrative begins and ends in a cinema, because the journey narrative is propelled by an inner narrative of a succession of Western films: 'They marked towns by the Indian battles they had watched there' (F, 27). Furthermore this spatial journey across America provides the terrain for a temporal journey into past memories<sup>19</sup> as Joshua's grandparents re-visit college memories, their courtship, marriage and parenthood. Conversation becomes a journey through the clutter<sup>20</sup> of these reminiscences where '[s]ubjects seemed to come to their minds so fast - comments on the countryside, stray memories, unrelated facts - that they would leave one subject in mid-sentence and dart on to the next without pausing' (F, 27). This verbal/spatial journey gathers momentum: 'The talk seemed to be flying faster than usual this morning, so that words were all run

together, and the car was going faster too - telegraph poles whipping by, fields gone almost before they appeared, all of them directed somehow at Joshua' (F, 28) and this movement accelerates towards the climax of the grandmother's collapse.

This collapse is an indication that the statement 'There was no reason for the trip' (F, 26) is deliberately misleading. As the narrative journey evolves, the unreliability of the narrative voice means that the reader has to 'crack the code' of the text. Because of the clues embedded in the story, the rationale behind these two old people's determination to travel thousands of miles in a trailer, 'which smelled like a musty tin can and rang hollow wherever you rapped it' (F, 27), becomes evident. The grandmother's breathlessness, her words, 'which reminded Joshua of a lacy old valentine, sounded strange ... gasped out in the stuffiness of the Pontiac' (F, 29), and the reference to the 'special doctor' back home, suggest that she is ill, probably dying, and that the trip has been arranged so that she can rehearse significant moments of her life in front of an audience, her grandson. Here, by dropping such clues, Tyler is inviting her reader to enter into a game concerning signification and significance.

Arguably it is this sort of 'game playing' that characterises Tyler's short story writing as a whole. She alluded to this at a seminar with Price and Welty at Duke when they met to discuss 'their "how to's" of successful writing'. Tyler's comment was, 'In short stories, you feel more free to be playful, because you're not committed to a terrifically long hall [sic] that could be a mistake'.<sup>21</sup> This is a re-stating of an earlier statement again made at Duke: 'writing short stories for me is almost like getting filled up ... and you can be

sort of playful in them. You don't feel that a year of your life is going to go into it. You're not committed in that way'.<sup>22</sup> The remark 'sort of playful', then, suggests that, in her short stories, Tyler feels that she has the freedom to play with the possibilities and the constraints of language and the relationship between form and the variety of readings to which a story may give rise. Hence her tentative attempt in 'The Feather Behind the Rock' to conflate the progression of journey and narrative. Furthermore, it is possible to invest Tyler's use of the term 'playful' with Bakhtinian resonances; she recognises language as a means of liberation, in which words are multi-accentual and signification is unstable.<sup>23</sup> However, the notion of being 'playful', as often with Tyler, has a contradictory edge. Conventional playfulness has somewhat trivial connotations of fun and even coyness. But Tyler's playfulness, her playing with linguistic possibilities is more constructive than this sort of definition implies. It involves play with a purpose, for she can take the experimentation this involves back to her longer fiction. She implies this herself when she says 'writing short stories for me is almost like getting filled up'.

Thus, like any writer of realist fiction, Tyler engages with 'games' of make-believe, pretending that fictional characters exist, that fictional settings might be visited and that fictional events could take place. This involves persuading the reader of the 'truth' of the narrative through the application of appropriate conventions and linguistic strategies, and, for Tyler, one such strategy is the use of convincing detail:

Mostly it's lies writing novels. You set out to write an untrue story and you try to make it believable, even to yourself. Which calls for details;

any good lie does. I'm quicker to believe I was once a circus aerialist if I remember that just before every performance I used to dip my hands in a box of chalk powder that smelled like clean dry cloth being torn.<sup>24</sup>

That she regards such detail as especially necessary in short story writing is borne out by her revelation to an interviewer from the *New York Times Book Review* about the index card boxes she uses where the short story box has a category for 'details'.<sup>25</sup> In view of this, 'The Bride in the Boatyard'<sup>26</sup> is a significant story because Tyler acknowledges, meta-fictively, the effects of such 'details'. In a text within a text Venetia meets Sarah, the bride of the title, and describes her own 'just perfect' courtship, wedding and the subsequent deterioration of her marriage where 'Teddy before the altar, hauling forth his Mexican ring, changed into Teddy straddling his motorcycle in unknown towns. Trading a cigarette back and forth with unknown girls' (BB, 127). Sarah is convinced by these stories and so imaginatively engaged that she empathises with the 'crowded, stifled irritation of Teddy at the supper table planning new escapes', drawn on by 'neon towns' 'across the moonlit curve of the continent' (BB, 128). However, a comment from a neighbour reveals that Venetia lives alone and has invented both the romantic and the recalcitrant Teddy. When Sarah confronts her with this, Venetia says 'I *like* to make things up, gives me something to do', to which Sarah replies, "But you had all those details" (BB, 128). She has been persuaded by 'the four-year-old ring bearer with his heart-shaped cushion' and 'her wedding dress down to the last stitch' (BB, 126). She had been convinced by the home-comings of the errant husband: 'I was eating French fries. I had on that ruffly blue dress I was telling you about' (BB, 128). Indeed Sarah is reluctant to relinquish the illusion: 'But it



seemed as if it were this second version that was the lie. There was such a person; having been called up in her mind, he protested his non-existence' (BB, 128). Clearly Tyler is suggesting here that Venetia's story-telling, like the practice of writing fiction, becomes more credible through the use of closely observed specificity and this suggestion self-reflexively foregrounds her own writing practice. Furthermore she seems to be advocating subtlety in this use of close observation, as when she has Sarah remark, 'I don't even know *how* she did it. He seemed so real' (BB, 28).

Arguably Tyler learnt the importance of such specificity while still at Duke. The short story 'Glass Wind' was presumably written at that time when Tyler was attending creative writing classes taught by Reynolds Price. Even at this early stage in her writing career, the themes and motifs which will characterise her later work are emerging. She explores the tension between staying and leaving. As Susan, the central character, is returning home, 'walking as if there weren't a place in the world to go or a time in the world to be there' (GW, 43), she fantasises that her brother would 'return and take her away with him' (GW, 43). Tyler also anticipates the nexus of order, clutter and escape which will persist: 'she wouldn't take a thing with her, not even her pocket book; she would leave everything in a heap in her room and never think about it again as long as she was gone' (GW, 43). More importantly the comments on the manuscript concerning method, probably written by Price, approve of her 'sure and natural' use of 'the right word and the right *detail* in narrative' (GW, 43, my italics).

Evidently, then, Tyler, like her character Venetia, understands the efficacy of detail and she also likes to 'lie', 'to make things up'. She has even claimed

that it is one of her reasons for writing: 'I like to lie and that's an acceptable way of lying'.<sup>27</sup> In 1975 she wrote an unpublished story entitled 'Believable Lies',<sup>28</sup> which anticipates an assertion on the activity of writing she made in a 1977 interview: 'A serious book is one that removes me to another life as I am reading it. It has to have layers and layers like life does. It has to be an extremely believable lie'.<sup>29</sup>

It is significant that, in the short story in question, the producer of 'believable lies' is a stage magician. Tyler is reflecting on the relationship between performing magic and writing realist fiction. Both processes depend on trickery - the magician's sleight of hand and the writer's linguistic strategies. Conforming to convention and expectation, Gabriel the Great produces the obligatory rabbits while Tyler extracts an image from her 'hat' of figurative language to describe their colour and texture: 'The rabbits were not of the white cottony variety but a stipled [sic] brown, like clover blossoms' (BL, 11). Tyler sets up a narrative continuum informed with such convincingly imagined detail that we accept as 'believable' the way the central character, a thirty-eight year old woman, needs to escape from an unimaginative husband, who is allergic to fabric shops and buys her a deep fat fryer for her birthday. Consequently she has an affair with the magician.

Yet the story fractures both illusions. When the magician is performing, his props take on magical properties, but upon close examination off-stage they reveal what Tyler refers to as their 'ultra-reality' (BL, 11). Similarly Tyler calls into question the fixity of referentiality in language, which is assumed in the practice of realist fiction's illusionism. The daughter in the story frequently uses the 'harsh sounding' invented word 'Adoyawinkie' (BL, 8) as a means of

retaliation to her mother's statements of the obvious. She succeeds in investing the word with significations whose denotations her mother cannot understand, because of the arbitrariness of the sign. This takes their exchanges into a language realm where the mother is denied any means of reply, adrift in a sea of possible connotations. When mother and daughter are at odds, the word 'Adoyawinkie', whose meaning is obscure in any dictionary sense, takes on psychological power as the daughter's weapon. However, the story ends with this word being used by the daughter at a moment of harmony with her mother. A word that has been an indicator of contention has changed its meaning, finally signifying the two females' occupancy of a shared linguistic terrain and indicating that language is arbitrary yet conventional.

In escaping from home the mother again encounters language which excludes her. Abracadabra, like 'Adoyawinkie', is another nonsense word, which, because the mother is not one of the initiated, suggests yet denies access to a different and special world beyond understanding, and both words are syllabically cluttered.

'Believable Lies' ends in reconciliation. The husband George 'set out three soup plates. He aligned the silverware neatly' (BL, 15). By so carefully setting the table for a family meal, he is restoring the order of their life together, and in fictive terms, it is such specificity, invested with meaning, which makes the 'lie' of the story 'believable'. Yet there is a further 'layer' here, which calls into question the reality of family life, suggesting that this too may conceal falsehoods and may be an arena where the maintenance of surface order does no more than construct itself as believable. All writers of realist fiction use the artifice of detail and illusionism to represent the 'lie' of fiction as truth.

Tyler, in this short story, is attempting to deconstruct the aesthetic paradox of fiction as illusionism tricking the reader with regard to reality.

In 'Believable Lies' there is a potent exchange between the narrator and the magician when he denies that his tricks are lies: "Ah, well, whatever" I said. It didn't matter to me what name he called them by' (BL, 10). And this comment, which problematises the transparency of words, is taken up by Tyler and developed in 'Linguistics',<sup>30</sup> a short story which again addresses issues involving the parameters of language. This story concerns a relationship where the protagonists speak two different languages and the first sentence is particularly telling, 'Neither his language nor mine declines the nouns' (Ln, 1).<sup>31</sup> This draws attention to the way language is fixed and categorised by grammatical terms. Perhaps it also registers a loss of confidence in this process, a 'decline', in fact, and expresses the fact that nouns, which denote objects, cannot be declined, in the sense of refused. The narrator resists her husband's attempt to 'delve deeper into one particular word, to trace its roots and its multibranched meanings and applications' (Ln, 3). She prefers language to be 'untranslated, mysterious - a jungle of sounds' (Ln, 3). When he wonders why she is still unmarried, she teases him with the potential absurdity of fixing the meaning of words, "Fundamentally", I said, "it's my antipathy toward a sempiternal and unmitigated consanguinity" (Ln, 3).

In addition, Tyler draws attention to the limitations as well as the ludic possibilities of language; hence the wife's observation about learning her husband's language: 'I believe that I first spoke his language as a kind of play-acting, humouring his whims ... Water was "water", but if he wanted to

call it something else, something strange and abrupt, I would go along with it' (Ln, 5). Here the character unwittingly comments on the instability of signification and comes close to a preliminary recognition of that aspect of Saussure which stresses the arbitrariness of sign systems that Tyler will develop further in *A Slipping-Down Life* (see Chapter 2). She suggests, comically, that such 'arbitrariness' derives from learned systems and from existing conventions. The husband loses his accent and then his facility with his first language, "It doesn't come naturally", he said ... "I couldn't find the word for rooster ... I kept stalling and stammering and finally I had to say 'husband of the hen'" (Ln, 13). Tyler even goes so far as to draw attention, not only to the inadequacy, but also to the possible irrelevance of language in human interaction. After an emotional interchange with her husband's aunt, the narrator comments: 'I never can remember which language I've said it in' (Ln, 14b).

A seemingly similar ambivalence towards the efficacy of language structures in communicating emotion can be detected in 'A Knack for Languages'.<sup>32</sup> It is instructive that Tyler, herself, values this short story about another partnership where the husband and wife speak different languages. In a comparatively recent exchange she referred to it as 'uncharacteristically "strong"'.<sup>33</sup> It is also telling that she changed the title from 'The Clay Daughter'. This implies that she is concerned not simply with the family relationships the story addresses, but also with the family's means of communication. Indeed the word 'knack' reveals Tyler's awareness of the complexities of language as it denotes facility, but also carries connotations of artifice, even deceit - thus enforcing Tyler's view of the potential shortcomings of linguistic structures.

The change of title, moreover, suggests a more complicated focus which does not merely concern narrator as character, the daughter, but also draws attention to narrator as writer. In this story Tyler points out the distinction between the 'knack for language' of the protagonist, within the text, and that of the narrator, outside the text. The character/narrator within the text finds it impossible to articulate her experiences *verbally*. On the other hand, the writer/narrator outside the text has the facility to articulate her experiences by using the conventions and strategies of realism, the *written* images which convince the reader.

Again Tyler's first sentence is significant and 'My husband is a linguist' (K, 1) immediately points up the central issue in the marriage, for the narrator can neither speak nor understand foreign languages. Her husband, on the other hand, a native Italian, speaks French, Spanish, Russian, Greek and English and owns books in Italian, Middle English and Old Church Slavonic. Moreover the wife even has difficulty with her own language; 'it seemed Mark had to do all the talking, leaving spaces for me to fill if I wanted, although usually I couldn't manage it' (K, 32). Similarly, when his sisters arrive from Italy, her conversation with them is not 'rich and heavy' but 'reasonable and deliberate, full of words dealing with price, process, and chemical content ... they speak to me so dramatically I find it impossible to rise to the occasion' (K, 33). It becomes clear that such inarticulacy has stemmed from the disjunctions and inhibitions imposed by her own family life, which meant that she could not even mention her mother's suicide to her college roommates: 'The words wouldn't form themselves' (K, 34). Although she evidently feels emotion for her father, she cannot express this: 'the sight of the clean pink scalp beneath

his white hair made me want to cry. But all I said was "Hello, Papa" (K, 34). Conversation occupies a material rather than an emotional terrain where 'We talked about physical objects. Machines, mainly. We always do' (K, 33). When, exceptionally, the father painfully articulates feeling and acknowledges, referring to his dead wife, that he 'will miss her till I die', the daughter's response is 'Well' (K, 37). For the character/narrator, then, language is a potentially dangerous minefield which involves 'picking my way between words very carefully', afraid 'that I would blurt out something terrible. (In silences that possibility often worries me.)' (K, 34).

Tyler heightens the effect of this story, however, by juxtaposing the possible drawbacks of these verbal silences for the character/narrator, the picking *between* words, alongside the writer/narrator's adroit 'knack' with convincing detail and telling imagery where she picks her way *within* words. As readers we get a sense of the father's state of mind: 'he had shrunk and curled like a yellowed book drying out after a night in a storm' (K, 34). His apathy is made clear in a telling detail where a 'calendar was still turned to August, showing an old-fashioned girl with a Cupid's-bow mouth swinging on a swing entwined with hollyhocks' (K, 34). Similarly, the daughter's tortuous relationship with her mother is made 'real', and her suicide is partially explained by the image contained in the sentence, 'she was full of violent moods which she pulled over her face like huge exaggerated masks: fury, elation, despair, hilarity' (K, 34) and '[i]f she could move into our skulls she would have, bringing along great bulging suitcases and knobby shopping baskets full of her envies, suspicions, grudges, ecstasies, passions, fears' (K, 35). Tyler makes this distinction between character/narrator and

writer/narrator explicit in the last paragraph of the text. The husband, impervious and distant, is learning 'still another language'. The writer/narrator uses an image to communicate this point in the relationship, rendering him 'enclosed in a bubble of good fortune' which 'remains closed and appears to be carrying him away ... leaving me behind'. Here the character/narrator realises that 'there is nothing I can think of to say that will call him back' (K, 37, my italics). However there is a sense that this realisation blurs the written/verbal distinction suggested earlier in a merging of character/narrator/writer, where the daughter's private story has built up meaning through a recasting in written form and an address to the reader. I agree with Tyler that this story is 'strong' in that it complicates the conclusion of 'Linguistics' which suggests that language is irrelevant in emotional discourse. What she is saying here is that acknowledging a lack of verbal facility in expressing emotion by using the written word can be a vehicle for enhancing understanding.

Tyler, then, 'plays' with language in order to ask questions about the boundaries of conventional realism. Furthermore, linguistic and thematic play intersect, for writing short fiction also provides her with a means to experiment with representations and interpretations of the eccentric and the domestic. Again she can take this to her other writing. In this respect, a remark in a letter written to Tyler by her editor Judith Jones is apposite. The letter concerns the publication, suggested by her agent Tim Seldes, of a collection of stories and Jones, significantly, refers to some of the stories as 'finger exercises for your novels'.<sup>34</sup> Yet Tyler's familiar domestic focus does not so fully conform to conventional realism as first appears. As was the case in 'Believable Lies',



Tyler disrupts the reality of family life in her representations of the domestic, which can also, like language, involve pretence and contradiction. In a sense this involves conceptual 'play', where she breaks down accepted boundaries and problematises the concept of 'normality' when applied to family, to marriage and to motherhood. And this becomes an increasingly persistent theme in her novels.

To take a key example, in 'With All Flags Flying',<sup>35</sup> which won an O. Henry Award, she questions, albeit tentatively, the sort of familial 'normality' where 'sneakers and a football in the front yard' are 'signs of a large, happy family' (FF, 118) and where it is conventional and expected that, in such a family, aged parents should move in with the younger generation. The old man at the centre of this story (arguably this character is a 'finger exercise' for Justin Peck in *Searching for Caleb* (1976)), refuses to conform to this expectation. His daughter, 'a plump happy-looking woman in an apron' (FF, 119) adopts a traditional daughter role, applying emotional blackmail in an attempt to dissuade him 'I feel like this is something you're doing to me, just throwing away what I give' (FF, 123). However, her husband adopts the role of breadwinner: 'you were one of the reasons we bought this big house' (FF, 121). In spite of this the old man wants to go to an old folks' home in order to retain his dignity and independence. He is determined not to show weakness while living with them and waiting for a place: 'he chose a chair without rockers, one that would not be a symbol of age and weariness and lack of work' (FF, 122). He intends to carry out 'a simple plan, dependent on no-one' (FF, 122). What he has chosen is the space to show weakness 'with nobody to watch that mattered' (FF, 126). So here Tyler's conceptual 'play' disrupts

the 'reassuring' patterns of conventional domesticity that the pile of sneakers seems to indicate.

Tyler again questions the 'normality' of family life in 'The Artificial Family',<sup>36</sup> which received the 1976 Pushcart Prize. Here the very title implies that there is a perceived 'naturalness' which can be put to the test of literary representation. The family in question consists of Mary, a divorced woman, her child and Toby, her second husband. At first it appears that the 'artificiality' stems from the fact that Toby is not the natural father and this is what his own mother is at pains to emphasise: 'Everything she said was meant to remind them of their artificiality: the wife was someone else's first, the child was not Toby's' (AF, 618). However, this is to miss the point. The artificiality stems from the fact that a male is not necessary in the household, that a single parent can be preferable to a triangular nuclear family unit. This is especially the case in this family, due to the tensions which emerge when Toby compensatively indulges the child and Mary, the mother, resents this: 'Why is it you get to shower her with love and gifts and it's me that takes her to the dentist?' (AF, 620). It is the mother and daughter unit that constitute the family here, as Tyler makes clear in the first sentences of the text: 'The first full sentence that Mary ever said to him was, "Did you know I had a daughter?" They presented a solid front. Their eyes were a flat matching blue' (AF, 615). And Tyler reinforces this at the end when Mary, in a rehearsal of the end of the first marriage to the natural father, leaves Toby, taking the child with her. Here the final sentence, 'All they would have taken with them, he knew, was their long gingham gowns and each other' (AF, 621), suggests that their

normality consists of just the two of them. So again Tyler is playing with conceptual boundaries.

'Holding Things Together'<sup>37</sup> also concerns an unconventional relationship; a marriage of opposites and the (very muted) attraction between the wife and the young man who mends her car. Arguably, this story lacks the subtlety of either 'With All Flags Flying' or 'The Artificial Family'. Indeed Jones' comment on the stories that 'some of them seem too easy and as a result too easily forgettable'<sup>38</sup> could well be applied to this text. One of the ways that Tyler experiments in her short stories is in the use of a first-person narrative. This happens rarely in her novels, only two instances in seventeen texts, because, in her longer fiction, the use of the first person, while raising issues concerning reliability, prevents Tyler from her use of multiple points of view in order to expose family tensions and misinterpretations.<sup>39</sup> However, 'Holding things Together' might be viewed as a 'finger exercise' in the use of a first person narrative for *Earthly Possessions*, written in the same year. Here, as Charlotte does in the novel, the narrator alternates between past and present in an attempt to come to terms with her situation. Yet the tone of the narrator in the short story lacks Charlotte's sardonic bite in her descriptions of a marriage of opposites where the husband is 'shabby, shambling, absentminded' (HT, 32). He is so impractical and disorganised that he 'can't fix a leaky faucet ... change the storm windows or put on tire chains' (30). Consequently the wife has to 'hold things together'. Tyler uses a cars/driving trope for this difference; hence the narrator tells us: 'I myself drive a Ford; I believe it's easier to get parts for a Ford. It's five years old but it looks brand-new' (HT, 30). She is good at 'timing the lights perfectly' (HT, 31). On the other hand, her husband

drives 'a Plymouth with a dented left fender, a smashed tail-light, and a BB scar like a little rayed sun on its right rear window (HT, 30). He 'always drives abysmally - dashing start-ups, sudden swerves, jerky stops' (HT, 31). Yet this seems contrived and obvious. Similarly, her attraction to the car mechanic, a 'tall blond boy named Joel' (HT, 30), whose 'knuckles moved beneath his skin like well-oiled machine parts' (HT, 34) remains unconvincing and unresolved, resulting in the sort of lame ending Tyler has been criticised for in her novels.<sup>40</sup> There is a sense of stasis where the central female character, although acknowledging the shortcomings in her marriage, has only tentatively considered an alternative and is prepared to capitulate and continue 'holding things together'. In sum, to quote Jones again, this story is 'not richly developed enough, nor sufficiently thought through' and there is 'little sense of anything really conclusive or provocative'.<sup>41</sup> However, it can be viewed, in its evocation of a mismatched couple where the opposition between order and clutter informs the marriage, as a pre-echo of the relationship between Macon Leary and Muriel Pritchett in *The Accidental Tourist* (1985).

Another short story where Tyler plays with the familiar is 'Laps'.<sup>42</sup> This is a much more successful and 'provocative' text concerning a routine visit to the swimming pool, in the summer vacation, of two friends and their children. Croft suggests that Tyler's central concern here is the passing of time: 'Like the laps the daughter swims, time seems to fold back on itself'.<sup>43</sup> But I would suggest an alternative reading in which she returns to a questioning of the boundaries of motherhood. This is a concern of the early story, 'The Common Courtesies', where Miss Lorna's lack of maternal feeling is made manifest; her daughter was 'born in Miss Lorna's middle age, just when she had finally gotten it

through Mr. Billy's head that she didn't hold with child-bearing' (CC, 123). Indeed the narrator, like Charlotte Emory in *Earthly Possessions*, has abortive and ambivalent fantasies of escape, ready yet not ready to leave: 'Last night I dreamed that a very ordinary man in a business suit rang my doorbell and asked if I was ready ... he was very calmly taking off his clothes and hanging them in my closet' (Lp, 3). In this text swimming can be read as a trope for motherhood, as an entry into a potentially threatening element where it is possible to be out of one's depth. It is therefore necessary to learn a set of skills and conventions in order to stay afloat. It is significant, then, that the protagonist says, 'I make myself swim twenty laps - four breast stroke, four back stroke, four on each side and four American crawl. The crawl is my favorite, although the most tiring' (Lp, 8). Tyler here is calling into question the naturalness of motherhood, which, like swimming, not only has to be learned but also requires practice, endurance and constant motion. The result of such practice is motherhood - at a cost. This role dominates the identity of the narrator: 'I was a lifeguard myself once, though none of my children imagine such a thing' (Lp, 3) and she feels trapped in a relentless routine: 'I have spent the day uselessly, wasted it, and see nothing ahead of me but more days to waste the same way' (Lp, 14).

This is a somewhat bleak story, interestingly published in *Parents*. It ends with the mother's reflection that her daughter's enjoyment of the liberation of the water will not last. There is little comedy to relieve Tyler's evident acknowledgement that the adoption and accomplishment of the maternal role can be burdensome, even painful. That this sort of thematic 'play' bears fruit is evident in her more thoroughgoing engagement with the same issues in

*Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant*, published the next year. Like Pearl Tull, the narrator is oppressed by a dual burden; the weight of emotional guilt - 'Biddy has a touch of sunburn, which is all my fault' (Lp, 140) - coupled with the load of necessary material items. They enter the pool, 'me and Sue Ellen and her children and my children and our stack of peanut-butter-jelly sandwiches, beach towels, comic books, the little tin buckets and rubber animals' (Lp, 1).

'Laps', in a sense, is a 'familiar game' played on a usual domestic pitch, in this case undermining idealised configurations of motherhood. Yet Tyler also plays more unfamiliar thematic games in her short stories. She widens her centre of attention, addressing different concerns and diverging from a predominantly family focus. She turns her attention to more social issues, such as race, in 'The Geologist's Maid' (1975), and cultural difference in both 'Uncle Ahmad' (1977) and 'Your Place is Empty' (1976).<sup>44</sup>

In 'The Geologist's Maid'<sup>45</sup> Tyler turns her attention, unusually for her, to racial issues.<sup>46</sup> From the outset she contrasts the 'whiteness' of the geologist, who, recovering from a heart attack, 'is a mountain of light propped against the pillows ... a large white face and a spray of white hair, pale pyjamas, white stringy hands resting on the blankets' and the 'blackness' of his maid, her face 'so dark that it appears to have no features' (GM, 29). In this story Tyler depicts a tense, subtly elusive relationship between employer and maid where race imbricates with class and a dialogue is set up. The voice of the maid is filtered through the point of view of the geologist and, as a result, their stories interweave, 'so now it seems he has led two lives not merely one' (GM, 31). What the maid is voicing is a catalogue of grievances, past and present,

against 'white folks', where as a child she was 'scrubbing white marble stoops at fifteen cents a throw' (GM, 31); as a young woman she was sacked peremptorily by a white family after caring for their child for seventeen years; and as a married woman 'her husband died of over-work, driving his white lady to a North Carolina hunt club too soon after a minor stroke' (GM, 31). She seems perpetually angry, complaining about the therapy group dominated by whites, her unappreciative Sunday-school superintendent and her dangerous neighbourhood where she is afraid of 'no-account niggers strung out on dope and glue and Pam' (GM, 29). These complaints, and her employer's acknowledgement that such deprivation has been caused by and is based on a nexus of race and class, provokes an ambivalent reaction. Her employer is vehemently angry and, in a silent battle, 'he is ready to smash her face in' (GM, 30), yet he is also strangely sympathetic; her quiet reaction to the revivalist preacher on the radio saddens him: 'she is no doubt motionless, perhaps even bowing her head - a fact that makes him sadder still' (GM, 30). Tyler is using this relationship to point up the silences and lacunae implicit in race/class relations where the maid 'withdraws herself like a question she has regretted asking' (GM, 31). A central symbol for this sense of unanswered questioning is that the maid is saving up for 'prayer in the parchment version - embedded in Lucite - which will double as a paperweight' (GM, 29), a prayer that has solved the problems of thousands. What the geologist wants to know is what particular problem she wants solving but this issue will remain unresolved and he will never ask, given the racial and hierarchical conventions that inform his position as white employer. Hence when Tyler has

the geologist intent on 'guarding his heart' (GM, 29) this is not simply a reference to his past illness.

A further play on words, even perhaps further evidence of Tyler playing games with her readership, is her naming of the maid. Not only does this acknowledge the significance of naming in black culture, where the maid's sisters were named for colours and her brothers for presidents. By calling her central character Maroon, 'an ugly, awkward name so unfortunately suited to her face' (GM, 33) she is alluding to maroonage, the formation of isolated, semi-independent, self-governing Southern communities of escaped slaves. The irony here, of course, is that Maroon is entrapped, even marooned, within the household of the geologist, yet the antagonism between them is muted and their relationship remains unresolved, hence the final sentence: 'As always she lays a hand on his pillow when she passes, wishing him good night ... unanswered questions echoing on and on long after she has departed' (GM, 33). In her depiction of the complexities of this relationship, then, Tyler moves on from the more stereotypical relationship she had set up between white employer and black employee in 'The Common Courtesies', written seven years earlier. In the earlier story, the sole role of Miss Lorna's maid Ida, who 'was colored but her heart was in the right place' (CC, 121), was to be literally supportive, to mend her mistress's chair while 'humming beneath her breath' (CC, 122). Now in the later story, racial issues are more complicated. In a sense the 'play' here is in Tyler's refusal to accept clear-cut categorisation with regard to issues concerning white responses to race.



However, Tyler's depiction of race in 'Uncle Ahmad'<sup>47</sup> is more problematic than that in 'The Geologist's Maid'. It depicts another magician, a visitor from Iran staying with his nephew's family. In his presence, the family 'took on the expectant trustful look of children at a magic show, waiting to be dazzled' and the children felt fearful that 'he might have vanished in the night' (UA, 7). Tyler presents him as 'some sort of genie' (UA, 7), a 'suntanned Mr Clean' with 'arms folded across his chest' wearing expensive ivory silk shirts 'blousing at the cuffs and waist and open nearly to the navel' (UA, 7). The vitality of this visitor from Iran is such that in his presence 'the house had grown fuller' (UA, 5); 'everything he did was touched with some exotic yellow light' (UA, 7). It is evident that here Tyler is employing rather than undermining the sorts of stereotypes of oriental mystery which informed Said's<sup>48</sup> constructions of Otherness, also written in the seventies. A further connection is that a review of *Orientalism*<sup>49</sup> is juxtaposed on the same page in the *New York Times Book Review* with Tyler's article 'Please Don't Call It Persia'. The notion of the Orient inhabiting a site of both fear and fantasy informs her rather uneasy representation of Uncle Ahmad, for it is possible to detect a sense of threat within the sense of exotic fascination. She subtly suggests that he takes over the household, enveloping them all. His spicy cologne is almost oppressive and the fumes from his opium pipe, which Elizabeth tries to mask 'with a can of Glade so the children won't notice' (UA, 13), invasive. Even his laundry '(ribbed underwear of navy and brown and other surprising colors)' (UA, 10) tinted everyone else's. Here 'tinted' clearly has connotations of tainted and Tyler implies that this influence might be less than benign. That she has been exercised by her representation of Uncle Ahmad is evident from changes in

the manuscript. She has Elizabeth, his nephew's wife, articulate her first impressions and there is an alteration in the manuscript from 'She felt caged, encased' to 'She felt encased, protected' (UA, 3). However, even though a sense of entrapment is not made explicit, for whatever reason '[s]he was dying for him to go' (UA, 15) and her relationship with Uncle Ahmad has obviously soured. Indeed an indication of this change is that he calls her Elizabeth, inserted in the manuscript for the more affectionate Lizzie-jun. Hence in the final sentence Tyler points up the ambiguous dialectic between the fearsome yet mysterious Other: 'She had never known till now that people who are larger than life become that way by taking chunks of other people's lives, so they are missed forever afterward like an arm, or a leg, or a piece of a heart' (UA, 16). The 'yellow as an onion' (UA, 3) Uncle may have enriched the Ardavi household - but at a cost.

A more successful engagement with cultural difference is 'Your Place is Empty',<sup>50</sup> where another visitor from the Middle East, thinking about her son's American household, comes to the conclusion that 'language is not really all that necessary' (YP, 47). Again this story carries within it a mistrust of the transparency of language. In addition, linguistic and cultural eccentricities merge and, while reflecting upon 'the foreign' in terms of communication, Tyler also addresses differences in cultural practice, suggesting that one culture's 'normality' is another culture's 'eccentricity'.<sup>51</sup> The title suggests the sense of emptiness experienced by the mother-in-law when it becomes obvious to her that she has 'lost' her son, Hassan, to American culture. He has married a woman who would be 'recognised as an American the world over' (YP, 45) and her grand-daughter 'was a foreigner forever' (YP, 51). At first she fails to

recognise her son, 'a stranger blocked her path' (YP, 45), indeed 'the competence with which he parked the car ... put him firmly on ... the American side' (YP, 46). In the household the old lady, a devout Muslim, takes over the cooking of supper, so 'the top of the dishwasher was curlicued with the yellow dye from saffron' (YP, 48) and insists on laundering her clothes separately, as the 'automatic dryer was also unclean' (YP, 48). She considers this 'normal'; her daughter-in-law disagrees. Tensions increase, climaxing when, as she is de-cluttering the kitchen as a coping strategy, she dislodges a tin her mother-in-law has brought from Persia. The 'cloud of insects' which fly out is an image for the pent-up tension between the two women and this precipitates the mother-in-law's return home. There is a comic use of cultural difference as the old woman is persuaded that it is the custom in America to have house-guests for three months only.

So the mother-in-law returns to Iran, retaining her difference, 'securely kerchiefed and shawled' and 'undeniably a foreigner' (YP, 54). What is significant is that, during her stay, she has been both inside and outside American culture. She enjoys imagining the private lives of people in the park or supermarket and the public lives of television characters. Here she realises that 'American days were tightly scheduled' (YP, 46). However, she has maintained her piece of Persia in her own room, where her own days are punctuated by morning, noontime and evening prayers: 'East was where the window was ... On the east wall she hung a lithograph of the Caliph Ali and a colour snapshot of her third son Babak'. The clutter of this personal space is as comforting 'as her shawl' and '[s]he had built up layers of herself on every surface-tapestries ... gilt-framed pictures of saints ... little plants in orange and

aqua ... bottles of medicine' (YP, 52). She therefore conforms to the expectations of her own cultural norms, unlike Uncle Ahmad who is interesting in that he demonstrates a kind of 'second layer' eccentricity. By not conforming to the conventions of his own foreignness, he is eccentric both without and within his culture. He deviates from Moslem 'normality' and flirts with notions of Americanisation, wanting a coat like his nephew's and displaying a weakness for ingenious tools and utensils. He flaunts accepted orthodoxy by drinking Scotch by the quart and ordering sausage pizzas during Ramadan.

By suggesting that cultural boundaries can be crossed in this way Tyler questions their fixity and suggests that the parameters of 'otherness' shift according to dominant cultural discourses. As the mother-in-law says, 'This business of being a foreigner was something changeable. Boundaries kept shifting and sometimes it was she who was the foreigner but at other times Elizabeth or even Hassan' (YP, 51). This undermines any notion of culture as monolithic and suggests how shifting boundaries will become important 'within' a culture. A metaphor for this shifting is sited in the cultural artefacts the mother-in-law wants to take back in order to reveal to her sisters what life in America is like: 'three empty urn-shaped wine bottles, the permanent-press sheets from her bed, and a sample bottle of detergent that had come in yesterday's mail' (YP, 54). It is significant that in the manuscript Tyler has inserted 'urn-shaped' to describe the wine bottles as their very shape undermines their Americanness.

'Your Place is Empty' was mentioned by Judith Jones in the letter referred to earlier where she rejects Tyler's agent's idea of publishing a collection of

short stories: 'And after long and careful deliberation I'm afraid that I don't think he's right'.<sup>52</sup> She seems to want more variety with 'each and every story providing something new for your readers ... a book that reflects the range of your talent, takes some risks, reveals some surprises about you as a writer maybe'.<sup>53</sup> Consequently three of the four stories she does value are, in a sense, 'surprising' in that Tyler plays 'unfamiliar' games or points up the ludic possibilities of language:

Four, I believe, are superb, the kinds of stories that leave one with something lasting, as though one had entered into an experience and would never be quite the same for it. And they are all longer, more fully developed stories: "Your Place is Empty", "Half-Truths and Semi-Miracles", "A Knack for Languages" and "The Geologist's Maid".<sup>54</sup>

Arguably, however, 'Half-Truths and Semi-Miracles'<sup>55</sup> differs from the other three in that the 'game' it plays seems familiar and again provides a 'finger exercise' for her novels. In this story the protagonist, Susanna Meagan, becomes a spiritual healer, yet is unable to save the life of her own child. Because of this, she begins to distrust her faith and engages in a battle with God until another healer suggests in a 'half-truth' that any healing power is not divine but originates within the sick people themselves. In terms of both form and content it is possible to detect pre-echoes of later longer fiction. This is most obvious in *Searching for Caleb* published a year later, when Mrs Milsom cannot cure Arthur's headaches, and in *The Accidental Tourist* (1992), which concerns the death of a son. Furthermore, her interest in representing the eccentric is also present in this text. The central character's seemingly supernatural powers might appear to render her extraordinary, but Tyler's description carefully undercuts any such classification:

Maybe they expect me to be tall and blond and beautiful, maybe in a white robe or something chiffon, loose and floating. The fact is ... I generally wear a nice flowered dress and a string of pearls. When I am working out at the church, I add an Orlon cardigan. Wouldn't you call that ordinary? (HT, 264)

In addition the very title suggests a blurring of borders and a distrust of fixity and absolutes.

Jones' letter, then, was an important document with regard to the publication of the short stories. However, the issue of publication has continued to simmer. Jones has suggested that *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant* 'might be done along with some of the best of your short stories. Maybe you noticed that a number of reviewers seemed to express the hope that someday there would be a volume of short stories from you and this might be a good way of doing it'.<sup>56</sup> Five years later, prompted by a conversation with John Updike, she asks whether Tyler would like her 'to take a look again at what you have and try to figure how much it would take to make a nice little collection'.<sup>57</sup> However, a collection has never been published and Tyler's responses as to why seem to suggest that she will no longer consider this: 'there are only four or five that I consider to be any good'.<sup>58</sup> In fact her output dwindled to seven stories between 1978 and 1991 because she does not 'get so absorbed in the process as when I spend months and years on a novel'.<sup>59</sup> After *Dinner At The Homesick Restaurant* she gradually gave up writing short stories altogether, with two exceptions; 'Teenage Wasteland'<sup>60</sup> and 'A Woman Like a Fieldstone House',<sup>61</sup> discussed in Chapter 2. 'Teenage Wasteland' is a bleak and somewhat humourless short story, almost a cautionary tale, in which a guilt-ridden mother agonises about her role in her son's change from

a small boy with an endearing cowlick to a troubled and rebellious adolescent who, despite the efforts of a liberal counsellor, runs away from home. Her more recent practice has been to extract chapters from her longer fiction for publication in journals.<sup>62</sup>

*Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant*, then, can be viewed as a pivotal text in terms of Tyler's writing, in that it can be read both as a novel and a series of short stories; hence Jones' suggestion referred to above. According to Updike, '[t]he plot ... moves its extensive cast agilely along, with flashback and side glance, through ten chapters that are each rounded like a short story'.<sup>63</sup> Similarly Betts alleges that '[l]ast month by accident I met Anne Tyler's mother Phyllis who told me every titled chapter in *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant* had been designed so it could be published as a short story'.<sup>64</sup> Adam Mars-Jones endorses this when he suggests that there is a 'certain forced poignancy' at the endings of chapters, 'perhaps because each section is constructed as a self-contained short story, and demands its own emotional release'.<sup>65</sup> More importantly, the novel is pivotal, providing the starting point for the next phase in Tyler's writing.

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1 Anne Tyler, 'Olives out of a Bottle' (discussion with Anne Tyler at Duke), reprinted in Alice Hall Petry, ed., *Critical Essays on Anne Tyler*, New York: G.K. Hall, 1992, 34.

2 Betts acknowledges the influence of Eudora Welty in this respect: 'At Duke Tyler's favourite author ... was Eudora Welty, more a short story writer than a novelist, whose effects are often wrought less from event than from plumbing the depth of her characters and their memories', Doris Betts, 'The Fiction of Anne Tyler', *Southern Quarterly*, Volume XXI, Summer 1983: 23.

3 I have chosen not to discuss these stories in chronological order but as and when appropriate to the central argument, which concerns the relationship between

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- the short stories and playfulness/play and also the distinction between familiar and unfamiliar games.
- 4 Clifford A. Ridley, 'Anne Tyler: A Sense of Reticence Balanced by "Oh, Well, Why Not?"', reprinted in Petry, ed., 27.
- 5 Robert W. Croft, *Anne Tyler: A Bio-Bibliography*, Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 126.
- 6 Letter to Ann Hurford from Anne Tyler, 19 February 1997.
- 7 In the seventies Tyler was involved with the Nelson Algren Award and the PEN fiction project.
- 8 Anne Tyler, 'The New Improved Short Story', *National Observer*, Volume 15 Part 7, August 1976: 17.
- 9 Paul Bail, *Anne Tyler: A Critical Companion*, Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1998, 6. In his review of the collection, Robert Taylor states that Tyler's introduction is 'irresistible in its delight in short story form', 'Short in length, long in strength', *Boston Globe*, 12 October 1983, and Anatole Broyard commends her approach, 'Her choices are strongly coloured by her tastes which ... is better than trying to make "disinterested" or "objective" decisions', *New York Times*, 30 September 1983 (DU).
- 10 'If I had, in a day dream, wished for the perfect review of my work it would have begun and ended in the way yours does', letter to Anne Tyler from Shannon Ravenel, 11 November 1986 (DU).
- 11 Shannon Ravenel, ed., *Best of the South*, Chapel Hill: Algonquin Books, 1996, x.
- 12 Anne Tyler, 'Laura', *Archive*, March 1959 (DU).
- 13 Elizabeth Evans, *Anne Tyler*, New York: Twayne, 1993, 28.
- 14 'As the Earth Gets Old', *New Yorker*, 29 October 1966: 60-64.
- 15 'The Common Courtesies', *McCall's*, June 1968, reprinted in *Prize Stories 1969: The O. Henry Awards*, William Abrahams, ed., Garden City: Doubleday, 1969, 121-30.
- 16 Charlotte Emory's mother in *Earthly Possessions* (1977) is also confined to a chair because of her size.
- 17 'The Feather Behind the Rock', *New Yorker*, 12 August 1967: 26-30.
- 18 See Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, New York: Hill and Wang, 1974.
- 19 Tyler uses this strategy again in *Earthly Possessions*.
- 20 This is early evidence of Tyler's interest in the random nature of past experience and its inter-relationship with the present.



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- 21 Anon, 'Two Renowned Authors Express Novel Ideas', *The Chronicle*, 12 December 1982, 1 (DU).
- 22 'Olives out of a Bottle', in Petry, ed., 34. Such a statement needs to be taken seriously as Tyler has seemingly adhered to this for more than a decade.
- 23 See Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, Austin: University of Texas Press, 1991.
- 24 Anne Tyler, 'Because I Want More Than One Life', reprinted in Petry, ed., 45.
- 25 Marguerite Michaels, 'Anne Tyler, Writer 8:05 to 3:30', reprinted in Petry, ed., 41.
- 26 'The Bride in the Boatyard', *McCall's*, June 1972: 93, 126-128.
- 27 Petry, ed., 33.
- 28 'Believable Lies', manuscript, 1975 (DU).
- 29 Petry, ed., 44. Relatedly a BBC Radio Three programme on Tyler, broadcast on 4 September 1982, was entitled *Convincing Lies*, letter to Anne Tyler from Louise Purslow, 14 July 1982 (DU).
- 30 'Linguistics', *Washington Post Magazine*, 12 November 1978, page references to manuscript (DU).
- 31 The short story box contains 'first sentences' as well as 'details', Petry, ed., 41.
- 32 'A Knack for Languages', *New Yorker*, 13 January 1975: 32-37.
- 33 Quoted in Bail, 9.
- 34 Letter to Anne Tyler from Judith Jones, 24 December 1974 (DU).
- 35 'With All Flags Flying', *Redbook* 137, June 1971, reprinted in *Prize Stories 1969: The O. Henry Awards*, William Abrahams, ed., Garden City: Doubleday, 1969: 121-30.
- 36 'The Artificial Family', *Southern Review*, Summer 1975: 615-21.
- 37 'Holding Things Together', *New Yorker*, 24 January 1977: 30-33.
- 38 Letter to Anne Tyler from Judith Jones, 2 April 1975 (DU).
- 39 This is evident in the different re-visitations of the archery incident in *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant* (1982).
- 40 Petry takes issue with the ending of *Earthly Possessions*: 'A change in attitude, after all, can indeed make a situation bearable, but it does not change the situation in the least. What was meant to be a "happy" resolution to *Earthly Possessions* is thus oddly unsettling', Alice Hall Petry, in Dale Salwak, ed., *Anne Tyler as Novelist*, Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1994, 38.
- 41 Letter to Anne Tyler from Judith Jones, 2 April 1975 (DU).
- 42 'Laps', *Parents*, August 1981: 66-67+, page references to manuscript.

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- 43 Croft, 60.
- 44 Tyler revealed in an interview in 1997 that her favourite short stories include 'Your Place' and 'Uncle Ahmad' because they touch upon 'the Iranian side' of her life, Bail, 9.
- 45 'The Geologist's Maid', *New Yorker*, 28 July 1975: 29-33.
- 46 I agree with Petry that '[b]ut even as one acknowledges that Tyler avoids facing the complexities of Southern racism ... Tyler has evinced increasingly more concern with the capacity of blacks to survive and thrive in a hostile world', Alice Hall Petry, 'Bright Books of Life: the Black Norm in Anne Tyler's Novels', *Southern Quarterly*, Volume XXXI, No 1, Fall 1992, 13.
- 47 'Uncle Ahmad', *Quest/77*, November-December 1977: 76-82, page references to manuscript.
- 48 Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*, New York: Pantheon Books, 1979.
- 49 J.H. Plumb, 'Looking East in Error', *New York Times Book Review*, 18 February 1979: 3. For revisions of Said's ideas see Patrick Williams ed., *Edward Said*, London: Sage, 2001.
- 50 'Your Place is Empty', *New Yorker*, 22 November 1976: 45-54.
- 51 'Tyler's own Iranian mother-in-law provided the "seed" of the story', Croft, 24.
- 52 Letter to Anne Tyler from Judith Jones, 2 April 1975 (DU).
- 53 Letter, 2 April 1975.
- 54 Letter, 2 April 1975.
- 55 'Half-Truths and Semi-Miracles', *Cosmopolitan*, December 1974: 264-6, 269-302.
- 56 Letter to Anne Tyler from Judith Jones, 29 May 1980 (DU).
- 57 Letter to Anne Tyler from Judith Jones, 12 December 1985 (DU).
- 58 Bail, 9.
- 59 Quoted in Croft, 76.
- 60 'Teenage Wasteland', *Seventeen*, November 1983: 145, 167-169.
- 61 'A Woman Like a Fieldstone House' in *Louder than Words: 22 Authors Donate New Stories to Benefit Share Our Strength's Fight Against Hunger, Homelessness and Illiteracy*, William Shore, ed., New York: Vintage, 1989.
- 62 Chapter 5 of *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant* was published in Harper's as 'The Country Cook', March 1982: 54-62; the funeral in *Breathing Lessons* became 'Rerun' in the *New Yorker*, 4 July 1988: 20-32; and Doug Bedloe's chapter in *Saint Maybe* became 'People Who Don't Know the Answers' in the *New Yorker*, 26 August 1991: 26-36.

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63 John Updike, 'On Such a Beautiful Green Little Planet', reprinted in Petry, ed.,  
109.

64 Betts, 36.

65 Adam Mars-Jones, 'Family Mealtimes', *Times Literary Supplement*, 29 October  
1982 (*DU*).

## CHAPTER 5

### **From (eccentric) boundary-line to (liminal) threshold: *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant* and *The Accidental Tourist***

'Well I've joked around families long enough; let me tell you now what I really believe about them' (Anne Tyler)<sup>1</sup>

The epigraph to this chapter sums up what Tyler thought she was doing in her ninth novel, *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant*, published in 1982. Although any judgement by an author on her own work needs to be approached with caution, this one does have some validity. Up to and including *Morgan's Passing* (1980) Tyler had indeed, to an extent, 'joked around', by placing eccentric individuals in family situations. *Dinner*<sup>2</sup> comes at a point of transition in her writing career. She now moves on from the representations of eccentricity that had formerly provided the main vehicle for her exploration of the domestic and the familial. Indeed reviews of the novel also suggest that Tyler's fiction changes after *Morgan's Passing*. Benjamin DeMott in the *New York Times Book Review*<sup>3</sup> makes a trenchant comment when he refers to *Dinner* as 'a border crossing'.<sup>4</sup>

I also want to contend that Tyler has progressed beyond the limits of the 'jokey' to a more rigorous view of family life. However, it is not only her tone that has changed and here DeMott's evocation of 'border', in the sense of boundary, is crucial. In the texts which preceded *Dinner*, Tyler's representations of eccentricity questioned the ideological definitions which

underpin cultural constructs of the familial. In the first three Southern-based published texts, *If Morning Ever Comes*, *The Tin Can Tree* and *A Slipping-Down Life*, eccentricity is articulated 'benignly' through celebratory and indulgent manifestations of eccentric behaviour enacted by a cast of quirky, lovable individual characters. The fourth text, *The Clock Winder*, marks a transition where Tyler moves on from portraying the eccentric individual to the eccentric family and informs the domestic dynamics and tensions of this family with the recurrent motif of the opposition between order and clutter.

As discussed in Chapter 3, in the next phase, from *Celestial Navigation* through *Searching for Caleb* and *Earthly Possessions* to *Morgan's Passing*, Tyler's representation of eccentricity becomes more complex and her model is less benign. Jeremy Pauling in *Celestial Navigation* is her first fully developed eccentric character and, through his depiction, in the first text in this phase, she draws attention to the double-edged nature of this loss of benignity. The dominant perception of aberrant behaviour as a threat to be removed through reintegration is placed alongside a more radical position which exposes the limitations of judgemental classification. She takes up the latter position in the next two texts, where her characterisations of Justine Peck and Charlotte Emory transgress the parameters of conventional maternal behaviour. Tyler's next novel, *Pantaleo*, remains unpublished, and its failure to question effectively the boundaries of individual difference marks the beginnings of a crisis in her representation of eccentricity. In spite of this Tyler returns to a central male eccentric in *Morgan's Passing* and it is in this text that the sense of crisis becomes increasingly evident. The novel lacks the interrogative quality of the earlier texts, neither calling into question the parameters of the

maternal nor suggesting the positives of either maintaining or transgressing the boundary-line between normal and eccentric behaviour.

Tyler's distrust of eccentricity, and the crisis in its representation that resulted, led to a change in emphasis. The concept of 'boundary', which presupposes a distinction between behaviour that is considered 'normal' and behaviour that does not conform to conventional expectations as 'eccentric', is recast as 'threshold'. This recasting, while retaining the idea of marginal edge, loses connotations of enclosure, of clear limits and definite classification. In a sense there is an 'opening up' of boundary-lines. Subsequently Tyler becomes more concerned in her writing with the idea of such supposed distinctions as liminal thresholds, a concept freighted with a different set of meanings involving beginnings and shifting, permeable transitional space. This, less definite, categorisation had been anticipated, to some extent, in her short stories concerning cultural difference. The mother-in-law in 'Your Place is Empty' (1976) reflects that 'this business of being a foreigner was something changeable. Boundaries kept shifting and sometimes it was she who was the foreigner but at other times Elizabeth or even Hassan' (YP, 51). The implication here that cultural boundaries can be (re-)crossed and parameters of 'otherness' can be displaced according to dominant cultural discourses brings to mind the theories concerning transitional space, which have characterised the work of the anthropologist Victor Turner. Such theories shed light on an analysis of Tyler's change in emphasis<sup>5</sup> in the shift that now becomes characteristic of her work.

Turner's work on liminality prioritises rites of passage; the rituals that celebrate changes of state, whether physical, like birth or death, or social, like

marriage or retirement and which, paradoxically, in terms of life experience, involve both the movement of passage and the stasis of repeated, learnt symbolic rituals. Turner follows Van Gennep, who in *Les Rites de Passage* (1909), defined such rites as those 'which accompany every change of place, state, social position and age'.<sup>6</sup> Van Gennep also identified three phases in their evolution: separation from the flow of activities of the initial phase, entry into a margin or limen, and aggregation into a new state. For both Van Gennep and Turner, then, the limen is very significant. It is the interstitial stage marking a condition of transition. However, Turner adds a synchronic dimension, where threshold moment is also threshold place. He sites the liminal stage as a zone to inhabit 'betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention and ceremonial'.<sup>7</sup> Here the temporal, informed by the spatial, becomes a state in itself: 'While for Van Gennep the limen is always a threshold, for Turner it can also be a place of habitation'.<sup>8</sup>

In this representation, liminality constitutes a 'semantic molecule with many components',<sup>9</sup> and this multi-faceted concept serves to illuminate how Tyler, in *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant* and *The Accidental Tourist*, opens up and re-configures (eccentric) boundary-lines as (liminal) thresholds. In these two texts, a change of emphasis occurs where the limen, or middle phase, in Turner's three-tier model, is fundamental. The limen can be mapped as both place and threshold. Here moving into the limen involves experiencing a didactic process. It is a place of instruction where enquiry and evaluation lead to understanding and characters learn to adjust. In the case of Tyler these adjustments centre upon the characters' understanding of the maternal and the familial. Hence it can also act as a threshold into a next stage; that of

reaggregation, as Turner phrases it. In fact it is at this stage that this model is less useful when applied to Tyler, as will be discussed later.

However, representations of the 'boundaries' of eccentricity do not completely disappear as the 'thresholds' of liminality emerge. In three novels after this transition stage, Tyler reverts to the 'jokey', in what can be referred to as the eccentric set-piece, which becomes a terrain for the interaction of eccentric characters and the manifestation of quirky behaviour. In *Breathing Lessons*, Maggie and Ira Moran travel to Deer Lick to the funeral of Max Gill, which his widow, Serena, a girlhood friend of Maggie, decides to recreate as their wedding. This involves inviting 'all the friends we had when Max and I were courting' (B, 56) and persuading them to read from *The Prophet* and sing early sixties' love songs. As Serena says, 'What's the point of sitting in that church ... listening to Mrs. Filbert tinkle out gospel hymns on the piano? ... I'd rather have 'My Prayer' as played by Sissy Parton at our wedding. So then I thought, Why not all of it? Kahil Gibran? 'Love Is a Many Splendored Thing?'" (B, 58). In *Saint Maybe*, the children whom Ian Bedloe has elected to care for in an attempt to atone for his guilt because of his involvement in their father's death, attend Camp Second Chance, because of Ian's involvement with the religion of the same name. Here comic characters emerge, like the Reverend Emmett, who founded a church without symbols in his garage, and Sister Audrey, 'a big, soft pale teenager in tight cutoffs and a tank top which showed her bra straps ... who had a baby when she wasn't married and put it in a Dempster Dumpster and was now atoning for her sin' (SM, 136), and the children of the church engage in activities which include Juice Time, Devotions, Crafts and Morning Swim.



In these set pieces Tyler is making fun of religious practices. The rerun of the wedding<sup>10</sup> points up how meaningless traditional funerals can be and the children's club comically epitomises the oddities of an alternative religion which stresses good works and the avoidance of sugar. However, in these representations of eccentricity, her touch is light. There is no sense here that her primary concern is to call into question the boundaries between appropriate and inappropriate behaviour, between the normal and the not normal. Rather, she is exploiting the comic possibilities of quirky situations. There is a further example of this in *Ladder of Years* where Bay Day marks the anniversary of George Pendle Bay's dream to desert and found the town. This is celebrated with a picnic and a baseball game that always takes place in a fog: 'Vanessa fed her son another animal cracker. "Fog on Bay Day is a kind of a rule here", she told Delia. "I don't believe anyone's ever once got a good look at that game"' (L, 132).

Although this baseball game is not simply an eccentric set-piece (the significance of the fog will be addressed in Chapter 6), it is not as central as the archery game is in *Dinner*. And, in this respect, the work of another writer on liminality is apposite. Gilliad has viewed the liminal experience as a kind of safety valve. She suggests that it releases tensions in the social structure and, in providing vicarious experience, serves to reify the existing construction of the social sphere. She uses Christ as an example: from being the orphan, bastard, rebel, criminal, heretic, androgyne, initiand and victim, the Christ-figure turns out to be another form of God, Father and Authority.<sup>11</sup> Her argument is informed by the dialectic in Turner between structure and anti-structure that I will return to, but at this point it is her notion of the ludic

qualities of the limen that I want to take up. Gilliad refers to the liminal process as a 'game-space'<sup>12</sup> and a starting point for a discussion of liminality in *Dinner* is an archery incident, which is repeatedly referred to and is arguably the text's central trope.

Here the Tull family engage in a conventional family outing which is Beck's, the father's idea: 'I thought it would be such fun, bring us all together' (D, 312). However, this ends in disaster - a wounding, when Pearl is shot through the shoulder. This incident is re-visited in the memories of individual family members, as a plurality of voices interrelate and contradict each other. Yet these individual 'truths' illuminate the family tensions that Tyler is exploring. For Beck it is 'the very last straw' (D, 12), typifying his failure as husband and father. A week later he leaves 'the grayness' (D, 313) and clutter of family life behind, only to return thirty-five years later to attend his wife's, Pearl's, funeral. In Pearl's version she blames Beck's thoughtlessness which she alleges, with characteristic intensity, 'has shot her through the heart' (D, 27). For her this vindicates Cody, the elder son and culprit, 'who drew the bowstring but that was incidental' (D, 27). The younger son's, Ezra's, memory of the incident is that his repeated apologies had gone unheeded because Cody and Beck had been blamed. Cody's reworking demonstrates that he sees his father both as an embarrassment, in his 'strained-looking brown striped salesman suit' (D, 35), and an irritant. Cody is aware that this is 'an educational experience' (D, 36) involving lectures and criticisms, an attempt at 'moulding him into shape' (D, 36). For Cody his brother Ezra is also an embarrassment and an irritant but, most importantly, a rival. For, incensed by the fact that Ezra gets a bull's eye after he has hit only the edge of the target, Cody aims his second arrow

'longingly at Ezra's fair, ruffled head' (D, 39). It is in the scuffle that ensues that Pearl is wounded. It is also significant that Pearl's wound festers and is resistant to healing, a further indication that the marriage is over.

Arguably Tyler's confidence about the centrality of this incident is suggested by the fact that there are minimal differences between the earliest surviving handwritten version and the published text. However, in the published version Pearl's account does omit a long section concerning Beck's extravagance and vanity:

And he always had to be fully equipped, couldn't stop at the bare essentials - but had to buy a competition-quality bow and steel tipped arrows and a canvas target and even one of those lace-up leather cuffs you wear to protect your inner wrist from the twang of the string. She believed the cuff was what he bought the set for - the swashbuckling, Robin Hood cuff to look so fine on his muscled arm; for when Cody asked to use it Beck was impatient, brushed him off, said it wasn't necessary till Cody got halfway good at shooting.<sup>13</sup>

Making this omission is effective because she has indicated these shortcomings more succinctly earlier in the text, referring to Beck as a 'loud-voiced salesman peering at his reflection with too much interest when he tied his tie in the morning' (D, 7). In addition it shifts the emphasis away from the game itself. In Cody's account Tyler also changes Ezra's response to Cody's accusation 'See what you've gone and done' from 'I didn't do anything, Cody'<sup>14</sup> to "'Did I do that?'" (D, 39) in the published version. The change from a straightforward denial suggests Ezra's confusion over whether he might have wounded his mother and, rather than a simple idea of action, 'Did I do that' suggests a liminal field of interpretation and understanding.

So the archery incident provides a 'game-space', to refer back to Gilliad. In her use of this trope Tyler resists consensual and traditional expectations about the family by raising the question of whether it is possible to construct family life as a game with winners and losers in relation to a set of societal rules which have to be observed. Can the concentric bands of the archery board be viewed as a set of transitional spaces which need to be crossed in order to 'hit the bull's eye' of acceptable family life? Furthermore Gilliad's notion of 'safety valve' is also appropriate, not in the sense of offering a reification of the existing social structure, but in offering family members an opportunity to recast a domestic incident according to their own needs. Clearly in these re-visitations of the archery incident each family member has his or her own agenda.<sup>15</sup> Pearl needs to privilege her children at the expense of her husband. Ezra needs to free himself from the dual roles of 'the family stumbler' and 'his mother's favourite' (D, 123). And Cody needs to impress his father and gain ascendancy over his brother.

Moreover, this notion of transitional space in the text has resonances of Turner's model of liminality. He characterises liminal entities as 'being reduced or ground down to a uniform condition to be fashioned anew and endowed with additional powers to enable them to cope with their new station in life'.<sup>16</sup> The implication here is that the ability to survive is predicated on the experience of loss. This suggests a bifurcation within the liminal state where 'reduced and ground down' suggests vulnerability, yet 'endowed with additional powers' implies strength. In *Dinner* Tyler's characters inhabit a liminal state within the family. This involves the interrelationship between the

poles of a dialectic which characterises the limen as both dangerous and salutary, a zone where initial exposure leads to understanding via instruction.

Hence, at the very beginning of the text, Pearl Tull implies that motherhood is a dangerous place, effectively a liminal terrain. Having decided to have a second child after the illness of her first, 'she was more endangered than ever' (D, 2). And this sense of danger goes further than fear of loss. For Pearl it is based on the unfamiliarity of the transitional phase she finds herself in. To quote Gullette: 'Tyler saw that motherhood was not in every case a happy instinct, a gift of the life course. For some it comes as a curse'.<sup>17</sup> Hence Pearl feels that the rules of motherhood elude her: 'she gazes wistfully at other families and wonders what their secret is. They seem so close. Is it that they're more religious? Or stricter, or more lenient? Could it be the fact that they participate in sports? Read books together? Have some common hobby?' (D, 191). This unfamiliarity - exposing and seeking understanding - is intensified because Pearl's fierce independence and her dislike of outsiders means that she has no one to learn the rules from: 'Oh she'd been an angry sort of mother. She'd been continually on edge; she'd felt burdened, too much alone' (D, 18). She dwelt in the community 'like a visitor from a superior neighbourhood, always wearing her hat when out walking, keeping her doors tightly shut whilst at home' (D, 296). After Beck leaves she closes ranks, wanting outsiders to 'go on believing the Tulls were a happy family' (D, 9). This explains 'one of her rampages' (D, 50) at what she perceives as betrayal and loss of face when she overhears Jenny, her daughter, admiring a friend's dress.

Lacking the magic formula, and aware that all three children were 'closed off from her in some perverse way she could not put her finger on' (D, 21), for Pearl the 'curse of motherhood' leads to abuse: 'Which of her children had not felt her stinging slap, with the claw-encased pearl in her engagement ring that could bloody a lip at one flick' (D, 71). Her experiences engender, as Cody remarks, a 'raving, shrieking, unpredictable witch' (D, 305), not a fairy godmother. In order to cope with this unfamiliar and isolated zone, Pearl uses the ritual of order, where not only does she attempt to seal the family from 'outsiders', she also physically seals up the house: '[s]he had concentrated on making each house perfect - airtight and rustproof and waterproof' (D, 15). Her order demonstrates not only the rigid suppression of feeling that contributed to Beck's departure, but the use of order as a strategy of protection where 'every object would be aligned and squared precisely - the clothing organized by type and colour, whites fading into pastels and then to darks; comb and brush parallel; gloves paired and folded like a pair of clenched fists' (D, 42). Yet 'like a pair of clenched fists' has resonances of tension as well as strength, suggesting that the liminal area she has entered may not permit this construction and that vulnerability persists.

These comments have Cody as focaliser, who uses order himself as a means of surviving his limen where he has to attempt to learn the rules and conventions of brotherhood. However, unlike his mother, his 'order' centres on time rather than space and this is based on, though it goes further than, his job as an efficiency expert: 'Time is my obsession: not to waste it, not to lose it' (D, 230).<sup>18</sup> This preoccupation, freighted with attempts at control, is a strategy to combat what he cannot control - the destructive jealousy which

makes Cody's liminal phase dangerous. As Jenny, his sister, says, 'he's ruining his life with his catalogues' (D, 206). What he is cataloguing are grudges and what he perceives as past injustices, often prefaced by 'this really happened' (D, 226). As the archery incident makes clear, these often involve Ezra, whom Cody has tormented and teased through boyhood. He seems to assume that other people, usually girls, prefer his younger brother. Even after stealing and marrying his brother's fiancée, Cody remains unable to trust Ruth. He even persuades himself that Luke, their son, is Ezra's.

Yet Turner's model helps the reader in recognising that this 'limen' is not only a period of danger but also one of readjustment. As suggested above it is a didactic terrain where there is a need to learn. Significantly it is while Pearl is engaged in the restorative ritual of cleaning and ordering Cody's farmhouse that, reflecting upon motherhood, she enters some sort of threshold of insight and recognition. She reflects upon the triangular relationship between her two sons and Ruth, reassessing her own responsibility: 'Ridiculous, of course, to imagine that anything she did could have mattered' (D, 178). She also undermines the centrality of her role within the family: 'She did make mistakes ... Still, she sometimes has the feeling that it's simply fate, and not a matter for blame at all' (D, 191). As she is dying she sees her children more clearly, acknowledging possible flaws both in her relationship with them and in their personalities: 'They were so frustrating - attractive, likeable people, all three of them, but closed off from her in some perverse way that she couldn't put her finger on. And she sensed a kind of trademark flaw in each of their lives. Cody was prone to unreasonable rages; Jenny was so flippant; Ezra hadn't really lived up to his potential' (D, 21).<sup>19</sup>

Similarly Cody learns to adjust to family life and he becomes less grudging and resentful. The re-emergence of Beck, whom Cody has blamed himself for driving away, and what he learns from this encounter, facilitates this adjustment. His exchange with his father at Pearl's funeral precipitates a more positive perception of family and his mother's place within it. Beck talks about the failed marriage and suggests that his reason for leaving Pearl was that she 'used up' his good points. Yet he also admits that he had returned, years later, to check on the family and Cody's 'carefree' flipping of a paper and catching it had persuaded him that 'you all turned out fine' (D, 313) - and that this was due to Pearl's strength.<sup>20</sup> A revisionary reading of the past now seems possible. In the last year of Pearl's life Ezra had located the journal article she had been searching for, a record of a moment of happiness because she was 'kneeling on such a beautiful green little planet' (D, 287). Cody experiences a similar sense of well-being where the bottle fly Pearl hears 'buzzing in the grass' is recast as 'a little brown airplane ... droning through the sunshine like a bumble bee'. In this epiphanic moment he revisits the painful memory of the archery incident and reconfigures this as a pleasant reverie: 'He remembered the archery trip and it seemed to him now that he even remembered that arrow sailing in its graceful, fluttering path' (D, 314). In this, the last paragraph of the text, he perceives his mother differently: 'He remembers his mother's upright form along the grasses, her hair lit gold'. Here 'upright' suggests strength rather than rigidity, and 'her hair lit gold' (D, 314) sanctifies her as a Madonna rather than demonising her as a witch.

However, neither Pearl nor Cody achieves reaggregation in Turner's sense of an exit from the limen and an entry into a new state. The implication here is



that, having crossed the threshold into the third phase of this 'ritual process', there is no going back. Arguably this reading of threshold is over-schematic and somewhat reductive, informed by two sets of flaws. Firstly it suggests finality, hence Turner's phrase 'the passage is consummated',<sup>21</sup> and that the limen will end. This seems to suggest that there is no possibility that the dangerous/salutary dialectic will persist nor that either further exposure or further instruction will continue. It denies the permeability and fluidity of the liminal threshold, which even suggests the possibility of a crossing back. Furthermore Turner's model implies conformity; that the 'ritual subject' 'is expected to behave in accordance with certain customary norms'.<sup>22</sup> This implies the existence of a set of rules which need to be adhered to. Hence he also refers to reaggregation as reincorporation, with its resonances not only of crossing over but also of being taken over. In essence Turner limits the liminal experience.

Tyler's text resists both the conformity and finality of this construction. Her paradigm of the family subverts the notion that a normal or ideal family can be delineated or that a set of rules needs to be observed in order to achieve a prescribed version of the familial. Furthermore, in *Dinner*, there is no limit to the liminal zone; the threshold to further understanding is indefinite and incomplete and there is no sense of completion. Transition is fluid and the process to further understanding is ongoing through instruction/exposure. The characters gain insight rather than achieve reaggregation. So Cody's conversation with his father helps him to see family life in a less jaundiced way. Consequently, when he sees his family again, 'He felt that they were pulling him toward them - that it wasn't they who were travelling, but Cody

himself' (D, 314). Clearly if Cody is 'travelling' he is still moving towards complete understanding and has not yet arrived. Pearl experiences a nostalgic dream concerning a happy family holiday at Wrightsville Beach, North Carolina, when Beck was 'handsome', Pearl 'graceful' and the children had 'excited, joyous faces'. This prompts her to view this as a heavenly state, imagining how good it would be '[i]f, after dying, they'd open their eyes and find themselves back on that warm sunny sand, everyone young and happy again, those long-ago waves rolling in to shore?' (D, 21). Indeed a similar incident does signal Pearl's death in the text as she is 'borne away to the beach, where the three children ran toward her, laughing across the sunlit sand' (D, 34). Here, at her moment of dying, she is not only outside the confines of home, but, though still defined by her children, on a beach, at the fluid and ever-changing borderland between sand and ocean.

It is productive at this point to return to that game of archery. Although Cody does not achieve reaggregation, in Turner's sense, he comes closer than his younger brother Ezra to achieving the metaphorical bull's eye that symbolises some recognition of family realities. This suggests that there is an irony embedded in the novel because Ezra, who hits the textual bull's eye, has the least insight into family life. He retains a flawed ideal, hence his constant attempts to get the family to eat together. As his sister Jenny says, 'Poor Ezra: he was turning into the family custodian, tending their mother and guarding their past and faithfully phoning his sister for lunch' (D, 205). He seems to remain in a state of stasis, entrapped in the sort of semi-conscious activity that characterised the sleepwalking that led to his discharge from the army. His learning process is somehow stunted; he is aware of, but cannot understand,

the unresolved tension of his position as being central yet peripheral to the family. He maintains a distance, suggesting, perhaps, that the limen for him is a place of danger and exposure from which he withdraws.

And this peripherality informs his organisation of the family dinners that take place in the homesick restaurant of the title. He has reconstructed this restaurant as an ideal home, *outside* the home.<sup>23</sup> As his friend Josiah tells Jenny: 'Ezra's going to have a place where people come just like to a family dinner ... He'll cook them one thing special every day and dish it out on their plates and everything will be solid and wholesome, really homelike' (D, 76). In a text where a character's attitude to food is a signifier of emotional engagement, Ezra is a 'feeder' (D, 166), unlike his mother, a 'nonfeeder', who specialises in tins of spam and added 'jarring extras of her own design such as crushed pineapple in the mashed potatoes' (D, 165). Pearl has never been a proficient cook and it is an example of Tyler's subtle attention to detail that a seemingly insignificant journal entry from 1910 reads: 'I baked a few Scottish Fancies but they wouldn't do to take to a tea' (D, 287), which suggests that Pearl's lack of culinary skills stems from adolescence. In adulthood, her meagre and eccentric meals reveal that she finds the expression of emotion and the acknowledgement of her feelings difficult and unseemly.

Ezra's gifts of food<sup>24</sup> replace emotional relationships because he finds it difficult to engage with others: "I'm worried if I come too close, they'll say I'm overstepping. They'll say I'm pushy, or ... emotional, you know. But if I back off, they might think I don't care. There's this narrow little dividing line I somehow never locate" (D, 128). Ezra's gifts of food provide consolation without demands.<sup>25</sup> This attitude to food also sheds light on Ezra's experience

of being in the liminal phase, where again there is a tension between the centre and the periphery, between involvement and distance. As nurturer he comforts Jenny with 'a mug of hot milk laced with honey, sprinkled over with cinnamon' (D, 74); takes the dying Mrs Scarlatti 'his gizzard soup made with love' (D, 122) and has planned coffee and pastries to fortify the family before Pearl's funeral. Yet, as artist, he maintains a distance from his cooking. With his delivery man, Mr Purdy, he rejoices in his raw material, in the quality and textures of the vegetables he uses: 'Bibb lettuce, Boston lettuce, chicory, escarole, dripping on the counter in the center of the kitchen' (D, 120). He is concerned with arrangement. When Luke runs away from home he finds his uncle piling biscuits: 'He thoughtfully set each biscuit in its place, his large, blunt hands deliberate' (D, 253). And at the funeral dinner 'one of Ezra's masterpieces' is produced, 'pink-centered lamb and bright vegetables - a perfect arrangement of colors and textures' (D, 306).

Now Pearl also has a daughter and it is clear from the papers at Duke that Tyler reworked the character of Jenny. A handwritten chronology suggests more husbands and more children, including a son, Mark, with McKay McKinnon, and a daughter, Alice, with Joe Bynum. A letter from her editor indicates that Jones views these marriages as flaws in the narrative: 'it seems such a shame that you let that part of her story get out of hand, making the succession of husbands and the menagerie of children almost a farce'.<sup>26</sup> That Tyler heeded such editorial advice is made clear from deletions from the manuscript. There is no mention in the published text of the third husband, McKay McKinnon, 'a fat man twice her age at least' who she tells her mother 'had left her over an invisible dog',<sup>27</sup> or the fourth, Joe Bynum, referred to as

'that peculiar father who's tried to kidnap her twice, a regular maniac'.<sup>28</sup> Hence Jones comments in a subsequent letter, 'I'm so grateful that you've worked over the Jenny chapter and followed through by toning down the number of children swarming around her ... Yes, she should put the reader off a bit, and I think you've hit the right balance'.<sup>29</sup>

So how is the reader 'put off' by Jenny? This could be due to the flippancy referred to by Pearl. She too uses distance as a defensive strategy. Determinedly 'jokey', she employs humour in her attempt 'to make it through life on a slant' (D, 219). This attitude comes out of *her* liminal experience. According to Turner, liminality is frequently likened to darkness and eclipse and initially this experience, for Jenny, is similarly dramatic and painful. While trying to reconcile the demands of single motherhood and a career as a young doctor, she breaks down. Again there is a dialectic between exposure and insightful understanding. Jenny experiences the dangers of vulnerability where 'she carried herself as gently as a cup of liquid ... guarding a trembly fluid center' (D, 219),<sup>30</sup> yet learns to protect herself from her former intensity and perfectionism. She re-configures motherhood in an attempt to 're-make herself in order to survive'.<sup>31</sup> Jenny achieves this both professionally and domestically. She is a paediatrician, in a sense a professional mother, yet she diminishes this achievement by referring to herself as 'a baby weigher' (D, 206). She also marries Joe, her third husband, who brings with him protection, 'his padding, his moat, his barricade of children, all in urgent need of her brisk and competent attention' (D, 220). A significant measure of Jenny's success is that, in adulthood, unlike the other members of her family, she does not need to dwell on or re-visit the past by recreating the archery incident. Arguably she

is the most successful at coping with family life - at hitting the bull's eye - and, ironically, without shooting an arrow. Petry supports my view that, in this, Jenny seems to be Tyler's spokesperson.<sup>32</sup> She undermines the sort of conventional wisdom which emphasises the centrality of the family: 'I don't see the need to blame adjustment, broken homes, bad parents, that sort of thing. We make our own luck, right?' (D, 202). Perhaps this sort of refusal to accept the significance of one of the culture's most powerful inscriptions contributes to the possibility that the reader might be 'put off' by this character.

So an exploration of the interaction between Tyler's texts and Turner's anthropological writings, although serving to reveal the possible shortcomings of his model of liminality, does seem fruitful. Furthermore it provides some sort of measure of the strength of Tyler's writing, in that, where his three-tier model can be applied, and where a character does achieve reaggregation, the text is less successful or interesting in this respect. *Earthly Possessions*, a text that precedes *Dinner*, is a case in point. In this novel Charlotte's car journey can be read as a liminal experience. She separates herself from the family circle and home life when she leaves Saul, having stripped herself of her belongings. Indeed Turner states that liminal entities are 'represented as possessing nothing'.<sup>33</sup> She is kidnapped by Jake and pulled into a liminal space between worlds: 'a corridor of private weather' (EP, 5); a space which, according to Turner, is 'neither here nor there'.<sup>34</sup> Charlotte moves around in this threshold area, travelling through it. Ultimately Charlotte is disempowered physically - escaping, but entrapped in a stolen car 'where there was no escape' (EP, 26). However, as previously noted, her spatial journey becomes a temporal one where she re-visits, through memory, her birth and her

mother's belief that she was the wrong child; her childhood and the first kidnapping; marriage and motherhood and the death of her mother. This learning experience in the limen is empowering and enables her to find a new sense of self where she re-writes herself as wife/mother. After this experience Charlotte returns home to her husband and family. If her escape from her past is read as an exit from the limen, then the text ends in reaggregation. Although this return falls short of capitulation, it does undermine the text's former complexities. Hence Victoria Glendinning's review: 'After the very real tensions that have been set up, this mildly upbeat resolution of them seems a little facile'.<sup>35</sup>

### ***The Accidental Tourist***

It is also possible to bring Turner's model of liminality to bear upon an analysis of the novel after *Dinner*, *The Accidental Tourist*, published in 1985. Due to the success of *Dinner* this 'was accompanied with a certain amount of hype: paperback and book club deals netted \$1.3 million before the novel was released'.<sup>36</sup> However, some reviewers suggested that this text marked a return to the 'jokey' representations of eccentricity which had characterised earlier texts. Updike points to a difference in tone: '*The Accidental Tourist* is lighter than its wholly admirable and relatively saturnine predecessor *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant*'<sup>37</sup> and this is also picked up on by Lescaze: 'It's lighter material than *Dinner*; the Learys are too eccentric to pull at the heart as do the Tulls of the earlier novel'.<sup>38</sup>

So does this novel mark a retrogressive step in the development of Tyler's work characterised by a return to earlier representations of eccentricity?

Certainly, as Lescaze's review suggests, Tyler is depicting the Learys as an eccentric family, exploiting the comic possibilities of their behaviour. Lacking the potentially destructive sibling rivalry of the Tulls, they do not 'pull at the heart' in the same way. Rose's alphabetised kitchen where 'you'd find allspice next to the ant poison' (AT, 14) would not have seemed out of place in the early novels. Indeed in *If Morning Ever Comes* Shelley is similarly obsessed with kitchen order: 'she had some sort of phobia about seeing all the canisters were neatly aligned along the counter and all the measuring jugs hung in order on the wall according to size' (IMEC, 138). Moreover Tyler makes the eccentricity of the Learys explicit and has Macon, who has returned to live with his sister and two brothers after he has broken his leg, remark of his boss Julian Edge, 'He's only here because he hopes we'll do something eccentric' (AT, 127). She again seems to be questioning the boundary-line between what is considered normal and what is not. Rose's response to Macon's remark 'We're the most conventional people we know' leads him to reflect, 'This was perfectly true, and yet in some odd way it wasn't' (AT, 127). But this sort of analysis involving classification is not developed and again 'boundary' shifts to 'threshold' and eccentricity imbricates with liminality.

This interplay between eccentricity and liminality becomes apparent in a narrative where the comic aspects of Leary eccentricity become informed with the tragic consequences of the death of a child. This leads Sheppard to applaud the novel as a successful 'comedy of mourning',<sup>39</sup> though the novelist Larry McMurtry disagrees.<sup>40</sup> He suggests that Tyler is 'brilliant at showing how the living press upon another but less convincing when she attempts to add the weight of the dead'.<sup>41</sup> However, Penelope Lively rightly commends her



treatment of death: 'this death is handled with such delicacy and understatement that it pervades the book without ever dominating it'.<sup>42</sup> Indeed the mourning referred to by Sheppard is so significant and so successfully evoked that it provides the trigger for Macon's liminal experience after his son's death.

Macon is mourning for his son Ethan who has been 'murdered in a Burger Bonanza his second night at camp' (AT, 18). The first stage of Turner's model is characterised by separation or 'the detachment of the individual ... from an earlier fixed point in the social structure'<sup>43</sup> and this relates to the grief Macon experiences after this murder. He feels distant both from himself and from others. In conversation with Julian, '[t]he dullness of his voice interested him. He felt strangely distant from himself' (AT, 46). When he first visits Muriel, the woman who has been training his dog and who later becomes his partner, he says, 'And now I'm far from everyone; I don't have any friends anymore and everything looks trivial and foolish and not related to me' (AT, 200). Indeed, in an attempt to rationalise and simplify his sleeping arrangements after his wife Sarah has left him, this separation becomes a literal encasement: 'What he did was strip the mattress of all linens, replacing them with a giant sort of envelope made from one of the seven sheets he had folded and stitched together on the sewing machine' (AT, 11).

In addition, in this he is mimicking death because the 'envelope' becomes the 'Macon Leary Body Bag', a reference to the way dead soldiers were transported back from Vietnam.<sup>44</sup> This can be regarded as what Turner calls 'a mimetic enactment of some dimension of the crisis that brought about the separation'.<sup>45</sup> He is further separated and encased when, as a result of the

malfunction of a pulley system, he breaks his leg and has to return to the Leary household. Here his leg is sealed in plaster and 'sometimes he wished he could stay in his cast forever' (AT, 125). Voelker and Zahlan read this in psychoanalytical terms. Voelker evokes Freud's notion of death instincts and suggests that Macon suffers adult trauma-induced neurosis and regressiveness when Ethan dies. Hence his return to the Leary house, 'in the aftermath of his son's death', is undertaken 'to regress toward the nonliving, to reproduce the corpse in himself'.<sup>46</sup> Zahlan suggests that, while 'encased in plaster', Macon assumes, in Lacanian terms, "the armour of an alienating identity"<sup>47</sup> and that he subsequently journeys through psychic despair to rebirth. Certainly his return home is a type of regression, and his experiences there contribute to a kind of rebirth, but I see this as a quasi-anthropological rather than a psychoanalytical experience. Macon's entry into the Leary household is part of a necessary rite of passage and marks a further and different stage of separation where, in this liminal space, he has to come to terms with grief.

In *Dinner* the archery incident provided the starting point for a discussion of liminality, and, again, Gilliad's notion of a 'game-space' is germane. The game in question in *Accidental Tourist*<sup>48</sup> is 'Vaccination', and significantly this is an indoor rather than an outdoor game, a trope for the insularity and enclosure which is so fundamental to the Leary view of the world. This view is epitomised by playing 'a card game they'd invented as children, which had grown so convoluted over the years that no-one else had the patience to learn it. In fact more than one outsider had accused them of altering the rules to suit the circumstances' (AT, 80). Barbara Harrell Carson refers to these artificial

complications as 'inauthentic' because they result 'not in enlarging webs of relationships, in challenging and potentially generative tangles of connections, but in isolation, inoculating Macon and his brothers and sister against a union with the wives and sisters-in-law who try to learn the game.'<sup>49</sup> Clearly 'inoculating' is a crucial word here. Tyler is suggesting that the family play the game as a strategy of protection, a preventative measure to keep them immune from the contagions of the outside world. Hence their resistance to any sort of change which might undermine their ordered existence. And it is to this Leary world that Macon returns in order to escape from the dangers that have killed his son and the pain this has caused him. Playing 'Vaccination' is one metaphor for the threshold liminal experience Macon is going through and symbolises his need for immunity and the feeling of safety that living with his family gives him. Inhabiting the limen provides a place and a space where he needs to lose his sense of separation and learn to adjust again to the outside world before moving towards possible reaggregation.

Macon experiences, emotionally and literally, the height of this separation at 'the very top of an impossibly tall building' (AT, 157) in New York City:

He saw the city spread far below like a glittering golden ocean ... the sky a purple hollow extending to infinity. It wasn't the height; it was the distance. It was the lonely distance from everyone who mattered ... He had somehow travelled to a point completely isolated from everyone else in the universe, and nothing was real but his own angular hand clenched around a sherry glass. (AT, 160)

Significantly it is at this crisis point that he phones the dog trainer, Muriel Pritchett, the woman who is to play a key role in the learning process which he needs to accomplish. Macon employs Muriel to train Ethan's dog, Edward, but

in the process she also trains him. She tames the dog, which is in need of more control, and invigorates Macon, who is in need of liberation. Indeed Tyler makes this Macon/Edward connection evident and suggests that the dog is also grieving for Ethan, who had 'brushed him, bathed him, wrestled on the floor with him' (AT, 93), and that this explains his new aggressive behaviour: 'Could a dog have a nervous breakdown?' (AT, 27). Learning involves practice, so, on Muriel's advice, '[e]ach morning he and Edward practiced heeling. They would trudge the length of the block, with Edward matching Macon's gait so perfectly that he looked crippled himself' (AT, 124). This practice not only affects the dog's behaviour, it also has an effect on Macon: 'At this uneven, lurching pace he saw much more than he would have otherwise. He had a lengthy view of every bush and desiccated flowerbed' (AT, 109). 'Uneven, lurching pace' suggests that the ordered stability on which he had formerly depended is already being eroded, offering him a change of perspective. A triangular relationship develops between Macon, Muriel and Edward, and Macon becomes less dependent on the safety of the Leary household and the nightly games of 'Vaccination': 'Macon suddenly wished he were at Muriel's. He wrapped his arms around Edward and imagined he smelled her sharp perfume deep in Edward's fur' (AT, 210). Ultimately he does go, with Edward, to live with Muriel in Singleton Street, and this indicates that they can both adapt to a very different neighbourhood. Edward no longer attacks other dogs and Macon is no longer threatened by an environment that is potentially dangerous.

Muriel's training has worked, and Macon's liminal experience has led to re-adjustment, as it did for Pearl, Cody and Jenny Tull in *Dinner*. As referred to

before, in the earlier text the didactic dimension of inhabiting the limen involved a dialectic between the dangerous and the salutary. However, a liminal reading of *Accidental Tourist* involves a further dialectic which again rests on Turner. He asserts that the limen is a place where two major models for human interrelatedness, 'structure' and 'communitas', are juxtaposed and interact. Here the order and hierarchy of structure alternates with the relatively undifferentiated model which he refers to as 'communitas'.<sup>50</sup> In this process, '[c]ommunitas breaks in through the interstices of structure in liminality; at the edges of structure, in marginality'.<sup>51</sup> Thus the structures of everyday life are both elaborated and, more importantly, challenged.

This interaction can be applied to Macon's experience, and here Muriel's role is more potent than simply being a 'trainer' who advocates practice. The Learys represent those aspects of structure which, as an agent of 'communitas', she needs to challenge. She 'breaks in through the interstices of structure' and initiates the dialectical process Macon needs to experience in order to come to terms with the loss of his son. In this sense Muriel, as an agent of learning, offers the possibility of moving towards a preferable and more valuable way of life. And Tyler makes this sense of threshold literal when Macon first visits her. At the entrance to her flat he says, 'I lost my son' (AT, 199) out loud for the first time, and her response to this is critical: 'She took one of his wrists very gently and drew him into the house, still not fully opening the door, so that he had a sense of slipping through something, of narrowly evading something. She closed the door behind him' (AT, 200). Here, by crossing the threshold of her house, he is 'slipping through' into a different place and space. And this place undermines the binary opposition between

domestic and non-domestic space as he is pulled *in* into the limen rather than *out* into the limen. Subsequently this results in a process of 'narrowly evading' the Leary configuration of 'structure' which has stifled and entrapped him. A nexus of conservatism, rigidity and order is challenged by a nexus of possibility, openness and clutter.

It is fruitful to return now to the game of 'Vaccination', one of the Leary family rituals referred to by Carroll: 'Almost from birth lacking the stability of a biogenetic family, the Learys share a strong need to perform the rituals of their clan'.<sup>52</sup> Rituals had provided stability since a 'glassed in' childhood where, prematurely adult, the children lived with their grandparents, having been left by their mother, the 'giddy' Alicia. A childhood portrait anticipates the rigidity and chilliness towards others that they will take to adulthood: 'They all had a distinct centre groove from nose to upper lip' and wear 'an expression so guarded and suspicious' (AT, 67). These suspicions lead to an inclination to stay at home, which means that family members suffer a kind of 'geographical dyslexia' and become completely disorientated when they leave the house: 'None of them ever stepped outside without obsessively noting all available landmarks, clinging to a fixed and desperate mental map of the neighbourhood' (AT, 116-7). They become increasingly conservative and resistant to change: 'they don't believe in ballpoint pens or electric typewriters or automatic transmissions ... in hello and goodbye' (AT, 138). As Macon's estranged wife Sarah critically remarks, 'You're like something in a capsule' (AT, 142). However, on a trip back from San Francisco, his fellow passenger, Lucas Loomis, views this attitude positively: 'I say, "Going with the Accidental Tourist is like going in a capsule, a cocoon"' (AT, 253). In fact it is the purpose

of Macon's travel guides to provide information for businessmen who are reluctant to travel and want to feel at home when they are abroad. Hence the appropriateness of the winged armchair logo he uses, referred to by his boss Julian: 'While armchair travellers dream of going places ... travelling armchairs dream of staying put' (AT, 89).<sup>53</sup>

So a rigid conservatism is central to the cluster of values that characterise the 'structure' from which Macon needs to be released. And again Tyler effectively uses the opposition between order and clutter by suggesting that the persistence of this conservatism depends on the maintenance of order. Hence Rose needs her alphabetised kitchen, Porter urges Macon to return to work for the family Bottle Cap company (significantly an anachronism in the days of Coca Cola cans) 'for symmetry's sake' (AT, 79), and Charles has to classify Muriel: 'she's not your type of woman' (AT, 248). Macon himself, like Pearl Tull in *Dinner*, uses order as a defensive, coping strategy. After Ethan's death he mows the lawn and rearranges his tools; after Sarah leaves, organising the house 'gave him a sense of warding off a danger' (AT, 46). However, again like Pearl, this strategy fails and his vulnerability persists.

Ironically, it is Macon's dream about Grandfather Leary, the patriarch of the family who had epitomised Leary order, which anticipates the challenging approach of 'communitas'. At the end of his life the grandfather's dementia prompted him to create an imaginary island, Lassaque, and to invent things like a motorised radio and a floating telephone (AT, 147). This clearly makes the old man happy; as Rose says 'he's having the richest and most ... colourful time of his life' (AT, 147). Although this acknowledgement had little effect on Rose's own limited attitude to life, the memory of his grandfather

evokes a new sense of possibility for Macon. Meeting with Muriel intensifies this and her suggestion that 'You can take protection too far' (AT, 97) begins a process that ultimately leads him to reassess the effect the cocoon of order has had on him. He has protected himself from other people both professionally and personally. On his research trips abroad he has taken his own advice and barricaded himself on plane seats with his bag and coat while reading *Miss MacIntosh, My Darling* 'as protection against strangers' (AT, 31).<sup>54</sup> Macon has felt physically alienated from others; he 'wondered why it was that outsiders' skin felt so unreal - almost waxy, as if there were an invisible layer between him and them' (AT, 48). It is significant then, that his first physical encounter with Muriel, not long after he has crossed the threshold of her doorway, begins a process of change and the 'invisible layer' seems to disappear. He feels her Caesarean scar and realises that she seemed to be saying, '*We're all scarred. You are not the only one*' (AT, 201).

Mars-Jones' review, 'Despairs of a time-and-motion man', rightly identifies the comic potential of a juxtaposition between 'the opposed eccentricities of the two households, Muriel's desperately courageous mess and the Leary's compulsive regularity', for these 'make entertaining reading'.<sup>55</sup> However, this opposition has more significance than simply entertainment and the 'communitas' of Muriel's clutter interacts with the 'structure' of Leary, exemplifying the sense of liberating defiance she represents. Even Muriel's hair is 'disorganised' (AT, 196) and her business card, which is 'crookedly snapped' (AT, 164), suggests she possesses a different mindset from Rose, who needs Macon's chapters to fit precisely into the envelopes she is mailing them in. Previously Macon had classified the world into the careful and



ordered (his family) and the careless and disordered (other people). His relationship with Muriel complicates this for him: 'he could not have said ... why he was so moved by the sight of Muriel's thin quilt trailing across the floor' (AT, 256). In addition she lives in a less respectable part of Baltimore. Shelton has suggested a relationship between identity and living space, where 'houses function in the largest sense as physical and spiritual correlatives of people, for the space an individual chooses or is forced to inhabit in a meaningful way defines the individual'.<sup>56</sup> Although this statement seems somewhat general and over-simplified, Muriel's cluttered space and her 'open house' policy with her neighbours does reflect her personality and, furthermore, living in the clutter of this environment effects a change in Macon. Mary Anne Brush suggests that Macon 'finds comfort in the disrepair and disarray of Muriel's row house'.<sup>57</sup> Arguably this is because he can fix things without the freight of responsibility associated with his former compulsion to order. At first he views her neighbourhood's lack of order as a threat; a 'labryinth of littered, cracked dark streets' (AT, 198), but his response changes and is recast as 'Freedom! Sunlight glinting off blinding white drifts, and children riding sleds and TV trays' (AT, 251). Both Singleton Street and Muriel come to represent the different perspective he needs in order to come to terms with the grief that has precipitated his liminal experience: 'Singleton Street rose up in front of Macon's eyes, all its color and confusion' (AT, 334). 'Color and confusion' offer new possibilities and the 'richness' that came too late to Grandfather Leary.

Relatedly an integral part of Muriel's 'color and confusion' is her appearance, and her clothes present a challenge to the conservatism which

epitomises Leary codes of conduct. Tyler has always used clothes as signs both of her characters' relationship to conventional femininity and of their individual identities. For example in her first novel, *If Morning Ever Comes*, Ben Joe's sister Joanne's red dress and flamboyant lipstick objectify her femininity; Mrs Emerson's twin sets and pearls indicate her determination to continue to be ladylike in *The Clock Winder*; and Pearl Tull's washable seersucker dresses in *Dinner* are a clue to her practicality and her desire to appear seemly. Tyler's strategy here is to access an understood, and accepted, social coding of female dress where short skirts and strappy sandals communicate a different message from prim hats and cardigans. However, Tyler's use of such coding can be read as a critique of these conventional/patriarchal constructions of the feminine rather than an affirmation. She is drawing attention to and calling into question the social codes which demand that women should dress in accordance with how they view themselves and, more particularly, how they are viewed, as female types. Through this process, 'women have traditionally been taught to confuse external appearance with internal worth'.<sup>58</sup>

Now Muriel is clearly the 'short skirts and strappy sandals' type of dresser; Tyler introduces her as 'a thin young woman in a ruffled peasant blouse. She had aggressively frizzy black hair that burgeoned to her shoulders like an Arab headdress' (AT, 28). Here 'aggressively' is significant. Tyler has Muriel undermine traditional codes of dress. Certainly she wears 'preposterously high-heeled sandals' (AT, 41) but this provocative gesture is a feisty challenge rather than a submissive attempt to attract. As Saxton comments, wearing shoes like these 'announces a defiance of prescriptive feminine codes,

projects strength rather than vulnerability and expresses some internal pleasure'.<sup>59</sup> Such codes are fundamental to the 'structure' which defines Rose Leary's clothes, described, when we are introduced to her, as 'spinsterish and concealing' (AT, 61), and is subverted by the 'communitas' personified by Muriel. Furthermore she wears her 1940s' coat or her little fuchsia dress as costumes and deliberately, even 'aggressively', calls attention to the construction of an image that is completely her own. In this she goes further than Morgan Gower in *Morgan's Passing*, who *borrowed* the costumes of others in order to reinvent himself as a priest or doctor. Muriel's dressing is more creative and is a trope for her instinct for survival and a sign of her strategy of fierce energy and persistence. It suggests that she has some control over conventional codes. And Muriel has always refused to conform to the constrictions of the feminine. As a pretty blond-haired child her mother had attempted to cast her in the Shirley Temple mould of the glamorous little girl, a construction of feminine childhood beauty. Yet a childhood photograph undermines this stereotype: 'But the best of her was not the child's Shirley Temple hairdo. It was her fierceness ... her chin set awry and her eyes bright slits of determination' (AT, 230). Muriel develops this 'fierceness' and 'determination', and her subsequent behaviour with regard to the way she presents herself physically to the world is a reaction to the passivity and dependency this early stereotype had encapsulated.

Muriel also presents a linguistic challenge to the Leary sense of order. Conversations between Rose and her brothers are measured debates and deliberations on whether to turn the heating up, or how to expand the family business. On the other hand Muriel's conversation, with its vertiginous

changes of direction, lacks this sort of practical logic. She punctuates her advice on training Edward with a wealth of disconnected autobiographical detail; her 'wonderful' sister Claire, her short-lived marriage to Norman and her miscellany of jobs: 'All at once, Macon got the feeling she had not been talking about colors at all but something else. It seemed she used words as a sort of background music' (AT, 18). Muriel does not foreground language, nor is she driven by its logic; instead she uses words as a 'background' to enhance her own meanings. At first this confuses Macon but then it entraps him: 'It seemed she had webbed his mind with her stories' (AT, 192). Quiello supports the view that Muriel's ability to disrupt the traditional logic of language is a source of her power. As she suggests, 'Her perpetual displacement of meaning through her illogical sense-making operations implies the infinite possibilities of many meanings, which then threaten the hegemony of the prevailing order'.<sup>60</sup> And the Learys represent the pedantic conservatism of such an order which rejects possibility or flexibility. Rose objects not only to Muriel's appearance, 'a flamenco dancer with galloping consumption' (AT, 105) but also to her use of words: 'When she talked about her lesson plan she kept saying 'simplistic' for 'simple"' (AT, 105). Similarly Macon corrects what he perceives to be her misuse/abuse of language when she is justifying giving up one of her jobs:

"Why, I was coming home literally dead with exhaustion, Macon."

"Figuratively," Macon said.

"Huh?" "You were *figuratively* dead with exhaustion. Jesus, Muriel, you're so imprecise. You're so sloppy". (AT, 277)

Yet, she 'refuses to revise herself into the conformity of her social script'<sup>61</sup> and reconstructs and recontextualises language for her own purposes; hence her message which attempts to persuade Macon to take her to Paris, an anonymous letter pasted with magazine print, '*Don't FoRget tO BUY pLANE Ticket for MuRiel*' (AT, 279). Although this persuasion is not successful, it is symptomatic of Muriel's later success at disabling the stranglehold language has on Macon that he prefers Muriel's pronunciation of etcetera: 'And the emptiness now, the thinness when he hears etcetera pronounced correctly' (AT, 310).

Moreover Muriel's success at coaching Macon throughout his liminal experience is also to do with her voice, not simply her vocabulary. The illogic of her conversation is communicated in 'a voice that wandered too far in all directions' (AT, 99). That this voice is so unlike Sarah's: 'Sarah's voice was light and breathy; this one was rough, tough, wiry' (AT, 54) is a clue to the reason why Muriel's relationship with Macon succeeds instead of hers. There are similarities between the two women. In fact Sarah was 'the sort of woman who stored her flatware intermingled' (AT, 8-9) and, like Muriel, she too takes issue with the Leary sense of order. However, Macon identifies the crucial difference between the two women when he reflects, about Sarah, that '[w]hen he folded her hand into a fist it was round, like a bird. It had no sharp angles' (AT, 309). This observation associates Sarah with circles, as does his memory of her face; the mention of her name 'brought Sarah's calm face, round as a daisy' (AT, 284). Indeed it is Muriel who has the 'sharp angles', not only her mouth - 'a blackish lipstick that showed her mouth to be an unusually complicated shape - angular, like certain kinds of apples' (AT, 41) - but also

her face. When Macon sees Muriel on the plane to Paris he perceives this as 'a thin triangle' (AT, 326). And this is integral to Muriel's success. Sarah's 'circles' enclose and restrict, whereas Muriel's 'angles' jut outwards. Tyler uses the detail of Sarah's 'matched luggage' to suggest that Sarah is fundamentally conventional and aligned to structure, unlike Muriel, whose idiosyncratic interest in a suitcase which reminded Macon of a 'partly sucked caramel' (AT, 276), relates to 'communitas'. Macon ultimately recognises that Muriel's angles will cross a boundary and provide him with a threshold, whereas Sarah's circles will enclose him. Ethan had joked with his cousins about Macon's artichoke plate which was 'kind of finicky' with '[e]very leaf laid out in such a perfect *circle*' (AT, 183, my italics). After Ethan's death, it is Muriel who helps him move out of the circle where grief has entrapped him.

So does moving out of this circle mean that Turner's notion of reaggregation, at the moment when the limen ends, can usefully be applied to this text? According to Turner reaggregation is signified by a re-entry into the everyday world where 'the ritual subject is in a relatively stable state once more' (AT, 95) and Macon does achieve 'a relatively stable state', largely due to his relationship with Muriel where he has been 'fashioned anew'. He has emerged from the Leary 'cocoon' and is able to relate to other people; on a plane trip with Muriel he experiences a new interest in people's lives: 'how intense and private and absorbing' (AT, 209) they were; and, more significantly, he sees the Old Bay Restaurant, a place associated with Leary conservatism, from a different perspective. Instead of viewing the unconventional with suspicion, he imaginatively engages with it by inventing a story about two other customers, a priest offering toast to a woman in a tennis

dress: 'maybe the woman wants to join a convent ... and he's pointing out that sorting her husband's socks ... can be equally holy' (AT, 308). In a crucial insight he recognises this change in himself and acknowledges Muriel's role in this:

Then he knew that what mattered was the pattern of her life; that although he did not love her he loved the surprise of her, and also the surprise of himself when he was with her. In the foreign country that was Singleton Street he was an entirely different person. This person had never been suspected of narrowness, never been accused of chilliness; in fact was mocked for his soft heart. And was anything but orderly. (AT, 212)

Updike also identifies this change: 'The scruffy society of neighbourhood women that collects in Muriel's kitchen comes to feel as cozy to him as a game of 'Vaccination''.<sup>62</sup>

Furthermore another member of the 'scruffy society' referred to by Updike is instrumental in Macon's 'return to a relatively stable state'; Muriel's son Alexander. Tyler has this 'small, white sickly boy with a shaved-looking skull' (AT, 194) combine the roles of small Macon and surrogate Ethan. Like Macon as a child he initially seems limited and constricted: 'Even his smile never dared to venture beyond two invisible boundaries in the center of his face' (AT, 237). Like Ethan, he has a bond with Edward the dog: 'Alexander hugged him and buried his face in Edward's ruff' (AT, 232). What is significant here is that this gesture does not make Alexander wheeze although, according to Muriel, he is allergic 'to shellfish, milk, fruits of all kinds, wheat, eggs, and most vegetables ... to dust and pollen and paint, and there's some belief he's allergic to air' (AT, 195). When Muriel stops policing his diet he suffers no negative reactions. His allergies are emblems of the dangers of the outside

world that both he and Macon become able to deal with. Tyler uses clothing as a symbol of this change in both characters. At the beginning of the novel, when Sarah and Macon are returning from the trip that finally leads to their separation, she identifies their difference: 'Macon wore a formal summer suit, his travelling suit - much more logical for travelling than jeans, he always said. Jeans had those stiff, hard seams and those rivets. Sarah wore a strapless terry beach dress' (AT, 3). It is therefore representative of the change in both Macon and Alexander that at an important moment in their relationship, when they are buying clothes together, Macon's resistance to jeans seems to have disappeared and he buys Alexander a pair that are 'comfortably baggy' (AT, 262)

However, in spite of such changes, Muriel and Macon remain in a liminal zone. They do not exit into the stage of reaggregation and the threshold experience continues, implying that the limen does not end. This is evident when Macon, like Cody at the end of *Dinner*, has an epiphanic experience which indicates a shift in his attitudes. Firstly he leaves the bag containing such emergency items as 'the plastic travel flask of sherry, the matchbook-sized sewing kit and the tiny white Lomotil tablet', the symbol of his fear of change, on the Paris curb. Then he acknowledges the adventure inherent in the flow of time and that, if Muriel is with him, Ethan might still be part of that flow. Consequently he picks her up in a taxi. Again sunlight is transformative and the spangles on the windscreen become 'so bright and festive, for a moment he thought they were confetti' (AT, 355).<sup>63</sup> This sense of future imaginative possibilities is reminiscent of the ending of *Morgan's Passing*, where '[e]verything he looked at seemed luminous and beautiful, and rich with



possibilities' (MP, 282), but in *Accidental Tourist* this is implied rather than overtly expressed.<sup>64</sup> Furthermore, this sense of the future is a final indication that Macon's relationship with Muriel is ongoing rather than completely resolved. A sense of moving on, engaged in a continuing dialogue between 'structure' and 'communitas', is suggested as they *travel* off in the taxi.<sup>65</sup>

In a sense Macon becomes 'The Accidental Traveller' who is not afraid to leave home rather than 'The Accidental Tourist', who inevitably returns there and for whom he writes his guides. Similarly, the correspondence reveals some debate between Tyler and her editor concerning the title. Tyler is unsure about *The Reluctant Tourist*, but Jones feels that *The Accidental Tourist* is difficult to remember whereas 'RELUCTANT does stick'.<sup>66</sup> Tyler remained exercised by this, 'Well, I'm still thinking. My objection to "Reluctant" is that it's obvious, while at least with "Accidental" people might wonder what it's all about. I've thought of "Traveller's Choice" but that sounds like a brand name for sea-sick pills or toilet-seat shields or something ... At this point nothing seems to fit the purpose as well as *The Accidental Tourist*, but I will try to remain open to other ideas'.<sup>67</sup> However, Jones stayed unconvinced, 'Let me brood on it further. "Reluctant" is obvious ... but it's charming and provocative - and one doesn't forget it'.<sup>68</sup>

Ultimately, of course, the writer retained the title she wanted. Moreover, by making Macon a writer too, Tyler could be commenting, obliquely, on her own craft. Indeed it is productive to compare Pearl Tull and Macon with regard to such self-reflexivity. Pearl, too, is a writer of sorts, as her diary entries indicate. Her diaries contain a confessional record of past events and feelings combining observation and self-reflection, where privacy is paramount; hence

her attempt at concealment with the words, '[a]ppleappleapple all joined together, so no-one could guess what was written underneath' (D, 277). Similarly, the alterations in Tyler's manuscripts are very difficult to decipher. Relatedly Macon's guidebooks are, of course, for a public audience, and his writing does depend on the close observation of cultural minutiae which characterises Tyler's own work, although her attempt at a neutral distance from her characters eschews giving advice. In his visit to England Macon recommends restaurants like Yankee Delight or the US Open to make his businessmen audience feel at home. In a similar appeal to her own audience, who expect quirky punning,<sup>69</sup> Tyler utilises what Updike refers to as the 'literary foolery' of her naming: 'Doggie Do is an outfit that trains canines; Rerun names a second-hand shoe store'.<sup>70</sup>

Of course Tyler's readership will also expect an exploration of domestic tensions and in both *Dinner* and *Accidental Tourist* she calls into question the 'apple pie and cream' connotations of family togetherness through the use of the set-piece of the family meal. Tyler uses this trope to interrogate the ideological cluster which signifies 'happy families'. In *Dinner* she punctuates the text with a series of failed, unfinished dinners, orchestrated by Ezra, and loaded with the metaphorical weight of dysfunction. Often Pearl walks out, jealously guarding the integrity of the family, reacting to Cody 'setting up shop as far away from home as possible' (D, 159) or Jenny choosing an unsuitable wedding dress.<sup>71</sup> On the other hand, in *Accidental Tourist* the Leary family meals are a source of unity rather than estrangement. The ritual of preparing baked potatoes, like 'Vaccination', had started as a strategy for survival when, as children, they were left to their own devices. This rigorously finicky and

well-regulated practice has persisted into adulthood: 'The skins should be crisp. They should not be salted. The pepper should be freshly ground. Paprika was acceptable, but only if it was American. Hungarian paprika had too distinctive a taste' (D, 77). Clearly the family unity involved in this is underpinned by the family exclusivity that Pearl Tull unsuccessfully strives to maintain in the earlier novel. Because of her sealing up of the family, she reacts against 'outsiders', like Mrs Scarlatti, at a dinner celebrating her offer to Ezra of a partnership in the restaurant, or Josiah, the chef, whom she misreads as having a relationship with Jenny. Tyler is suggesting here that the intensity engendered by excluding such outsiders does not make for 'happy families'.

She is also concerned with the dynamics of the insider/outsider relationship and the issues of status this involves, in that the presence of these outsiders might undermine a misplaced over-emphasis on familial influence. It is productive, in this respect, to compare two dinners in the two texts; the Tull funeral dinner<sup>72</sup> and the Leary Thanksgiving Dinner. These events differ in tone, and Cody's outburst at what he perceives, at this stage, as his father's desertion makes the funeral dinner, to quote Updike again, 'relatively saturnine'. However, in both cases Tyler draws attention to the uneasy balance between insiders and outsiders. The obvious 'insiders' are Cody, Ezra and Jenny Tull in *Dinner* and Porter, Charles, Macon and Rose Leary in *Accidental Tourist* - but what of Cody's son, Luke, or Porter's three children, Danny, Susan and Liberty - and does marriage confer insider status on Cody's wife or Jenny's third husband?

The perceived outsiders are Beck Tull and Julian Edge, and both have their preconceptions. As Beck says, 'it looks like this is one of those great big, jolly, noisy rambling ... why ... *families!*' (D, 305). Similarly Julian, fleeing from the haphazard pot roasts of his singles apartment, is in search of wholesome homeliness. Both are disappointed. As Cody is at pains to point out to Beck at the funeral dinner, only two or three of the children are related to him, and Rose's attempt to cook the Thanksgiving turkey differently in order to conserve energy ends in tears. Rose, in an uncharacteristic outburst that reveals that the Leary chilliness has been substituted for adolescent notions of love derived from soap operas, accuses her family of turning Julian against her. Now significantly Julian is called Edge - and this very name has connotations of threshold. Humphrey comments that 'Julian, the voice from the edge, stands between the real world and the world created by the Learys'.<sup>73</sup> I would also suggest that he occupies an indefinite, permeable liminal area. He had not been discouraged by the Thanksgiving Dinner and his remark "I'll take the turkey" (AT, 175) endears him to Macon and leads eventually to marriage to Rose. He provides a new beginning for her, in that, like Macon, she leaves the Leary household. However, unlike Macon, she moves back again to look after her brothers. Furthermore Julian joins her. What is significant in this respect is the crossing and re-crossing of the 'edge' referred to by Humphrey that complicates the insider/outsider divide. Julian plays 'Vaccination' every night but whether the others still change the rules is left ambiguous.

Tyler raises a series of interconnected issues by problematising the relationship between insider and outsider. Furthermore her suggestion that

'outsiders' are significant seems to be challenging the inescapability of family influence, both genetically and environmentally. Gibson and Shelton view the influence of family differently. Gibson overstates the role of fate, suggesting that '[f]amily is seen in the light of cosmic necessity, as the inevitable precondition of human choice'.<sup>74</sup> Shelton refers to *Dinner* as 'a somber and powerful study of family determinism'.<sup>75</sup> Robertson's comment that Tyler undermines the exclusivity and givenness of family life is more germane: '[the novel's] particular virtue lies in the way it places the children in various exogenous relationships that prove as formative and valuable to them as do their family ties'.<sup>76</sup> Jenny, in *Dinner*, then Macon in *Accidental Tourist*, both thwart family influence through the agency of an outsider. Tyler is suggesting here that it is beneficial if families offer an opening through which outsiders can enter. However, she leaves the distinction between insider and outsider ambiguous. To return to the games referred to above - does the fact that Julian now plays 'Vaccination' every night confirm his status as an insider and a Leary? - does Beck Tull, the absent father, remain an outsider even though his memory of the archery incident indicates his involvement in a shared family history? These questions, which remain ambiguous, underpin the issues Tyler will continue to address in her next four texts: *Breathing Lessons*, *Saint Maybe*, *Ladder of Years* and *A Patchwork Planet*.

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- 1 Quoted in Alice Hall Petry, *Understanding Anne Tyler*, Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1990, 186.
- 2 From now on *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant* will be referred to as *Dinner*.
- 3 Benjamin DeMott, 'Funny, Wise and True', reprinted in Alice Hall Petry, ed., *Critical Essays on Anne Tyler*, New York: G.K. Hall, 1992, 111.
- 4 Other reviewers also refer to such a change. Penelope Lively suggests that in former texts 'their idiosyncrasy' has taken them to the 'perversely improbable', yet that *Dinner* is 'sited squarely in a recognisable landscape', *Sunday Telegraph*, 31 October 1982, and Andrea Barnet comments that 'gone is the jaunty, madcap mood of *Morgan's Passing*', *Saturday Review*, March 1982 (DU).
- 5 However, there is nothing in the papers to suggest that she has drawn upon his ideas.
- 6 Quoted in Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*, Chicago: Aldine, 1969, 94.
- 7 Turner, 95.
- 8 Gustavo Prerez Firmat, *Literature and Liminality*, Durham: Duke University Press, 1986, xiv.
- 9 Turner, quoted in Firmat, xiv.
- 10 The chapter was published as a short story under this name in *New Yorker*, 4 July 1988: 20-32.
- 11 Sarah Gilliad, 'Liminality, Anti-Liminality and the Victorian Novel', *English Literary History*, Volume 53, Part 1, 1986: 183-98.
- 12 Gilliad, 184.
- 13 Manuscript of *Dinner*, 21.
- 14 Manuscript of *Dinner*, 4.
- 15 Caren J. Town argues that 'the original family exists only as a story in the mind of each child' and that such fictionality is a strategy for survival, 'Rewriting the Family During *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant*', *Southern Quarterly*, Volume XXXI, No 1 Fall 1992: 19.
- 16 Turner, 95.

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- 17 Margaret Morganroth Gullette, 'Anne Tyler: The Tears (and Joys) Are in the Things', in C. Ralph Stephens, ed., *The Fiction of Anne Tyler*, Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1990, 101.
- 18 Voelker associates Cody with 'chronos' or time as duration, which implies the quantitative and the mechanical, Joseph C. Voelker, *Art and the Accidental in Anne Tyler*, Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1989, 138.
- 19 Indeed British reviewers have pointed out connections between *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant* and William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* (1930) in terms of both structure (Hermione Lee suggests that the text 'owes something to Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*', *Observer* 1982) and characterisation (Nicholas Shrimpton comments that 'Cody is a version of Jason Compson', *Sunday Times*, 3 October 1982) (*DU*). Arguably such connections are misguided attempts to authenticate Tyler's domestic/perceived female concerns by aligning her with a canonical male American writer.
- 20 In a sense Tyler is using the duality of the Southern woman stereotype here: at first Beck is attracted to Pearl's delicacy and refinement but he is put off later by her sense of moral rectitude and family duty.
- 21 Turner, 95.
- 22 Turner, 95.
- 23 These dinners have led Voelker to associate Ezra with time as occasion which implies the qualitative and a sense of opportunity, 138.
- 24 Caleb Peck in *Searching for Caleb* can be viewed as a model for Ezra. He too worked as a custom chef and acknowledged his customers' needs; he 'chose to cook them their favourite food' (SC, 291) and 'prepared every meal so seriously and so tenderly that it tasted like a gift' (SC, 310).
- 25 Voelker, 129.
- 26 Letter to Anne Tyler from Judith Jones, 11 June 1981 (*DU*).
- 27 Manuscript, 292 (*DU*).
- 28 Manuscript, 280 (*DU*).
- 29 Letter to Anne Tyler from Judith Jones, 8 July 1981 (*DU*).
- 30 Tyler is recycling an image here; in *A Slipping-Down Life* she refers to Evie Decker 'carrying herself like a bowl of water' (SDL, 132).
- 31 Letter to Anne Tyler from Judith Jones, 11 June 1981 (*DU*).
- 32 Petry, 203.

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- 33 Turner, 95.
- 34 Turner, 95.
- 35 Victoria Glendinning, 'Running on the Spot', *Times Literary Supplement*, 9 December 1977 (DU).
- 36 Charlotte Templin, 'Tyler's Literary Reputation', in Dale Salwak, ed., *Anne Tyler as Novelist*, Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 185.
- 37 John Updike, 'Leaving Home', reprinted in Petry, ed., 128.
- 38 Lee Lescaze, 'Throwing Caution To the Whim', *Wall Street Journal*, 16 September 1985 (DU).
- 39 Review of *The Accidental Tourist*, R.Z. Sheppard, *Time*, 6 September 1985: 78 (DU).
- 40 McMurtry won the 1986 Pulitzer Prize with *Lonesome Dove*. *The Accidental Tourist* was also nominated for this.
- 41 Larry McMurtry, 'Life is a Foreign Country', reprinted in Petry, ed., 135.
- 42 Penelope Lively, 'A Triumph for Tyler', *Sunday Telegraph*, 20 October 1985 (DU).
- 43 Turner, 94.
- 44 This, then, is a moment of contextualisation which demonstrates Tyler's recognition of political events.
- 45 Turner, ix.
- 46 Voelker, 154.
- 47 Anne Ricketson Zahlan, 'Traveling Towards the Self: The Psychic Drama of Anne Tyler's *The Accidental Tourist*', in Stephens, ed., 87.
- 48 From now on *The Accidental Tourist* will be referred to as *Accidental Tourist*.
- 49 Barbara Harrell Carson, 'Complicate, Complicate: Anne Tyler's Moral Imperative', *Southern Quarterly*, Volume XXXI, No 1 Fall 1992: 33.
- 50 Turner, 96.
- 51 Turner, 128.
- 52 Virginia Schaffer Carroll, 'The Nature of Kinship in the Novels of Anne Tyler', in Stephens, ed., 20.
- 53 In this reluctance to travel Tyler resembles her characters: "'I like to stay in one place and just examine it more and more deeply, rather than skimming across the surface of a whole bunch of places'", quoted in Paul Bail, *Anne Tyler: A Critical Companion*, Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1998, 119.



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- 54 Tyler cites a living author here. Marguerite Young is currently writing a three-volume biography of Eugene Debs and Tyler agreed to contribute a paragraph about her to a collection at the University of Hawaii, undated letter to Anne Tyler from Miriam Fuchs (DU).
- 55 Adam Mars-Jones, 'Despairs of a Time-and-Motion Man', *Times Literary Supplement*, 4 October 1985 (DU).
- 56 Frank W. Shelton, 'Anne Tyler's Houses', in Stephens, ed., 45.
- 57 Mary Anne Brush, 'Anne Tyler's Baltimore: Two Worlds', an illustrated essay circulated at the Baltimore conference of April 1989.
- 58 Ruth O. Saxton, 'Crepe Soles, Boots, and Fringed Shawls', in Salwak, ed., 71.
- 59 Salwak, ed., 73.
- 60 Rose Quiello, 'Breakdowns and Breakthroughs: The Hysterical Use of Language', in Salwak, ed., 59.
- 61 Salwak, ed., 60.
- 62 Petry, ed., 129.
- 63 In a letter responding to her treatment of epiphanies Tyler reveals that such moments in her own life have taken place in sunshine and her final comment indicates their importance: 'I send you the best wish I can think of: for another one of those moments', letter to Patricia Abbott from Anne Tyler, 17 April 1983 (DU).
- 64 Clearly Tyler values the notion of possibility; hence her reason for admiring Gabriel Garcia Marquez is 'because everything he writes carries with it the assurance that we live among a wealth of possibilities, and are foolish to fear that they will ever thin out or dry up', 'Writers' Writers', *New York Times Book Review*, 4 December 1977: 70 (DU).
- 65 Tyler's own comment on the ending of the novel sheds light on the question of reaggregation: 'I see Macon and Muriel in an edgy, incongruous but ultimately workable marriage; Macon forever frustrated by Muriel's behaviour and yet more flexible than his old self'. 'Edgy' and 'incongruous' are key words here concerning their marriage. 'Incongruous' suggests that this will not be a conventional relationship and will not conform to the 'customary norms' referred to by Turner and 'edgy' implies that Macon and Muriel continue to inhabit the transitional space of the limen.
- 66 Letter to Anne Tyler from Judith Jones, 15 November 1984 (DU).

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- 67 Letter to Judith Jones from Anne Tyler, 26 November 1984 (*DU*).
- 68 Letter to Anne Tyler from Judith Jones, 12 December 1984 (*DU*).
- 69 Petry points out that Macon is 'emphatically "leery" of life', 212.
- 70 Petry, ed., 127.
- 71 Tyler had anticipated the potential of the dinner table as a site for family disjunction as early as her fourth published text, when she has Mary, an Emerson daughter, remark, "Have you ever known this family to make it through to the end of a meal" (CW, 110).
- 72 In the papers an index card describes the detail of the menu not contained in the text: curried egg plant soup, minted leg of lamb, mushroom kasha, tossed salad, wine, chocolate mousse, dessert wine and coffee (*DU*).
- 73 Lin T. Humphrey, 'Exploration of a Not-So-Accidental Novel' in Salwak, ed., 151.
- 74 Mary Ellis Gibson, 'Family as Fate: The Novels of Anne Tyler', reprinted in Petry, ed., 165.
- 75 Frank Shelton, 'The Necessary Balance: Distance and Sympathy in the Novels of Anne Tyler', reprinted in Petry, ed., 181.
- 76 Mary F. Robertson, 'Anne Tyler: Medusa Points and Contact Points', in Catherine Rainwater and William J. Schieck, eds., *Contemporary American Women Writers: Narrative Strategies*, Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1985, 135.

## CHAPTER 6

### (Re-)crossing liminal thresholds: from *Breathing Lessons* through *A Patchwork Planet*

'For my own family, I would always choose the makeshift surrogate family formed by various characters unrelated by blood' (Anne Tyler)<sup>1</sup>

In *Dinner At The Homesick Restaurant* and *The Accidental Tourist* Tyler undermines any sense of clear delineation with regard to family boundaries by locating domestic experience within an indefinite threshold space and place. Underpinning this is the notion of a limitless limen where edges move and the suggestion that the distinction between insiders and outsiders remains fluid.

One of the ways she does this is by drawing attention to perceptions of physical resemblance. Hence at the end of *Dinner*, Cody mistakes his father, Beck, who has been outside the family periphery for years, for his son Luke: 'There was Luke ... sitting for some reason on the stoop of a boarded-over building ... But it wasn't Luke. It was Beck ... his sharp, cocked shoulders so oddly like Luke's' (D, 310). Similarly, in *Accidental Tourist*, Macon perceives his own face in the childhood family portrait differently: 'The set of that mouth echoed now in Macon's mind ... It was Ethan's mouth'. This recognition, like Cody's mis-recognition, relocates an 'outsider' within the family: 'Macon had spent twelve years imagining Ethan as ... a visitor from the outside world, and here it turned out he'd been a Leary all along' (AT, 67).

And Tyler continues to explore the threshold between insiders and outsiders in two other texts where the central protagonist is male; *Saint*

*Maybe*, her twelfth novel published in 1991, and *A Patchwork Planet*, her fourteenth, published in 1998. In the former, Ian Bedloe, like Macon Leary, has to come to terms with an emotional experience that changes his life. This involves not grief at the death of a child, but guilt at the death of a brother, for Ian has inadvertently caused the suicide of his elder brother Danny by hinting that his recent wife Lucy had been unfaithful. In this novel Tyler uses the image of an amoeba to suggest Ian's initial adjustment to this tragedy, where 'the dot of food' represents his way of coping with the fact of Danny's death: 'an amoeba shaped like a splash approached a dot of food and gradually surrounded it. Then it moved on, wider now and blunter, distorted to accommodate the dot of food within' (SM, 82). This image also evokes how the family changes shape to accommodate the outsiders who are necessary for its survival.

In this portrayal of family, Tyler is subverting the traditional position which privileges the influence of so-called nuclear family life by drawing attention to exogenous relationships, the other resources available to family members as they mature and gain some sense of self. Robertson supports this view by suggesting that Tyler is refusing 'to regard the family as the most significant agent of character development and social representation'.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, as she also points out, in traditional realist texts the boundary between insiders and outsiders is recognisable and fixed and 'reflected in the reader's awareness of what is plot - action concerning family history - and what is subplot - contingent action concerning outsiders'.<sup>3</sup> After 1980 Tyler increasingly rejects the sort of binary thinking where the family is a consistent and ideologically definitive entity to which characters can submit, or which

they can reject by choosing decisively between insiders within the family circle and outsiders who offer alternative options. This serves both to undermine the hypostatization of category differences like family and non-family and to draw attention to the limitations and arbitrariness of family life. This relates to the sense of the arbitrariness of language signification which Tyler is particularly concerned with in *Ladder of Years*.

Tyler subverts the emotional freight which informs the concept of the nuclear family explicitly in *Saint Maybe* when she has Doug Bedloe, Ian's father, reflect on a short-story class he had attended in an attempt to occupy himself when he first retired from teaching. Here he had read a short story concerning an experiment conducted by creatures from outer space. In order to determine whether 'earthlings form emotional attachments' or were 'merely at the mercy of biology', these creatures put two halves of two different houses together to see how the individuals would interact. Although the woman was 'terribly puzzled and upset' when faced with a new husband and children, she got on with caring for these children because they had some illness. In the light of this evidence, the creatures from outer space came to the conclusion that earthlings 'didn't discriminate' and '[t]heir family feelings, so called, were a matter of blind circumstance' (SM, 172). Here 'so-called' signifies that the importance of both nature and nurture can be overestimated; that shared genetic make-up and environmental influence need not necessarily determine emotional interaction.

These reflections by Doug are contained in the fifth chapter of the novel, 'People Who Don't Know the Answers', which was published as a short story in the *New Yorker*.<sup>4</sup> The title of this chapter indicates how Tyler privileges such

people - for 'to know the answers' assumes the sort of knowledge informed with judgement and the right to intervene which she questions. An examination of this chapter can demonstrate how Tyler complicates the distinction between family and non-family in the novel as a whole and suggests that this ambiguous division intersects upon an uncertain liminal threshold. As one reviewer commented, 'Ms Tyler is intrigued by family circles and she draws a wide one in *Saint Maybe*'.<sup>5</sup> At the beginning of the chapter Doug comments on a family expectation: 'It had been assumed that he would help out with the grandkids, once he'd retired' (SM, 160) 'but he turned out to be kind of a dunderhead' (SM, 161). What is significant here is that 'the grandkids' are not 'his' in the conventional sense and that the Bedloe family is not defined in biological terms. After Danny's suicide his widow Lucy had struggled to bring up her three small children alone, an episode graphically described from Agatha's, the eldest's, point of view in the chapter entitled 'The Department of Reality'. Here the child describes how '[e]very sound meant something' (SM, 76), 'the scrape of a match' signifying that her mother was smoking, and so upset, whilst 'the popping of the lid of the pill bottle' meant that she was drugging herself to sleep. When Lucy takes off the lid once too often and dies from an overdose, the children, Agatha, Thomas and Daphne the baby, born after Danny's death but not his, move in with Danny's parents Doug and Bee and Ian, his younger brother. Lorna Sage, in a review, sums up the dynamics that ensue: 'the Bedloes are saddled with three foundlings which is where family life really begins' and as a consequence 'all the relationships are intensified and thrown into high relief precisely because they are not

“natural””.<sup>6</sup> The situation is acknowledged by Bee: ‘our house is stuffed with someone else’s children. You know they all are someone else’s’ (SM, 181).

So Tyler positions Agatha, Thomas and Daphne both as outsiders and insiders. Although they are ‘someone else’s’ and, at the wedding between Danny and Lucy, they remain on the edge of the family ‘on a window sill, almost hidden by the curtains on either side’ (SM, 14), they later become insiders by joining the Bedloe family circle. Clearly this movement is essential to the narrative as Ian leaves college and adopts the children to assuage his guilt. However, their status as family members remains ambiguous, particularly when they leave, then return, home. Here Tyler engages in what Robertson refers to as ‘category assassination’ as ‘her plots reveal along the horizontal axis a continual questioning of the proper vertical boundary between family and not-family’.<sup>7</sup> The family has changed shape, like the amoeba, accommodating other members who, significantly, provide new emotional nourishment. This serves to reveal the potential inadequacy of conventional family structures and points to the possibilities extant in incorporating outsiders and their influence.

Therefore Stout is misguided in suggesting that Ian achieves self-definition within the structure of the family<sup>8</sup>. It is his encounter with religion *outside* the family, in the form of Reverend Emmett at the Church of the Second Chance, which has greater significance. His storefront church emphasises expiation for wrongdoing and it is this minister who suggests that Ian can make amends for Danny’s suicide by adopting Lucy’s children. Ian takes this very seriously, hence Doug’s remark in ‘People Who Don’t Know the Answers’ that he is a ‘sucker’ for giving in to Daphne’s demands (SM, 176). Yet Doug does

acknowledge the church's agency in Ian's redemptive process and 'supposed this church met a real need' (SM, 178). This agency is also borne out in Tyler's own comment on the role of religion in the text; she 'certainly never intended to satirise Ian's religious beliefs' and viewed his faith 'as, literally, his Second Chance at a moment when he had given up hope'.<sup>9</sup> Interestingly the Church of the Second Chance, as the name suggests, is not a mainstream religion, rather a religion of the margins which does not conform to a conventional cultural imagery. According to Croft it combines 'Calvinist salvation by works and a benign social gospel'.<sup>10</sup> Perhaps here Tyler's Quaker heritage is evoked in the church's services, where silence precedes testifying and there is a democratic lack of any hierarchical structure. But, certainly, in this religion, there are strict codes of conduct which forbid sex before marriage and alcohol and where Saturdays are dominated by a Good Works Program when church members help each other out with practical tasks. This is a far cry from the easy-going and 'all American' life-style Ian has been used to in the Bedloe family, who are introduced to the reader at the outset as 'Waverly Street's version of the ideal, apple pie household' (SM, 4). However, this ideal does not provide Ian with the resources he requires, so he turns instead to the outside help of the church, and it is the difference of this help that is significant. As Robertson suggests, 'people will choose strangeness over similarity for their own preservation'.<sup>11</sup> The powerful influence on Ian of this eccentric religion becomes clear as the narrative unfolds and this is evident in the chapter in question. Tyler suggests that 'answers' to his questions are emerging by having him subvert a comic catastrophe when he solves a practical problem at the church picnic.



Now Doug's description of this church picnic in 'People Who Don't Know the Answers' demonstrates the permeable nature of the insider/outsider distinction which creates an ambivalent borderland as characters cross forwards and backwards through the liminal space that constitutes the threshold. It remains ambiguous as to whether the characters in the narrative are insiders or outsiders as they transgress this boundary without wholly eliminating it. To quote Robertson again: 'Tyler designs narratives in which there is constant oscillation between shedding and incorporation without any suggestion of some final resting place, either totally within the family or totally outside it'.<sup>12</sup> At the picnic, in a sense, the church members have become Ian's family but he invites his own parents along as well as the children he has adopted. And Tyler draws attention to this 'oscillation' by placing Bee both inside and outside Ian's church 'family'. When Doug himself tries to categorise individuals, he 'fancied he could tell the members from the visitors. The members had a dowdy, worn, slumping look; the visitors were dressier and full of determined gaiety. It occurred to him that Bee could be mistaken for a member' (SM, 175). However, he also views her as an outsider: 'She was the only guest who seemed to have remained outside the gathering' (SM, 177).

Tyler again undermines the importance of family by suggesting that, when Doug is finding adjustment to retirement difficult, it is a group of outsiders who provide the solution rather than individuals within the family circle. And here the interface between insider and outsider is informed with cultural diversity as Doug chooses 'strangeness over similarity'<sup>13</sup> and benefits from the company of 'the foreigners' from Number Nine: 'A constantly shifting assortment of Middle Eastern graduate students ... attending classes at Johns Hopkins'

(SM, 3). Their 'difference' provides him with a liminal space. In an earlier text, the unpublished *Pantaleo*, such difference is perceived as a threat. The protagonist's American mother reminds him of his childhood in an Italian American neighbourhood: "Your Father wanted you to be American ... light of touch ... easy-going, offhand ... I thought, my poor little children, in this shabby neighbourhood, these queer-smelling people all around ... skinny babies wearing earrings" (P, 328). This is not the case in *Dinner*, where Ezra feels empathy for the 'foreigners' visiting their relative with a 'heart rumour' in the hospital when the owner of the restaurant, Mrs Scarlatti, herself Ezra's significant outsider, is dying: 'Why even their poetry touched matters close to Ezra's heart' (D, 125). Nor is it the case in *Saint Maybe*, where the students are present at such family occasions as the funeral of Lucy and the introduction of Ian and Rita's baby and, significantly, Christmas and Thanksgiving celebrations. In a sense, as Judith Caesar suggests, they 'enrich the lives of the Americans with their difference'.<sup>14</sup>

However, in other respects, Caesar's article is misconceived. It seems dubiously generalised and simplistic to suggest that 'Middle Easterners seem the most threatening of foreigners, because they are almost like us, but, finally, not quite'.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore it seems conceptually confused to place an emphasis on alienation and align Rita, who will be discussed later, with these Middle Easterners and assert that she is 'almost as alien as the foreigners'.<sup>16</sup> Tyler clearly does not support this sort of categorisation as is suggested by Robertson; the 'concept of alienation depends on a firm conceptual boundary between the strange and the familiar, inside and outside'.<sup>17</sup> More specifically, I take issue with Caesar's view that the 'foreigners' are 'liminal' because they

'share a Semitic religion and Greco-Roman philosophical heritage with the West, and they frequently look just like southern Europeans'.<sup>18</sup> In my view their liminality rests on the fact that they occupy a double threshold, on the edges both of the family and of Americanness.

Caesar's assertion that 'none of the major reviews ... even mentions the existence of the foreigners who pervade the book and help to convey some of its most important themes ... as if that which contradicts the stereotype does not exist'<sup>19</sup> is inaccurate. Both Leithauser in the *New York Review* and Parini in the *New York Times Book Review* refer to them. Indeed, Parini suggests that there is an element of stereotype: 'And a fair number of the peripheral characters - like the continuously changing group of "foreigners", students who live nearby and attend the Bedloes' annual Christmas fest - seem astonishingly caricatured'.<sup>20</sup> However, Parini's criticism presumes that there is a superior voice articulating the telling and overlooks Tyler's subtle use of point of view, where the chapter has Doug as the focaliser and through him she is comically depicting white middle-class misunderstandings concerning the 'exotic'. Hence there are references to differences in cooking, where Doug perceives 'smells of spice and burnt onions'; to music - 'the tune continued to wind through his head, blurred and wandery and mysteriously exciting' (SM, 165); and to language and religion - 'They were always so considerate about dropping whatever unpronounceable names they'd been christened with. Or not christened, maybe' (SM, 163).

There is an element of exaggeration for comic effect, where Fred, Ollie and John Two, because of their love of gadgets, are prone to disasters, and also a characteristic use of detail. In their house the 'foreigners' have hung a

'wrinkled paper poster of a belly dancer drinking a Pepsi' (SM, 165). The juxtaposition of 'Eastern' belly dancer and 'Western' Pepsi signifies that the students occupy a dual terrain, a hybrid 'third space'<sup>21</sup> not only between family and not-family but also between American and not-American - a liminal zone. Even though they are present at Christmas and Thanksgiving, Tyler draws attention to their distance from American life: 'They thought America was a story they were reading, or a movie they were watching ... it wasn't theirs' (SM, 166). Here Robertson's notion of a 'constant oscillation between shedding and incorporation without any suggestion of some final resting place' can be re-cast in cultural terms. They never become American and Doug views their experiences as a 'brief holiday in their lives' (SM, 183). Yet they take on stereotypical aspects of American life during their stay, hence their fascination with gadgets and their beer-drinking. A further significant detail is that they are American and not-American in their wearing of jeans. They go along with the custom of wearing jeans but wear them differently. Doug observes that they 'wore their jeans, so neat and proper with the waist at the actual waistline, and in this man's case even a crease ironed in' (SM, 163).

In *Saint Maybe* the notion of liminal edge can also be re-configured in narratological terms. This occurs in two movements; one radial, one linear. Initially Tyler plays games with reader expectation, as it emerges only gradually that Ian is to be the central character. As Pavey comments in her review, 'Ian is the sort of kid who stands grinning, hands clasped under his armpits, on the edges of family life, before sloping off to follow his own devices'. However, he 'emerges as the one to watch'.<sup>22</sup> This narrative movement can be viewed as radial, as characters, like the 'foreigners', are

pulled in from the periphery of the narrative to the centre. In his review, Leithauser commends this 'Following one of her novels to its conclusion, we find that her edges, her peripheral characters, continually beckon - further proof of the skill of the artist holding everything together at the center'.<sup>23</sup> It also demonstrates her skill in reinforcing narratologically her thematic point concerning the permeability of family influence.

Furthermore Tyler highlights the flaws inherent in any notion of an ideal family by drawing attention to the way the Bedloes maintain 'the ideal apple-pie household' (SM, 4) by glossing over 'hitches' in the linear narrative. These 'hitches' can be viewed as 'limit-tests' to the idea of family, like Claudia's dropping out of college or Danny's sudden marriage to a pregnant divorced woman with two small children. However, these edges of potential disruption are passed over for the sake of perpetuating the family ideal. Bee is particularly guilty of this: 'she was the one who set the tone' (SM, 8), and John C. Hawley describes her as 'a self-blinded Polyanna who transforms every crisis into an apparent opportunity for welcome change'.<sup>24</sup> And indeed she is, as when she seamlessly assimilates the fact that her potential daughter-in-law has children already: "'If she has lots," Bee told him, "we can mix them in with Claudia's and form our own baseball team"'. She laughed. Ian turned to look at her, but he was too late. Already she had passed smoothly to unquestioning delight, and he had missed his chance to see how she did it' (SM, 10).

In 'People Who Don't Know the Answers' there is a potentially disruptive episode which threatens to dent Bee's ideal of family harmony when Claudia criticises the state of the house. Doug feels that this is insensitive: 'She wasn't thinking how it sounded to waltz into a person's house and announce that it

was filthy' (SM, 168). He is anxious that Bee might be hurt by this and tries to defuse the situation: 'Peculiar, isn't it? ... First you're scolding your children and all at once they're so smart they're scolding you ... I suppose there was some stage when we were level with each other'. Typically, Bee moves across this edge of disharmony by making light of it, and in a sense, she demolishes rather than inhabits this threshold: "'Well, I must have been on the phone at the time," Bee said and then she laughed' (SM, 168). However, there is a suggestion in this chapter that even she comes to some sort of recognition that the Bedloe narrative of family life has contained points of change: 'We've had extraordinary troubles ... and somehow they've turned us ordinary ... We're not a special family anymore' (SM, 181).

Here her acknowledgement that disruptions necessarily occur suggests that, in reality, an ideal family does not and cannot exist. Arguably it is significant that she voices this after the church picnic and her encounter with Ian's 'outsiders'.

The character of Rita di Carlo relates to the first of these narrative movements in that she moves from the periphery to the centre. Seemingly she is peripheral, the 'Clutter Counselor' who puts people's houses in order. In one of Tyler's handwritten index cards she is listed as 'Rita', 'a sorter of households, old classmate of Agatha's'.<sup>25</sup> Actually she is a friend of a friend of Daphne's but her function remains the same and she tidies up and de-clutters the house. Again Tyler relates disorder to a lack of control after the death of Bee. Some reviewers have suggested that, in both character and function, Rita and Muriel Pritchett are similar. Parini refers to her as 'a zany man-saver perhaps too reminiscent of Muriel Pritchett in *The Accidental Tourist*',<sup>26</sup> and

Linda Brinson states that 'A woman comes into Ian's life, a strong woman who can set things right. Rita di Carlo makes her living by clearing out other people's clutter, not by training dogs, but the parallel to Muriel Pritchett in *The Accidental Tourist* is clear. One of Anne Tyler's strengths as a writer is that she can make a character who is clearly symbolic even while absolutely vibrant and unique'.<sup>27</sup> However, Rita is a less successful character than Muriel and she almost remains as 'symbolic' as the cradle Ian makes, where he delights in curves rather than straight lines, suggesting a loss of his former rather rigid attitude to life. She represents the last stage in Ian's redemptive process where she 'revitalises the Bedloes by helping them deal with their stale emotional and psychological fixations whose tangible sign is the accumulated physical debris that she clears out of their lives'.<sup>28</sup>

Yet, in a sense, Rita tidies up not only the Bedloe household but also the narrative, by marrying Ian and having his child; although their relationship does not drive the narrative as Macon and Muriel's had done, nor is it seen as emerging and developing. In this instance Tyler prefers to tell rather than show and has the characters make statements about their mutual attraction. (Arguably this is an attempt to de-liminalise the relationship which is not as crucial as the Macon/Muriel relationship, given the influence of the church members.) Rita tells Daphne that sorting Ian's belongings has revealed his simplicity and she is also attracted by his ability to listen: 'He acts so happy to hear me, even when all I'm talking about is drawer knobs' (SM, 297). Ian tells Daphne that 'There's something honest about her, and just ... right' (SM, 307). More significantly he also refers to her physicality, 'She has beautiful long

black hair and she moves in this loose, swinging way, like a dancer' (SM, 307).

Ian's response here demonstrates what Parini refers to as his 'wonderfully subtle sexual presence'.<sup>29</sup> Indeed Ian's (dubious) attitude to women has been evident throughout the novel. This started with adolescent imaginings where, when Lucy showed him her new dress, 'He could imagine its silkiness against his fingertips' (SM, 29) and adolescent fantasies about a stag party Danny attended: 'Probably they'd have a stripper ... and waitresses in fishnet stockings and girls popping out of cakes and such' (SM, 44). Then, in 'maturity', he objectifies the niece of his employer by viewing her as 'a juicy morsel of a girl', noticing 'how her long hair swung against the tight-packed seat of her jeans' (SM, 194) and daydreaming of a possible future wife, 'The Church Maiden', a 'lovely golden-haired girl sitting in the row just ahead (SM, 200, my italics).

### ***A Patchwork Planet***

This is Tyler's attempt to inscribe a male voice with sexual innuendo and it is in this respect that the character of Ian Bedloe anticipates Barnaby Gaitlin, the protagonist of Tyler's fourteenth book, *A Patchwork Planet* (1998), a novel which also involves the dynamic between insider and outsider. However, Barnaby Gaitlin's view of women is less 'wonderfully subtle' than Ian's, verging, as it does, on the 'laddish'.<sup>30</sup> On Baltimore railroad station, where the novel opens, Barnaby registers and assesses a variety of female 'types'. Taking hair as a sign of feminine sexuality, he compares a girl in a miniskirt with 'long blond hair, longer than her skirt which made it seem she'd neglected



to put on the bottom part of her outfit' (PP, 4) with a 'schoolmarm type' whose sexuality is summed up by her 'yellow netted bun' (PP, 7). In his review of *Patchwork Planet* Sebastian Faulks considers Tyler's success when she has Barnaby describe his first sexual encounter with this 'schoolmarm type': 'I cupped her lush, heavy breasts in the circle-stitched cotton bra' (PP, 122). Faulks questions the plausibility of whether 'any male in the history of human mating has noticed circle stitching at this moment'. He concludes that this disconcerting observation is Tyler's attempt to signify Barnaby's 'commitment problem'. Perhaps a more valid suggestion is Faulks' comment that 'most of her male characters lack that disagreeable aspect of maleness: the gung-ho testosterone-driven part ... and by leaving most of that out, creates men who are almost a third sex'.<sup>31</sup> Certainly Tyler does depict male nurturers and this blurring of gender boundaries relates to her questioning of the 'givenness' of maternal feeling already discussed. Yet she is careful to undercut Barnaby's 'laddishness'. Hence his acknowledgement, after describing a game with complicated rules which involves flipping crudities into sauce cups, that 'You miss that kind of thing when you're not around other guys a lot' (PP, 151) is undermined by his awareness of such masculine bonding, 'those man-to-man talks that are all numerals' (PP, 128). She also informs his voice with the sort of quirky sensitivity that privileges the special moment and the significant memory. He appreciates the change to 'a deep translucent blue' in the sky before sun-up which is accompanied by 'a quiet sound like loom! as the blue swings into focus' (PP, 62) and when he reflects on his house after his wife and baby have left, he remembers that 'there wasn't just an absence of sound; there seemed to be an antisound - a kind of like hole in the air' (PP, 157).

So the tone of the narrative forms a nexus of 'laddishness', sensitivity and also unsentimental insight and comic self-deprecation. Barnaby works for Rent-a-Back, a company that provides services for 'the aged or disabled'.<sup>32</sup> He compares two of his favourite female clients, Maud May and Mrs Alford; Maud May, the 'Tallulah' client, who 'smoked cigarettes in a long ivory holder and drank martinis by the quart' (PP, 55); Mrs Alford, the family woman, who recorded her grandchildren's visits on the calendar with exclamation marks: 'Ernie spending the night! Edward here for Labor Day!' (PP, 180). Barnaby understands the preoccupations of such old people where grandchildren and the fear of breaking a hip 'ruled the world' (PP, 23). Yet he refuses to sentimentalise old age and acknowledges its indignities: the 'sags and droops, splotches, humps, bulging stomachs, knobbly fingers, thinning hair, freckled scalps'. He disputes that 'old age is beautiful; that's one of those lines intended to shame whoever disagrees' (PP, 231).

These insights combine with Barnaby's self-deprecatory asides to himself like 'Dummy' (PP, 130) and 'Freak of the week! Nerd of the herd!' (PP, 112).<sup>33</sup> This self-deprecation mostly stems from his seemingly dismal situation at the beginning of *A Patchwork Planet*. Natalie, his ex-wife, is disparaging about his life-style: 'A rented room ... an unskilled job, a bunch of shiftless friends ... No goals and no ambitions' (PP, 19). To quote Brampton's review, he has 'Mislaid a wife, a daughter, a reputation and a sense of self'.<sup>34</sup> Barnaby has 'mislaid ... a reputation' because of the burglaries he had committed in his adolescence and there is a link to representations of the eccentric here where the notion of boundary-line re-emerges, suggesting a distinction between acceptable and unacceptable behaviour. Furthermore, he is an

unconventional burglar, more concerned with investigating the trappings of people's lives than stealing their material possessions for gain. In drawing attention to Barnaby's 'delinquent' behaviour Tyler is, once more, calling into question societal perceptions of what is normal and what is not, and the arbitrariness of the boundaries and constraints that this involves. Barnaby is sent to 'Renaissance', a high-class reform school 'whose stated aim was "Guiding the Gifted Young Tester of Limits"' (PP, 87). The implication here, that limits concerning the suitable and the appropriate exist and can be put to the test, also relates to an object in the text which Tyler invests with symbolic significance. The Gaitlin Faithful Feminine Twinform is a 'life-size wooden cutout, head and all, flat as a paper doll' (PP, 29). However, this is not to be used for sewing dresses, but for putting together and testing the *suitability* of an outfit before wearing it.

Yet the Twinform also relates to liminality as well as eccentricity in that it emerged at a threshold point in the career of Barnaby's great-grandfather and made him very wealthy. Its invention was the result of his brief encounter with the 'Gaitlin angel'. Subsequently it became part of family folklore that every male should receive, at a turning point in his life, a visitation from a female believed to be an angelic messenger in disguise. The double function of the Twinform, then, relates to Barnaby's state at the start of the narrative. For Barnaby, at nearly thirty, hopes his angel will appear, on the threshold of a new decade, to give him some sense of direction out of the liminal state that his life-style epitomises. Perhaps Tyler makes the idea of crossing thresholds uncharacteristically blatant here. As the novel opens, Barnaby is on the platform of Baltimore railroad station waiting to cross several state borders to

visit his daughter in Philadelphia. In addition, the comic incident he witnesses there involves a passport, obviously a necessity when crossing significant borders.

It is on this station platform that Barnaby reflects, in the opening words of the novel, 'I am a man you can trust', but this is followed by the qualification that this 'is how my customers view me', for this is not how Barnaby views himself: 'Come to think of it, I am the one who doesn't take it for granted' (PP, 3). Tyler immediately foregrounds Barnaby's sense of his own reliability in this text. As a participant in the narrative, Barnaby, in order to move on, needs to gain a new belief in himself. So a recognition of a new 'real life' (PP, 83) must involve a realisation of his own trustworthiness. As a discussion of the *Ladder of Years* will suggest, this concept of establishing a stable identity reverts to a more conventional envisioning and, in a sense, marks a retrospective step in the development of Tyler's writing. This search for a 'true self' places the text within a more 'realist' frame of reference and avoids the complexities of the 'intramodernist' approach she adopts in the earlier text.

However, once again, as was the case for Ian Bedloe in *Saint Maybe*, Tyler also undermines the role of family in Barnaby's attempt to attain a sense of self, and again she uses the family dinner as a trope for dysfunction. As Yanofsky comments in his review: 'Tyler dissects with lethal precision the tensions and undercurrents peculiar to family life, culminating in a Thanksgiving dinner that rolls 800 Christmases into one'.<sup>35</sup> This potluck dinner starts badly without turkey, for as Barnaby remarks, 'If a meal is mainly dessert, it's hard to know when it's over' (PP, 242). Yet that it is over is made manifest in a row where the Gaitlins 'publicly demolish each other' (PP, 248).

In *A Patchwork Planet*, then, Tyler is once again concerned to explore the ambiguous nature of family boundaries and the insider/outsider relationship where 'outsiders assume roles that are more than contingent yet not quite surrogates for family roles'.<sup>36</sup> Clearly Barnaby is in need of a 'surrogate' mother as he is at odds with the Mrs Gaitlin who has reinvented herself in material and cultural terms. As he says, 'My parents lived ... in a half-timbered, Tudor-style house with leaded-glass windows ... Out front was this really jarring piece of modern sculpture: a giant Lucite triangle balanced upside down a pole. My mother went after Culture with a vengeance' (PP, 67). In this study of class pretension and upward mobility Tyler returns to the question of the boundary between family and not family. Barnaby's mother is ashamed of her own parents: 'My grandpa had driven a laundry truck till poor vision forced his retirement, and Gram still clerked in a liquor store' (PP, 63); in fact she had changed her given name, thinking 'Margot with a t was higher class' (PP, 127). She wants to be an 'insider' in the Gaitlin family, not merely married to a Gaitlin. As Barnaby remarks, if it were possible 'she'd have arranged to have a Gaitlin blood transfusion' (PP, 74). Yet Tyler suggests that crossing class boundaries can make for an uneasy transition. Hence Barnaby's comments on his mother's tension; there was '[a]lways something discontented about her, something glittery and overwrought that set my teeth on edge' (PP, 69) and her insecurity: 'It was a lot more obvious now that she was just a Polish girl from Canton, scared to death Jeffrey Gaitlin might find her common' (PP, 81). At Barnaby's thirtieth birthday party his mother, as usual, raises the issue of the eight thousand seven hundred dollars he owes them, the money the Gaitlins had used to repay the neighbours for Barnaby's

burglaries. This leads to Barnaby's realisation that saving up and paying off this debt might mean freedom from his mother (PP, 87), a way of growing up (PP, 271) and, in a sense, a way out of his liminal state. However, this is not the case. Mrs Gaitlin returns the money and negates any sense of release by continuing to chastise him, telling him that cash is no recompense for losing face with the neighbours.

What Barnaby needs is 'surrogate' help from 'outside' the family to effect a change in his life and this comes in the form of Mrs Dibble, a 'dainty, fluttery lady a whole lot older than my mother, but I'd seen her tote a portable toilet down two flights of stairs when we were short-handed' (PP, 22-3). As the owner of Rent-a-Back she has proved 'more than contingent', or incidental, by offering him a job, not only on account of his 'philosophical attitude' but also, although Barnaby does not initially acknowledge this, because of his 'good-heartedness' (PP, 43). Unlike his mother, who thinks he is working for Rent-a-Back 'for spite' (PP, 79), Mrs Dibble understands his real motivation. Neither does she allude to his past misconduct when he is wrongly accused of theft. Rather than suggesting to the police, 'Yes, that particular worker does have a history of criminal behaviour' (PP, 169), she supports him. It later becomes clear that she trusts him enough to plan to give him the company. Having rejected the Gaitlin foundation and the family business there is a possibility that he will re-enter the limits of a (surrogate) family business.

It is Mrs Dibble who makes Barnaby acknowledge that he *is* reliable. When his clients phone up with a miscellany of irrelevant jobs after the accusation of theft, her belief that 'they must be trying to make a point, dear heart' makes him realise that 'I couldn't let my clients down. They trusted me' (PP, 190). Yet

Tyler is careful not to suggest that there is a clear demarcation between the insider and the outsider, so Mrs Dibble is 'not quite a surrogate'. Barnaby feels embarrassed when she uses a 'solemn, treasuring tone' (PP, 189), perhaps because he feels this is inappropriate. Furthermore she does not wholly replace Mrs Gaitlin. In fact Barnaby begins to understand the relationship with his mother: 'Poor Mom! It hadn't been much fun loving someone as thorny as me' (PP, 265). That said, it is clear that Barnaby's angel does not come from within the Gaitlin family, as his mother would have him believe: "The angels are just one of those, like, insider things that help them imagine they're special" (PP, 37). He comes to realise not that 'there were no angels after all', but perhaps that 'his angels were lots of people he had never suspected' (PP, 286) - his clients. In an epiphanic moment, Martine, a colleague at Rent-a-Back's, uses the word 'volleying' rather than 'rallying' in connection with these clients, and this leads to his recognition of their role: 'Rallying around was what she meant, but I didn't correct her. I had this vision of a crowd of old folks on a volleyball court, keeping me up, up, up and not letting me fall, stepping forward one after the other to boost me over the net' (PP, 237). Here again it is surrogate support from outsiders that is significant.

*A Patchwork Planet* is all about (un)reliability in that Tyler conflates Barnaby as unreliable narrator with Barnaby as putatively unreliable character. Not only is he wrong about his clients' understanding of him: 'None of my customers had the least inkling of my true nature' (PP, 124); he also misreads Sophia, the 'schoolmarm type' he encounters on the train to Philadelphia. Initially he mistakenly perceives her as his angel, endowing her with 'the most seraphic *smile*' (PP, 61) and a halo: 'Even in this gray light, her hair had a

warm yellow glow' (PP, 115). As Yanofsky comments, 'When Sophia inadvertently steers Barnaby in the direction of being a better father, he assumes she's his very own middle-class fairy godmother: solid and reliable'.<sup>37</sup> However, Tyler dislodges Sophia's dependability when she has her take a vicarious, almost prurient, pleasure in the apparent difference between Barnaby and herself, as Barnaby says: 'She was as proud of my sins as I was of her virtues' (PP, 17). Furthermore, these 'virtues' are called into question as Tyler makes Sophia's shortcomings evident to the reader while simultaneously constructing a narrative voice that is oblivious to these faults.

Hence Tyler undercuts Barnaby's statement, 'Even her most mundane rituals seemed dear to me, and touching' (PP, 146), by poking fun at Sophia's staid old-fashioned conventional routines, the daily Crock Pot and the weekly washing of nylons and having her admit herself that "'I'm probably too set in my ways. Too, you know. Definite. Too definite for men to feel comfortable with'" (PP, 12). Similarly, Tyler suggests that Sophia is manipulative and controlling. She engineers her aunt into employing Barnaby in order to start the relationship and is helpfully present in this respect. When Opal, Barnaby's daughter, visits, she again is studiously helpful and ingratiate herself with the family. Barnaby is oblivious to this: 'Every day, it seemed, I saw something new to appreciate about Sophia' (PP, 153). However, this does change and he becomes irritated by Sophia: 'Her even temper, her boring steadfastness, her self-congratulatory loyalty when she assumed I had stolen from her aunt' (PP, 254). And this latter assumption is crucial. In an interview about the novel, Tyler claims that she had difficulty with the characterisation of Sophia: 'Sophia was a challenge, because I had less sympathy with her than with the other



characters, and therefore I had more trouble presenting her fairly'.<sup>38</sup> Arguably this character presented a two-fold 'challenge' to Tyler. Her comment indicates both her concern not to judge her characters and also her resistance to the sort of 'definiteness' with regard to the behavioural boundaries Sophia's staid conventionality seems to represent.

Barnaby, then, is writing his own story; hence the narrative voice directly presents key events in his life to the reader, like his employment at Rent-a-Back: 'How I got into it is a whole other story' (PP, 22). Furthermore there is a sense in which character/participant and narrator imbricate,<sup>39</sup> where this telling facilitates the recognition of his own reliability which will apparently enable him to understand the permeability of the limen: 'Myself, I planned to stick to prose, when my time came. And right from paragraph one, I would stress my reliability, my solid and trustworthy nature' (PP, 48). There is a suggestion that articulating his problems to the reader might lead to a better-developed sense of self. Hence he reveals his tendency 'to burst out with something rude or disgustingly self-centered' (PP, 76) which makes him 'wish I could rearrange my life so I'd never have to deal anymore with another human being' (PP, 112). Because of this, he seeks advice from the reader: '(Do you think I might have Tourette's syndrome - a mild, borderline version? I've often wondered)' (PP, 256). This process relates to Tyler's remark in the interview: 'I had trouble at first getting Barnaby to 'open up' to me - he was as thorny and difficult with me as he was with his family, and we had a sort of sparring, tussling relationship until I grew more familiar with him'.<sup>40</sup>

There is a further aspect to the concern that Tyler has over Barnaby's representation. As an adolescent, Barnaby, the 'Paul Pry' burglar, broke into

people's houses, looked through their photo albums and read their letters because of his curiosity about their lives. There are pre-echoes of this in two unpublished, undated short stories. In 'The Piggly Wiggly Bandit' O J Brown skips Bible School and shows a friend an attic full of stolen goods he has taken, not because of their value, but because he is 'perfecting the art'.<sup>41</sup> In 'Respect' Jeremy breaks into an old lady's house and ruffles through her photos and books because he is 'fascinated by life'.<sup>42</sup> In *A Patchwork Planet* Barnaby secretly inspects Sophia's bedroom drawers because he wants some insight into, 'What does it feel like, being you?' (PP, 142). Similarly he enjoys listening to Maud May because she 'was my foreign correspondent, as you might call it, from the country of old age' (PP, 124). However, this can not only be read as Barnaby the narrator collecting material for his own story but also, meta-textually, as Tyler commenting on her own practice and her preoccupation with photographs and clutter and her weighting of apparently insignificant objects with emotional freight and cultural reference. Gullette supports this view: 'Anne Tyler's narratives of adulthood are packed with things - well packed, with each item ... crammed with meaning', and she cites Jeremy's collages in *Celestial Navigation* and Emily's leotard in *Morgan's Passing*.<sup>43</sup> Similarly, in this text, Sophia's 'quilted black nylon boots with white fluff round the tops' (PP, 45) suggest the sensible and conventional and Martine's 'child's blue plastic barrette in the shape of a Scottie dog' (PP, 159) her much more eccentric sense of style.

Another object 'crammed with meaning' is Mrs Alford's patchwork quilt of 'Planet Earth' which was 'makeshift and haphazard, clumsily cobbled together, overlapping and crowded'. This suggests the permeability inherent in any

setting of boundaries which, in and of themselves, lack permanence, order and precision. Similarly the fact that the quilt is 'likely to fall into pieces at any moment' (PP, 261) undermines any definite textual closure. Tyler has Barnaby acknowledge his reliability in the last sentence when he imagines Sophia unfolding his note which reads 'you never did realise. I am a man you can trust' (PP, 288). Yet he remains in his threshold state. Although his view of himself has changed, he admits 'These little glints of wisdom never last as long as you would expect' (PP, 224). He also has to maintain a relationship, return to his dispersed family, and remain in contact with his ex-wife and child: 'I had to stay in the picture to give Opal a sense of whatchamacallit. Connection' (PP, 14). He cannot leave this past familial baggage behind and says of Natalie 'What is this? She pops up everywhere - as if she'd materialised not just once or twice but anytime I turned around, flashing in and out of view like a glimmer in a pond (PP, 215).<sup>44</sup>

Furthermore Tyler infuses Barnaby's future relationship with Martine with a sense of irresolution. He had been drawn to her sexually almost against his will when his 'body went forward on its own, and it didn't give my mind a chance to say a thing' (PP, 186). Then, at the end of the novel, this sexual charge does seem to have an emotional edge. Mrs Alford, a favourite of them both, has died and Barnaby and Martine are clearing out her house when he feels 'the most amazing rush of happiness wash over me' as he unscrews a mounting plate which 'brought to mind the brass clasps on Martine's overalls' (PP, 288). Yet there is also the suggestion of a potential crossing back to the 'laddish' behaviour of his liminal place. In this respect his comment 'Well she wasn't a woman; she was just this scrappy, sharp edged little person' (PP,

185) is particularly apposite. The notion of responding to her as a person rather than a woman might imply a degree of equality. However, Barnaby's recurrent use of 'little' in his descriptions of her infantilise her, signifying more than a reference to her size. Clearly it is the woman as child that he finds attractive and after their sexual encounter he is particularly taken by the vulnerability of her 'crumpled black ankle socks' and 'little white pipe-cleaner shins' (PP, 186). There is even a sense that she is a replacement for the car that he has to sell to pay his debt, the Stingray he refers to as 'a boastful little kid' (PP, 193). He describes the way she thinks: 'the workings of her mind suddenly seemed so intricate - *the wheels and gears* spinning inside her compact little head' (PP, 234, my italics). Here Barnaby seems to be indulging in a car/woman/child fantasy which indicates a reversion to the 'laddish'. Significantly this more subtle understanding of liminality is not present in the earlier *Earthly Possessions*, the only other text written in the first person, where Charlotte Emory's journey seems more complete.

On the other hand, although Barnaby's reversion here implies the permeable fluidity of liminal experience, there is also the sense, in the novel, that a threshold does exist over which there is no going back. For once the limen has limits. In *A Patchwork Planet* Tyler uses the familiar motif of clutter and relates this to old age. She draws attention to the way objects with a family history crowd the attics and basements of the clients of Rent-a-Back who are reluctant to dispose of them because of the emotional associations they carry. Barnaby has grown accustomed to this clutter: 'the possessions choking the basements and clogging the attics, lovingly squirreled away for grown children'. However, he is also aware that 'the parents refuse to believe

that the trappings of a lifetime could have so little value' (PP, 235). Furthermore not only are these objects disposable, they are also not *transferable*: 'Just look at all the possessions a dead person leaves behind: every last one, even the most treasured' (PP, 284). Here then is a recognition that death is an eradicable boundary. This implies a darkness within the comedy which Perrick seems to overlook: 'It's a worry though that at times it (the novel) seems airy and over-sweet. The last thing one wants from this responsive novelist is for her to become Tyler-lite'.<sup>45</sup>

### ***Breathing Lessons***

Perrick's suggestion that Tyler's characterisation of Barnaby can be associated with that of Maggie Moran in *Breathing Lessons*, a text published a decade earlier in 1988, has more validity: 'Barnaby could be son-of-Maggie; they are both the type whose alarm clocks don't trill when they need to get somewhere on time, who are itchy with inquisitiveness and have a habit of crashing into other people's lives that gets them into trouble'.<sup>46</sup> Yet, in many senses, Barnaby is not 'son-of-Maggie'. Whereas his concern is to write his own story, Maggie's tendency to meddle stems from her need to write other people's. This leads to her attempt to reunite her moody, failed musician son Jesse, a descendant of Drumstrings in *A Slipping-Down Life*, with his ex-wife Fiona who has moved away from Baltimore taking their daughter, Leroy, with her. In addition, in spite of her job in an old people's home where Maggie is seemingly comfortable with old age, she views this phenomenon less realistically than Barnaby. This is revealed in her misguided attempt, again driven by her urge to write other people's lives, to resurrect her version of

Anita, Serena's mother, who in her youth wore 'bright-red, skin-tight toreador pants and worked in a bar' (B, 69) in the context of a nursing home, in an inappropriate Hallowe'en costume, despite the fact that she is now a fragile old woman: 'her chin quivering and denting inward as she sat in her wheelchair' (B, 321). Relatedly, in order to persuade Fiona to return to Jesse, Maggie writes two sentimental narratives which gain strength from a central object/symbol. She evokes Jesse's supposed suitability as a father by referring to a cradle that never got beyond the planning stage, and his grief as an abandoned husband by reminding Fiona of a soapbox she had left behind, which he had supposedly kept because its smell reminded him of her.

However, the most significant difference between Maggie and Barnaby concerns their attitude to death. In *A Patchwork Planet*, because death is the (only) moment when the limen ends, the futility of old people hoarding objects because of their sentimental associations implies that you necessarily leave such possessions behind when you die. This is not the case in *Breathing Lessons*. Indeed a reflection of Maggie's suggests the possibility of retrieving significant objects. She had been impressed by the belief of one of her patients that 'once he reached heaven, all he had lost in his lifetime would be given back to him' where 'Saint Peter would hand everything to him in a gunny sack'. This would include such objects as the red sweater associated with his mother he had left on a bus and the pocketknife 'his older brother flung into a cornfield out of spite' (B, 316). This leads Maggie to fantasise on what her own sack might contain, which would include Thistledown, a kitten she had accidentally killed in her mother's spin-dryer. Now reviewers felt that this sort of 'ditziness' on Maggie's part weakened the novel as a whole. Indeed critical

response to *Breathing Lessons* was mixed: 'For those who, after *The Accidental Tourist* judged Miss Tyler one of America's best novelists, *Breathing Lessons* will be a disappointment'.<sup>47</sup> Yet even the most critical reviews praise the funeral and reception scenes. McPhillips, who finds the novel 'less consoling and emotionally satisfying' than Tyler's others, commends 'her ability to orchestrate brilliantly funny set pieces'.<sup>48</sup> Perhaps this was what led Tyler to follow her practice of extracting a chapter for publication as a short story. And the chapter concerning the funeral entitled 'Rerun', like 'People Who Don't Know the Answers' in *Saint Maybe*, provides a useful introduction to the central issues of the novel.

As discussed in Chapter 5, representations of eccentricity persist after the transition stage into liminality and Serena's plan to replicate her husband Max's funeral with a reprise of their wedding leads to the sort of 'brilliantly funny set piece' alluded to in McPhillips' review. As she says, 'All I want is a kind of rerun, like people sometimes have on their golden anniversaries' (B, 57). Not that the wedding conformed to the traditional. Serena Gill is one of Tyler's gypsy women, like Muriel Pritchett and Rita di Carlo, who use clothes to signify their difference. Even as a girl she defied the conservative 1950s, 'the stodgy times they'd grown up in', by wearing 'ballet-style shoes, paper-thin, with a stunning display of sequins across each toe' instead of 'sensible brown tie oxfords and thick wool knee socks' (B, 62). It is no surprise, then, that her wedding contained such popular songs as 'My Prayer', 'True Love' and 'Friendly Persuasion' rather than Presbyterian hymns, and readings from Kahlil Gibran's *The Prophet* rather than the Bible and that, at the rerun funeral,

she wore strappy sandals and her dress 'was a vibrant red chiffon with a rhinestone sunburst at the center of the V neckline' (B, 51).

However, this 'rerun' resonates even more with the liminal than with the eccentric. Serena's attempt to repeat past experience and recast funeral as wedding constitutes a denial of death as the ultimate threshold. Here her former realistic attitude to life, where 'in her truthful, startling, bald-faced way' she reported to Maggie that marriage was not a 'Rock Hudson-Doris Day movie' and motherhood was 'perhaps not worth the effort' (B, 54), is superseded by a more unrealistic attitude to death. The embarrassment of Ira and the Barley twins, and their refusal to participate, mean that Serena's 'denial' fails. Furthermore, in a related attempt to defy the passing of time, Serena has her hair 'gathered into one of those elastic arrangements secured by two red plastic marbles, the kind of thing very young girls wore' (B, 73). Similarly the Barley twins 'wore their yellow hair in the short, curly, caplike style they'd favored in high school' (B, 66). However, Tyler graphically suggests that such defiance is futile: 'the backs of their necks were as scrawny as chicken necks and their fussy pink ruffles gave them a Minnie Pearl look' (B, 66). And she underscores this in her descriptions of how Maggie's and Serena's other classmates have aged. At the funeral Maggie reflects that 'lately when she took a pinch of skin from the back of a hand and released it, she noticed the skin would stay pleated for moments afterward' (B, 63). She realises that the much sought-after, aptly nicknamed Sugar, now, in maturity, Elizabeth, is much 'older looking' and that Sissy Parton, who plays the piano at both wedding and funeral, is that 'plump-backed woman with dimpled elbows like upside-down valentines' (B, 59). Nor is ageing gender-



specific. Male members of the congregation fare no better and the image of 'old lady-killer Durwood' meaningfully lingering on 'Darling you're the one I'm living for' is dismantled by the image of 'present day, shabby Durwood searching for the next stanza on Maggie's shampoo coupon' (B,71). Attempting to defy the ageing process is as futile as pretending that death is a permeable crossing.

Maggie's thoughts at this funeral suggest that an additional facet of liminality can be applied to this text. Finding a school photo of Daisy and a colour snapshot of Jesse in her purse leads to a contemplation of her life and particularly her maternal status. Maggie is impressed by her son's handsomeness but perceives that 'the look he gave her was veiled and impassive, as haughty as Daisy's. Neither one of them had any further need of her' (B, 35). The sense of loss this insight implies suggests that she is occupying a similar liminal terrain to Pearl Tull in *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant*, where motherhood is a dangerous, and, more particularly, an unfamiliar place where conventions and skills need to be learned. Maggie articulates explicitly the need for lessons when she recalls her reactions on leaving hospital: 'I don't know beans about babies! I don't have a licence to do this ... I mean you're given all these lessons for unimportant things - piano-playing, typing ... But how about parenthood?' (B, 182). Clearly the title of the novel is relevant here, where 'breathing lessons' were the strategies, available to Maggie's daughter-in-law, but not existing in the 1950s, which women can learn to adopt during labour. This title, which contains a typical Tyler contradiction and appears oxymoronic in meshing the automatic and involuntary act of breathing with the cerebral and deliberate process of

learning, draws attention to the fact that the so-called 'natural' can often involve the need to learn to adjust.

For Maggie this adjustment involves an acceptance of the stage of motherhood termed 'empty nest'; the fact that her second (last) child is leaving home. Yet, and the book differs from *Dinner* in this respect, the relationship with her daughter remains unconvincing, and the character of Daisy, who undertook her own toilet training and ironed her own colour-coordinated school outfits, is a pale imitation of Meg in *Searching for Caleb*. As McPhillips comments, she 'remains largely off-stage as she packs to leave home for college the next day'.<sup>49</sup>

Furthermore, Maggie's adjustment to *her* liminal experience also fails to convince, largely because Tyler's characterisation of Maggie comes close to a stereotype of the dizzy housewife as seen in the situation comedy of the 1950s.<sup>50</sup> In fact, although Maggie dislikes the storylines of the TV programme, she aligns herself to the 'I Love Lucy type - madcap, fun-loving, full of irrepressible high spirits' (B, 45). The text is punctuated with the catalogue of mistakes and accidents which reviewers took issue with. Hoagland even suggests a kind of 'dumbing down' to gain popularity: 'the comedies of Fiona's baby's delivery in the hospital and of Maggie's horrendously inept driving have been caricatured to unfunny slapstick, as if in an effort to corral extra readers'.<sup>51</sup> Maggie as 'klutz' persists as a too-predictable running joke which starts before the journey with an accident with a Pepsi truck (reinforcing the women-are-bad-drivers stereotype), includes battling with road maps and spilling drinks as the couple travel and ends back home with a failed attempt at recording an answer-phone message. In the 'Rerun' chapter, Tyler makes

her sense of disarray and silliness evident as she and Ira enter the church for the funeral. She looks and acts inappropriately: 'the waistband of her pantyhose had folded in on itself so it was cutting into her stomach' (B, 48) and she has a 'little fit of giggles' (B, 48) about there being a bride's side and a groom's side. During the service she remarks too loudly that the minister who had presided at the wedding is dead and indulges in a sentimental fantasy of Max in heaven in a 'lovely dwelling place with Grace Kelly and Bing Crosby, his crew cut glinting against the sunlit sails' (B, 68).

In addition, there is less sense that Maggie achieves the sort of understanding of her situation that Pearl Tull does. At the very end of the novel Tyler has her experience 'a sort of inner buoyancy' (B, 327), which suggests that the future might not be as painful as she has anticipated. But this is undercut by her continuing lack of awareness of the politics of her marriage to Ira. Betts commends this relationship as 'a marriage of opposites' because their personalities complement each other.<sup>52</sup> Yet the marriage comes dangerously close to stereotyping along gender lines; Ira as the tall, dark, handsome, taciturn male, Maggie as the small, fair, talkative female. According to Wagner-Martin, 'Ira's relentless truthfulness counters Maggie's pervasive confusion'.<sup>53</sup> A conversation between them takes place in bed. Maggie, having been frustrated in acquiring a grandchild to look after, by reconciling her son and ex-daughter-in-law, asks Ira 'what are we two going to live for, all the rest of our lives?' (B, 326). Ira fails to answer and carries on with his game of Solitaire. Maggie is his passive audience: she 'rested her head against his chest and watched ... He had passed that early, superficial stage when any number of moves seemed possible, and now his choices

were narrower and he had to show real skill and judgement' (B, 327). Significantly it is Ira who is making the moves and demonstrating 'real skill and judgement'. In spite of the fact that Maggie 'slipped free and moved to her side of the bed', this is a specious sort of freedom if Ira is to make future decisions to which Maggie will concur.

### ***Ladder of Years***

In some respects Tyler's characterisation of Maggie in *Breathing Lessons* anticipates that of Delia Grinstead in *Ladder of Years*, Tyler's thirteenth novel, published in 1995. Here, again, in spite of the fact that the novel was short-listed for the first Orange Prize,<sup>54</sup> critical response was mixed. As in the earlier novel Tyler was castigated for 'the sitcom quality' of the narrative and for superficiality: 'The suspense is enjoyable but not nearly as pleasing as watching Tyler skim so stylishly over the surface of some decidedly troubled waters'.<sup>55</sup> Michèle Roberts also condemns her for a lack of social engagement: 'Serial killers and sex abusers and rampaging feminists may stalk the leafy neighbourhoods, but in Tyler-country mothers are still baking gingerbread and stuffing cookies into jars and no-one has heard of despair'.<sup>56</sup> There is the usual charge of 'marshmallow sentimentality', though another novelist, Lynne Truss, disagrees: 'I should say at once that Tyler is not sentimental or yucky about these families of hers'.<sup>57</sup>

Maybe this mixed response to both *Breathing Lessons* and *Ladder of Years* stemmed from the emphasis in these novels on the personal/domestic, rather than the political/public, situation which Maggie and Delia experience. Like Maggie, as middle-aged, middle-class mothers, they have to try to

resolve the dilemma of the 'empty nest' when their children no longer need them. Hence Delia 'sometimes felt like a tiny gnat, whirring around her family's edges' (L, 23).<sup>58</sup> Both Maggie and Delia attempt to leave this nest but this is a minor incident in *Breathing Lessons*, and Maggie capitulates almost immediately to Ira's 'Hey babe, care to accompany me to a funeral?' (B, 46).

However, in *Ladder of Years*, in my view a better book than *Breathing Lessons*, Delia's 'escape' from the usual family holiday in Bethany Bay, when she walks out of her marriage away from her family and hitches a ride into a future unknown, initiates the narrative. Tyler places, as a kind of epigraph to the novel, the newspaper item entitled 'Baltimore woman disappears during family vacation', which neatly sums up how her family perceive Delia. They can remember neither what she was wearing, her husband's suggestion being 'looking kind of baby-doll', nor, more significantly, the colour of her eyes: 'her eyes are blue or gray or perhaps green' (L, 3).<sup>59</sup> Clearly this ignorance indicates that Delia is indeed 'a tiny gnat', unappreciated by Sam, her preoccupied and patronising husband, by Ramsay, Susie and Carroll, her self-absorbed adolescent children, and by Eliza, her eccentric elder sister.<sup>60</sup>

Perhaps the most important similarity between the two texts, however, is the nuanced reiteration of the notion of 'rerun'. Delia ends up in the small Maryland town of Bay Borough, where one of the inhabitants is an elderly man, Nat Miller, who because of his 'flashbacks' lives in Senior City, a somewhat sanitised home for old people. In an attempt to outwit time and counter the inevitability of mortality and the realisation that 'Old age was the completed form, the final finished version' (L, 240), he marries a much younger woman and at the wedding he voices the notion of rerun, 'You get to

what you thought was the end and find it's a whole new beginning' (L, 219). More important is Delia's attempt to start over in Bay Borough, to 'rerun' her life. Because of this, Bay Borough can be read as a liminal space, a permeable threshold to inhabit as she re-configures motherhood and reviews her status within the family.

In this reading Bay Borough becomes a site of identity change where Delia becomes 'without the conversational padding of father, sisters, husband, children ... a person without a past' (L, 108). She does this by rejecting her former personal history. Here she had been cast in a variety of prescribed and circumscribed roles. She is the wife and mother, a recently bereaved youngest daughter, and an almost-mistress in her short-lived relationship with Adrian, the young man she came across in the supermarket. Tyler is concerned with stereotyping here as all these roles are informed with the notion of a kittenish Delia, of Delia as child in fluffy slippers, smocked dresses and nursery pastels; 'Daddy's pet' in childhood (L, 115) becomes 'a little girl playing house' in married life (L, 127). It is symptomatic of the subtlety of this text, as opposed to *Breathing Lessons*, that Tyler problematises rather than endorses female stereotypes and demonstrates an awareness of how women watch themselves acting out roles. In order to escape this past, Delia also has to minimise the trappings of her physical environment and Tyler here rehearses the familiar opposition between order and clutter. Before she can achieve order Delia needs to de-clutter, to attain a kind of starkness. This involves a minimalist 'satisfyingly Spartan' (L, 91) living space; hence her room at Belle's where she could 'detect not the slightest hint that anyone lived here' (L, 97), and the necessary boredom which led to the 'clearing out' of her mind (L,

127). The construction of Miss Grinstead is part of this process. Delia abandons 'kind of baby-doll' clothes, and wearing 'a gray knit of some sort', sees herself as 'a somber, serious-minded woman in a slender column of pearl gray' (L, 88). This woman avoids contact: 'She had noticed that Miss Grinstead was not a very friendly person. The people involved in her daily routine remained two dimensional to her, like the drawings in those children's books about the different occupations' (L, 101)

The key phrase here concerns the inhabitants of Bay Borough, who remain 'two-dimensional' rather than three-dimensional and 'realistic'. Here a comment in Joyce Carol Oates's review is apposite: 'If *Ladder of Years* seems not so imaginative nor so inventive as other novels of Tyler's, its characters rather more one-dimensional, it yet contains many satisfying qualities, small jewel-like epiphanies born of Delia's initial solitude and, not least, a serio-comic intelligence and a sympathetic forgiving eye for the textures of ordinary life'.<sup>61</sup> Oates misses the point here, as it is precisely because its characters are 'rather more one-dimensional' that the novel is more 'imaginative and inventive' than Tyler's other novels in that she moves away from her usual realism. I would counter Oates's assertion that *Ladder of Years* is 'perhaps her most conventional so far'<sup>62</sup> as, in my opinion it is the most experimental. Indeed other reviewers suggest that Tyler is complicating her usual writing style. Jane Shilling refers to a 'quasi-realism' where 'the naturalism is deceptive, distracting attention from a variety of highly artificial devices',<sup>63</sup> and Kathryn Harrison agrees: '*Ladder of Years* is a fantasy. The path Delia's story takes is deeply unrealistic. Her way is paved with tidily convenient twists'.<sup>64</sup>

Although the application of literary labels to Tyler's writing can be problematic, Kirtz's notion of intramodernism 'which nods to postmodernism and realism alike, but which cannot be subsumed automatically into either style'<sup>65</sup> is helpful. In Kirtz's view, 'the writers of intramodernist fiction call attention to classical realism's unexamined belief in our own absolute reality'.<sup>66</sup> Tyler 'calls attention' to this 'unexamined belief' in two important ways, firstly in her configuration of Delia's identity, and secondly by locating Bay Borough in the realm of the fantastic as both real and not real, a space within which to create meanings.

This leads to a different reading where the de-cluttering by Delia referred to above does not result in the notion of a true self located in a paramount reality. Certainly Bay Borough represents a threshold and, in this sense evokes a liminal space. Yet Tyler does not simply replicate the notion of the limen which informed such texts as *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant* and *The Accidental Tourist*, where the identity of Pearl Tull and that of Macon Leary seemed more a fixed reality than a construct. There is no longer a sense that identity can be searched for, and gained, but the sense that identity is essentially unstable. In *Ladder of Years* Tyler employs the poststructuralist notion of a de-centred self by pointing to the fluidity of Delia's identity. Certainly Delia attempts to reconstruct herself as an independent spinster in Bay Borough by replacing her family's version of her as the fluffily feminine Mrs Grinstead with her own version, the starkly aloof Miss Grinstead. However, this version is destabilised by a change of occupation when she leaves her secretarial job and applies for a job as a 'Live-in Woman' (L, 160), a substitute mother. What the remit of motherhood involves is made comic in



the job description that Joel Miller puts in the paper. Here the duties required range from 'transportation to dentist doctor/grandfather/playmates' to being 'available nights for bad dreams/illness' (L, 160). This is not comic invention on Tyler's part. In the papers at Duke there is a newspaper cutting, an advert for a 'Live-in Woman seeking loving responsible Mary Poppins with tolerance for sports and computer'. Delia takes the job and this arrangement leads to developing relationships not only with her employer, Joel Miller, but also with his young son Noah, his estranged wife Ellie, her father Nat and his wife Binky. Macpherson's feminist gloss on this rightly points to the social construction of motherhood and the difficulties of redefining that role. Tyler is drawing attention to the problem of motherhood in a patriarchal system in her portrait of Delia, who forsakes this role only to find herself wrapped up in family life in other guises.<sup>67</sup>

Delia's attempt to reconstruct another role because she perceives that her Baltimore roles do not contain her true identity, her attempt to start over, fails not only because of the invalid notion that 'true' identity exists, but also because the inhabitants of Bay Borough imbricate her self-construction with their own when they first adopt her as mystery woman without a past and then as surrogate wife/mother. Though no longer the Baltimore wife/mother defined in relation to her family, Delia's new identity is similarly circumscribed as she becomes a different sort of 'other'. Clearly reinvention is beyond her control. Her self remains in a state of flux as she returns as a mother to Baltimore. The text anticipates this reintegration: 'She resembled one of those children who, never, no matter how far they travel, truly mean to leave home' (L, 126). Relatedly she cannot slough off the child persona. Even when Mrs Delia

Grinstead becomes Miss Grinstead the child remains; a key Miss Grinstead signifier, 'the cardigan', 'made her feel like a cherished child' (L, 251) and she wishes 'they made gripe water for adults' (L, 269). Thus there is an element of the fantastic in Delia's attempt to reinvent herself.

There is also a sense of the fantastic in Tyler's depiction of Bay Borough, the town which constitutes the liminal space for this de-centring of Delia's self. Its 'unreality' calls into question the conventions of realism, which apparently propel the text. This tension relates to the experimental 'in-between' nature of the writing and 'the highly artificial devices' alluded to in Shilling's review. This fantasy/realism interface means that although Bay Borough does not exist in the same way as Baltimore, it is real enough to persuade the reader that the town is not merely a fantasy zone. Yet its unreality is signalled initially by a series of 'artificial devices'. Firstly there is Delia's initial encounter with the statue of George Pendle Bay, after whom the town is named. Not only does Tyler characteristically wrong-foot a reader expecting a waterside town, she also sets up a double coincidence with regard to the relationship between Delia and this Mr Bay. He, too, is a deserter, having made the decision 'TO ABSENT HIMSELF FROM THE REMAINDER OF THE WAR' (L, 87) as the inscription on the statue states and he is also an ancestor by marriage. Then there is the ease with which Delia finds herself an appropriate job and a suitable place to live, as if some kind fairy godmother of neglected runaway mothers and wives were watching over her. Furthermore Bay Borough 'is a town of misfits' (L, 137), which has been laid out as 'a *perfect* grid' (L, 105, my italics). There is a detailed plan of Bay Borough in the Duke papers as well as index cards with ground plans of the Miller house and Belle's boarding house

in Bay Borough. This attention to specificity suggests that Tyler is still concerned to maintain a framework of realism - but how are we meant to read Belle with her 'towering dessert tray of lavish golden curls' (L, 89) or her employer, the solicitor Ezekiel Pomfret, whose main occupation seems to be ordering gadgets from mail-order catalogues?

However, it is not simply through characterisation and setting that Tyler transforms Bay Borough. After all eccentric characters are to be expected and, in a sense, Ezekiel and Belle resemble characters in the earliest texts such as Mr Pike in *A Tin Can Tree* and Violet in *A Slipping-Down Life*. It is Delia's interactions with the residents of Senior City that are particularly significant. At first she reapplies the view of old age she had acquired as the daughter/wife of a doctor: 'She was familiar with old people's tribulations, having observed Sam's patients for so long' (L, 189), aware of 'arms as withered and soft as day-old balloons' (L, 219) and a face that 'had gone past merely old to that stage where it seemed formed of disintegrating particles, without a single clear demarcation' (L, 220). But, after spending time in Bay Borough, her attitude changes; hence she reconsiders the residents of Senior City: 'No longer did their own infirmities seem so apparent, either, or their wrinkles or white hair. Delia had adjusted her slant of vision over the past months' (L, 238). Perhaps here 'slant of vision' relates to the slippage between realism and 'intramodernism' that Tyler is employing in this text. This differs from the strategies she uses in her next novel. I have already discussed Barnaby Gaitlin's dispassionate (realistic) view of ageing in *A Patchwork Planet* and in this later text Tyler reverts to a more conventional realist discourse. Perhaps Tyler no longer felt comfortable with

'intramodernism' or considered it inappropriate to the subject-matter of *A Patchwork Planet*. Perhaps she was more concerned with a different kind of experiment, a first-person narrative in a male voice.

As these allusions to old age suggest, Tyler is concerned with the passing of 'natural time' associated with maturing and growing in *Ladder of Years* as well as with the attempts to outwit and arrest time already discussed. The ladder of years of the title is replicated in the organisation of Senior City, where '[w]e're organized on the vertical. Feebler we get, higher up we live' (L, 193). Yet one wonders whether time in the text would be better characterised by a spiral staircase rather than a vertical ladder, because of the motif of repeated time which informs the novel. Stout dismisses the novel as 'pointlessly repetitive'<sup>68</sup> but clearly there is a point to the repetitions. And here again there is an unreality associated with Eliza's belief in reincarnation and a significant reference to the film fantasy *Groundhog Day* (1993), in which the central character had been stuck in some kind of time-warp where he has to keep living the same day over and over. Peter Kemp in his review suggests that Bay Borough itself 'seems a cosy time-warp encapsulation of an earlier, homelier America, where a dimestore still exists and trusting inhabitants leave their doors unlocked'.<sup>69</sup> However, Tyler's treatment of time is more complicated than Kemp implies, and as Macpherson indicates past and present converge; hence the 1950s kitchen in Belle's boarding house is the setting for a 1990s Thanksgiving meal dependent on outside catering.<sup>70</sup>

Significantly, Delia herself perceives the unreal qualities of Bay Borough when she reflects on the newspaper announcement concerning her disappearance: 'Or maybe she wasn't gone; this whole experience had been

so dreamlike. Maybe she was still moving through her previous life the same as always, and the Delia here in Bay Borough had somehow just split off from the original' (L, 99-00). Later, about to attend Nat and Binky's wedding, she ponders outfits, thinking, 'When would the things she had here become her real things' (L, 215). This unreality combines with a sense of transcendental experience, symbolised by the ocean at Bethany Bay: 'that vast slaty limitless sweep, that fertile rotting dog's-breath smell, that continual to-and-fro shushing that had been going on forever while she'd been elsewhere stewing over trivia' (L, 70). Mendelsohn identifies the sense of immediacy within timelessness evoked here:

The day that Delia walks away is the first sunny day of their vacation, and she sees the water for the first time. "She paused, letting her eyes take rest in the dapples of yellow sunlight that skated the water, and then Carroll's armload of rafts crashed into her from behind, and he said 'Geez, Mum'." It's this kind of intrusion, of domesticity and accident into the realm of the sublime, that Tyler relishes, and captures with so much wit, simplicity and grace.<sup>71</sup>

In the liminal space of Bay Borough one trope for the town's unreality is the Bay Day baseball game. Significantly in this timeless place Independence Day is not celebrated, but on Bay Day a game is played in 'a fog as dense as oatmeal and almost palpably soft' (L, 130). This eccentric set-piece points to Delia's ambiguous relationship to Bay Borough. According to Macpherson, 'the fog acts as a pointer to the town's position as completely indefinable'.<sup>72</sup> However, this fog has more significance than Macpherson suggests. Fog implies the invisibility which is a convention of the fairy tale, and consequently relates to the metafictional nature of the text and the intertextual qualities embedded in it (for example the links with Eudora Welty's *The Robber*

*Bridegroom*, itself based upon a tale by the Brothers Grimm).<sup>73</sup> Tyler has used fairy tale in texts before, most obviously and most clumsily in *Morgan's Passing*. Here in *Ladder of Years* her fictive practice is more subtle. Initially she uses strategies of allusion, tapping into the reader's knowledge of a familiar cultural tradition. She signals this in the very first paragraph of the text, where 'garlic bulbs should be (called) "moneybags" because their shape reminded her of the sacks of gold coins in folktales' (L, 5). This positions Delia not only as mother, the teller of stories, but relates to the domestic/familial discussed later. At the end of the novel Tyler uses the fairy-tale task as a narrative device to reconcile Delia's daughter Susie and her estranged fiancé Driscoll. He has to discover the identity of a wrong number: "Bring me the boy in person, was how she put it, if I want her to forgive me." If you want to win the princess's hand, Delia thought to herself, because the errand did have a fairy tale ring to it' (L, 302).

Most importantly, however, Tyler associates a recurring set-piece of the fairy-tale genre, 'the three marriageable maidens' (L, 128) with an early meeting between Delia and Sam: 'But Sam claimed that when he first walked in, all three girls had been seated on a couch. Like the king's three daughters in a fairy tale, he said, they'd been lined up according to age, the oldest farthest left, and like the woodcutter's honest son, he had chosen the youngest and prettiest, the shy little one on the right who didn't think she had a chance' (L, 28). This anticipates the politics of a relationship where Sam has the power and the choices and Delia is firmly placed as decorative and amenable dependent wife/child, grateful to 'this unassailable self-possessed man who had all but arrived on a white horse to save her from eternal

daughterhood' (L, 212). There is a sense here that Tyler is eroding generic boundaries, as the reference to a hero on a white horse also suggests the genre of romantic fiction. Indeed Delia sought escapism before she attempted escape and found some kind of consolation in the reading of romantic fiction; books like *Captive of Clarion Castle*. In fact Tyler uses this intertextuality in a self-reflexive acknowledgement of the artificiality of fiction. She expresses Delia's first meeting with the young doctor in the language of the Harlequin books she reads: 'At nine o' clock exactly, young Dr. Grinstead stepped through the outside door, carrying a starched white coat folded over his forearm. Sunshine flashed off his clear-rimmed, serious glasses and glazed his sifted-blond hair, and Delia could still recall the pang of pure desire that had caused her insides to lurch as if she had leaned out over a canyon' (L, 28). Significantly her meeting with Adrian, the man in the supermarket, starts 'romantically', when, 'Once or twice the fabric of his shirt sleeve brushed her dress sleeve' (LY, 6). Here Tyler is purposely using the language of romantic fiction to indicate how it has influenced Delia's emotional responses.

It is a further indication of the experimental nature of this novel that Tyler makes overt the preoccupation with the possibilities and shortcomings of language, the sort of linguistic eccentricities she foregrounds in her third novel. In a sense, then, representations of eccentricity go beyond the comic set-piece in this novel. As in *A Slipping-Down Life* she draws attention to language's arbitrary nature and attendant linguistic confusions, as when Joel Miller mistakenly thinks 'penny soup' is so-called because it is cheap, not realising that its name originates from the way the vegetables it contains are coin-shaped. This lack of understanding is ironic because Joel himself, a

descendant of the Leary family in *The Accidental Tourist*, prides himself on his own use of language. In his preoccupation with correct terminology, he despises 'all terms that were trendy (including "trendy" itself)' (L,175). However, what is particularly significant about his mistake is the metaphoric implications of 'penny soup' and in *Ladder of Years* there is a wealth of such domestic/familial imagery. In a sense Tyler is cocking a snook at critics who castigate her for locating her fiction in the domestic by metafictionally drawing attention to, even celebrating, this trait.

This is signalled in the opening sentence of the novel: 'This all started on a Saturday morning in May, one of those warm spring days that smell like clean linen' (L, 5). The text comes to the reader through Delia's eyes, indicating from the outset how she is entrapped within a domestic mindset. Furthermore Tyler subtly particularises this imagery to relate to the variety of roles such a mindset implies. 'Clean linen' suggests woman as family laundress, while Delia's response to the hands of a child in Bay Borough: 'His little hands reminded her of biscuits, that kind with a row of fork holes on top' (L, 167) suggests family cook. Woman as carer is also indicated in the imagery. A mother has to amuse her children with treats and play. Hence the material for the air-conditioning filter looked to Delia 'like gray cotton candy' (L, 27), and the shrubs in her garden are described as 'the scribble of spent forsythia bushes' (L, 15). Similarly, 'mother' can also connote 'nurse', so Delia envisages newsprint 'as dotty and sparse as the *scabs* on an old briar scratch' (L, 50, my italics), and when Delia tries to conquer her aversion to water she moves gradually into the ocean 'like some-one removing a strip of adhesive tape by painful degrees'. That she misjudges the waves points to the



instability of her identity, particularly as this tentativeness is couched in the familial when 'she found herself to knocked off her feet and churning underwater like a load of laundry' (L, 250). This brings to mind Edna Pontellier in *The Awakening* (Kate Chopin, 1899), whose escape through drowning can be read as a kind of triumph. Delia's escape is neither as dramatic nor absolute.<sup>74</sup> Her view of her relationship with Sam at the end of the novel when 'She saw herself riding in the passenger seat, Sam behind the wheel. Like two of those little peg people in a toy car' (L, 323) is an indication that her domestic mindset persists.

In fact Delia finally relinquishes the liminal space she has inhabited in Bay Borough. She goes back to Baltimore for her daughter's wedding and returns to her husband's bed. Her final perception is of the unreality of the place: 'Bay Borough seemed to float by just then like a tiny, bright, crowded blue bubble, at this distance so veiled and misty that she wondered if she had dreamed it' (L, 310). So does this return home have resonances of capitulation and defeat? Has her experience in the 'tiny, bright, crowded blue bubble' served no purpose? Arguably her return reinforces the notion of Bay Borough as a threshold place. Certainly it cannot be read as a site of radical identity alteration; rather it is a terrain of muted adjustment.<sup>75</sup> According to Tyler herself: 'I don't see this book about a woman who undergoes an experience that alters her life; it's about how the experience lets her come to terms with her life as it really is'.<sup>76</sup> What this has involved has been a reassessment of her maternal status, hence the closing words of the text:

Now she saw that June beach scene differently. Her three children, she saw, had been staring at the horizon with the alert, tensed stillness of

explorers at the ocean's edge, poised to begin their journeys. And Delia, shading her eyes in the distance, had been trying to understand why they were leaving.

Where they were going without her.

How to say goodbye. (L, 326)

There is evidence in the papers that Tyler was exercised by this ending. As her practice is to obliterate corrections, changes on the manuscript are difficult to decipher but the readable changes are significant. Firstly in the manuscript copy Sam is included: 'Her three children had gazed out to sea while her husband stood slightly apart', yet this is omitted in the published edition, presumably in response to her editor Judith Jones who had taken issue with the 'downbeat' nature of the last page. As Tyler writes, 'it occurs to me that the reason it strikes you as downbeat may be that Sam is included in the image of those who are leaving. If the children alone appear in that image, it won't matter whether the final sentences are past-tense, since of course the children will still be leaving'.<sup>77</sup> A second omission is '[a]nd Delia walking away had only been trying to leave before they did'. Tyler decided to omit this herself, perhaps because it makes Delia's motivation in leaving too explicit. As Carol Shields' review suggests, 'Delia Grinstead, the good American housewife, runs away for a thousand undefined reasons' and she also feels that 'The decision she makes at the novel's conclusion may seem equally puzzling and impervious to analysis'.<sup>78</sup>

Perhaps it is Tyler's intention to be 'puzzling'. Perhaps her aim is to unsettle the reader and circumvent closure by eschewing the dichotomy between constrained and liberated and complicating the opposition between the entrapment of staying at home and the personal freedom of leaving. As

Stout says, 'Tyler in fact glorifies neither home-biding nor the freedom of the open road'.<sup>79</sup> Maybe both are in a way equally liminal. Certainly Oates' view that '[w]e want more from her than the wanly "moral" ending provides'<sup>80</sup> is misguided. There is nothing 'wanly "moral"' in Tyler's recognition of the difficulty in sloughing off the role of wife/mother as Delia becomes substitute, then returning mother. As Macpherson suggests, 'This postfeminist text subtly criticizes facile accounts of shrugging off one's past and almost deliberately provides no answers as to a woman's place once her mothering role is effectively complete'.<sup>81</sup> The ambiguities of the ending provide a statement by Tyler of how difficult it is to escape the ideological interpellations of gender construction. Roberts' dismissive review failed to acknowledge that *Ladder of Years* is both provocative and experimental. Her condemnation of the conventional nature of the narrative, 'The plot is one many contemporary women writers have felt compelled to invent, a myth of selfhood: unappreciated middle-aged woman flees husband and children in order to discover her identity'<sup>82</sup> inadvertently points to its unconventionality. In fact, in this 'intramodernist' text, Tyler, by drawing attention to the 'myth of selfhood', dismantles both realist conceptions of identity and utopian feminist notions of escape.

In the decade between *Breathing Lessons* (1988) and *A Patchwork Planet* (1998) representations of eccentricity persist in Tyler's work. However, the eccentric becomes subsumed in a liminal dynamic which is re-configured differently in each text. In the first pairing, in *Saint Maybe* and *A Patchwork Planet*, attention is drawn to the ambiguous threshold between family and non-family, between 'insider' and 'outsider'. This undermines the importance

of domestic influences by emphasising the significance of exogenous relationships. The ambiguity of this threshold rests on its permeability and lack of definite limit. However, in *A Patchwork Planet* there is one moment where the limen does stop, where death is the ultimate threshold. Formerly, in *Breathing Lessons*, the earliest novel of the four, Serena's failed attempt at 'rerun' obliquely anticipates this. This novel, in spite of winning the Pulitzer Prize, has weaknesses. There is a reversion to the sort of eccentric characterisation reminiscent of earlier texts which comes close to stereotype and caricature, and a rehearsal of the notion of limen in the sense suggested by Victor Turner. These sort of weaknesses are not characteristic of *Ladder of Years* - in spite of the fact that this novel did not win the Orange Prize. In this work the notion of 'rerun' is reiterated more successfully. The limen emerges as a place between reality and fantasy which partly enables a fresh encounter with the eccentricities of language and experimentation with form.

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1 Anon, 'An interview with Anne Tyler about *A Patchwork Planet*', reprinted in [http://www.bookbrowse.com/index.ctm:\(page=author&author11\)=313&view=interview](http://www.bookbrowse.com/index.ctm:(page=author&author11)=313&view=interview), accessed on 15 July 2001.

2 Mary F. Robertson, 'Anne Tyler: Medusa Points and Contact Points', in Catherine Rainwater and William J. Schiek, eds., *Contemporary American Women Writers: Narrative Strategies*, Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1985, 126.

3 Robertson, 126.

4 Anne Tyler, 'People Who Don't Know the Answers', *New Yorker*, 26 August 1991: 26-36.

5 Jay Parini, 'The Accidental Convert', *New York Times Book Review*, 25 August 1991 (DU).

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- 6 Lorna Sage, 'Compassion in clans', *Times Literary Supplement*, 27 September 1991: 24.
- 7 Robertson, 128.
- 8 Janis Stout, *Through the Window, Out the Door*, Tuscaloosa, Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 141.
- 9 Anne Tyler, quoted in Robert W. Croft, *Anne Tyler: A Bio-Bibliography*, Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1995, 95.
- 10 Croft, 88.
- 11 Robertson, 131.
- 12 Robertson, 136.
- 13 Robertson, 131.
- 14 Judith Caesar, 'The Foreigners in Anne Tyler's *Saint Maybe*', *Critique*, Fall 1995, Volume 37 No 1: 73.
- 15 Caesar, 73.
- 16 Caesar, 75.
- 17 Robertson, 127.
- 18 Caesar, 75.
- 19 Caesar, 79.
- 20 Parini (DU).
- 21 See Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, New York: Routledge, 1994.
- 22 Ruth Pavey, 'Run and Dance', *Observer*, 29 September 1991.
- 23 Brad Leithauser, 'Just Folks', *New York Times Book Review*, 16 January 1992: 55.
- 24 Quoted in Croft, 91.
- 25 Handwritten index cards (DU).
- 26 Parini (DU).
- 27 Anon, 'Anne Tyler Novel Has Laughs and Tears', *Winston-Salem Journal*, September 1991: C4 (DU).
- 28 Paul Bail, *Anne Tyler: A Critical Companion*, Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1998, 166.
- 29 Parini (DU).
- 30 This label has been applied to the British novelist Nick Hornby who, famously, is an admirer of Tyler: 'it is very hard to think of another novelist ... who can

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write comedy ... without being trapped into writing a stupid comic novel, or can induce the most acute melancholy without becoming po-faced', *Waterstones Magazine*, March 1995: 14-15 (DU). Indeed perhaps there is evidence of mutual borrowings. In *About a Boy* (1980) Fiona, a bizarrely dressed single parent, reminiscent of Muriel Pritchett, has a son, Marcus, who is ostracised and bullied at school and goes with the hero, Will, to buy trainers. This could be read as a reiteration of Macon Leary's trip with Alexander to buy jeans.

31 Sebastian Faulks, 'Needle Point of the Story', *Guardian*, 22 April 1998, 7.

32 As early as 1976 Tyler referred to the appeal of this sort of job: 'And it wouldn't be so bad working for one of those companies that takes on odd jobs for old ladies - driving them to their palmists, collecting their ground-rents for them' in 'Because I Want More Than One Life', in Alice Hall Petry, ed., *Critical Essays on Anne Tyler*, New York: G.K. Hall, 1992, 47.

33 As Bail points out, there is also evidence of a Holden Caulfield-type dislike of phoniness, 189, hence Barnaby's comment, 'Ordinarily I'm allergic to dishes with dropped g's in their names' (PP, 150).

34 Sally Brampton, 'Angel wanted. Blonde preferred', *Observer*, 7 June, 1998: 19.

35 Joel Yanofsky, 'Baltimore aureoles', *Montreal Gazette*, 16 May 1998 (DU).

36 Robertson, 122.

37 Yanofsky (DU).

38 Anon, 'An interview with Anne Tyler about *A Patchwork Planet*', reprinted in [www.bookbrowse.com/index.ctm:\(page=author&author11\)=313&view=interview](http://www.bookbrowse.com/index.ctm:(page=author&author11)=313&view=interview) accessed on 15 July 2001.

39 Tyler played with this idea in the short story, 'A Knack for Languages'.

40 Anon, 'An interview with Anne Tyler about *A Patchwork Planet*', reprinted in [www.bookbrowse.com/index.ctm:\(page=author&author11\)=313&view=interview](http://www.bookbrowse.com/index.ctm:(page=author&author11)=313&view=interview) accessed on 15 July 2001.

41 'The Piggly Wiggly Bandit', manuscript, 12.

42 'Respect', *Mademoiselle*, June 1972: 146-7+, manuscript, 6.

43 Margaret Morganroth Gullette, 'The Tears (and Joys) Are in the Things', in C. Ralph Stephens, ed., *The Fiction of Anne Tyler*, Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1990, 97.

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- 44 Tyler has already rehearsed this inability to relinquish shared family history in the previous text, *Ladder of Years*.
- 45 Penny Perrick, 'Men in a moral maze', *Sunday Times*, 14 June 1998: 43.
- 46 Perrick: 43.
- 47 David Klinghoffer, in Petry, ed., 137.
- 48 Robert McPhillips, 'The Baltimore Chop', in Petry, ed., 152-3.
- 49 Petry, ed., 153.
- 50 Voelker refers to the text's 'easily accessible sitcom vocabulary of domestic fiction', Joseph C. Voelker, *Art and the Accidental in Anne Tyler*, Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1989, 165.
- 51 Edward Hoagland, 'About Maggie, Who Tried Too Hard', in Petry, ed., 144.
- 52 Doris Betts, 'Tyler's Marriage of Opposites', in Stephens, ed., 1-16.
- 53 Linda Wagner-Martin, '*Breathing Lessons*: A Domestic Success Story', in Dale Salwak, ed., *Anne Tyler as Novelist*, Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1994, 165.
- 54 The chair of the judging panel, Kate Mosse, wrote to Tyler to explain the rationale for setting up the prize and invited her to send a personal message. 'People have told me that you rarely attend ceremonies, so I accept it's rather too much to hope that you want to come to smoggy polluted London in May and make an exception for us', letter to Anne Tyler, 24 April 1996 (DU).
- 55 Paul Gray, 'The Intentional Tourist', *Time*, 15 May 1995 (DU).
- 56 Michèle Roberts, 'Deep in Gingerbread Country', *Independent on Sunday*, 7 May 1995: 39.
- 57 Lynne Truss, 'Anne Tyler', *Independent Magazine*, 13 May 1995: 46.
- 58 There is a pre-echo in an unpublished, undated short story, probably written in the 1970s, entitled 'Empty Houses', where a woman attempts (unsuccessfully) to console herself after the marriage of her daughter Mitty, her son Skipper having already left home: 'she felt that clean sheets would be a consolation, but they felt too cold and smooth', manuscript, 12.
- 59 In another unpublished undated short story written in the first person entitled 'The Witch-Woman', the protagonist plans not to return from a trip to her sister because 'My husband slouches all over the place and my daughter drops every thing she touches'. Furthermore the family fail to notice her new glasses with spangled red frames. 'I had to make a real scene about it, act like some

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- old witch-woman. Then they noticed. What's the pleasure in that?', manuscript, 15.
- 60 Gail Caldwell refers to her as 'A 40 year old Baltimore woman who married her father's medical partner, Sam, when she was 19, she still lives in the house she grew up in - along with her kooky sister, a passel of churlish adolescent kids and a husband 15 years her elder who treats her like a housepet', *Boston Sunday Globe*, 7 May 1995 (DU).
- 61 Joyce Carol Oates, 'Time to Say Goodbye', *Times Literary Supplement*, 5 May 1995: 22.
- 62 Oates, 22.
- 63 Jane Shilling, 'Flight from the Family', *Observer*, 7 May 1995: 18.
- 64 Kathryn Harrison, 'Adventures of a Wayward Wife', *Washington Post*, 16 April 1995 (DU).
- 65 Mary K. Kirtz, 'Inhabiting the Dangerous Middle of the Space Between: An Intramodernist Reading of Kroetsch's *Gone Indian*', *GPQ*, 14, 1994: 207-17.
- 66 Kirtz, 215.
- 67 Heidi Slettedahl Macpherson, *Women's Movement: Escape as Transition in North American Feminist Fiction*, Amsterdam: Rodolpi, 214.
- 68 Janis P. Stout, *Through the Window, Out the Door*, Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 138.
- 69 Peter Kemp, 'A Change of Life', *Sunday Times*, 7 May 1995: 9.
- 70 Macpherson, 217.
- 71 Jane Mendelsohn, 'Mid-Life Crisis: Women Do It Too', *Guardian*, 12 May 1995, 24.
- 72 Macpherson, 217. She identifies a further reality gap - that there is no explanation for Delia's immunity from the town's censure, in spite of the fact that she has abandoned her children.
- 73 Eudora Welty, *The Robber Bridegroom*, 1942, reprinted London: Virago, 1982.
- 74 Also, and more explicitly intertextually, she reads, alongside the cat, a collection of short stories by Carson McCullers, one of these being 'A Tree, a Rock, a Cloud'. Here the central character advocates a new science which involves loving these 'easier' and 'less complex' things first before human beings: 'I meditated and I started very cautious. I would pick up something from the street and take it home with me. I bought a goldfish and I concentrated on the



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goldfish and I loved it', *The Shorter Novels and Stories of Carson McCullers*, London: Barrie and Jenkins, 1972, 138. This story makes Delia reflect on her own emotional progress and recuperation: 'First a time alone, then a casual acquaintance or two, then a small, undemanding animal. Delia wondered what came after that, and where it would end up' (L, 146).

75 Interestingly the title to the French edition of *Ladder of Years* does suggest identity change: Anne Tyler, *Une Autre Femme*, Paris: Calmann-Levy, 1996.

76 Interview with Anne Tyler in *You*, 1 July 2001: 68.

77 Letter from Anne Tyler to Judith Jones, 24 May 1994 (DU).

78 Carol Shields, 'Tyler's Ladder an engaging novel on disengagement', *Globe and Mail*, 20 May 1995: E3 (DU).

79 Stout, 107. Nicci Gerrard endorses this view with regard to *Ladder of Years*: 'At first we welcome Delia's unsweet self assertion; but Tyler is too canny a writer to present her flight as a choice between the suffocation of a marriage gone stale and the painful liberation of independence', *Observer*, 7 May 1995: 19.

80 Oates, 22.

81 Macpherson, 223.

82 Roberts, 39.

## CONCLUSION

'Laughter coming from the margins, from the edges, is much more powerful and threatening than laughter coming from the center' (Barbara Bennett)<sup>1</sup>

According to a reviewer in the *Boston Globe*, Tyler's latest book, *Back When We Were Grownups*, published in 2001, 'treads familiar ground'.<sup>2</sup> In this sense *Back When*<sup>3</sup> might serve as a useful starting-point to the conclusion of this study. By identifying what in the text could be termed the Tyleresque, the nexus of themes and motifs which critics view as the 'familiar ground' of a Tyler novel should emerge. Indeed her use of the motif of fairy tale<sup>4</sup> is evident in the opening phrase of this latest novel: 'Once upon a time, there was a woman who discovered she had turned into the wrong person' (BW, 3). This sentence also indicates a typical interest in character, identity and the universality of female experience. As one might expect, the protagonist, Rebecca, the woman in question, is something of an eccentric. She dresses unconventionally, wearing 'A loose and colourful style of dress edging dangerously close to Bag Lady' (BW, 3) and views herself as a 'social misfit' (BW, 51). Significantly, too, she discovers that she has 'turned into the wrong person' during a familiar Tyler event - a family meal, in this case a picnic to celebrate her stepdaughter's engagement. Family gatherings frame this novel for, as usual, the central focus is domestic and concerns the dynamics between the 'inside' and the 'outside' of family life. Within the Davitch family the 'silly quarrels' (BW, 5) are intensified and complicated because Rebecca lives with an ancient great-uncle-in-law, has three stepdaughters, one birth daughter and a miscellany of grandchildren. Here there is the familiar tension

between family and non-family. Rebecca herself might be viewed as an outsider because she attained 'instant motherhood' (BW, 234) when she married Joe, a divorced father, and became a Davitch.

This, then, is a 'huge, big, jumbled family' (BW, 133) and 'jumbled' is a key word because the opposition between order and clutter is, as shown in the course of this project, a persistent motif in Tyler's writing. She employs this in *Back When* in her characterisation of Will, the high-school boyfriend Rebecca re-visits in her attempt to find the 'right woman'. Tyler (comically) indicates that the boy who liked his pens and pencils 'aligned precisely', where each had a specific function: 'red ballpoint for editing, black fountain pen for composing' has become even more meticulous and 'stuffy' in middle-age (BW, 77, 76, 119). Will's tendency to be dull and pernickety is evident in his eating habits. He is hardly an imaginative cook, as he tells Rebecca, 'I mix up a double batch every Sunday afternoon, and I divide it into seven containers and that's what I eat all week' (BW, 131). And her attempt at an intimate dinner party is marred somewhat when she notices that he 'seemed to be dissecting a strip of roasted red pepper. Each dot of char was set carefully to one side' (BW, 219). Indeed the food motif in this novel is, as has been seen, another aspect of the 'Tyleresque'. However, it carries less emotional weight in this text than in the earlier, and better, *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant*, where the distinction between 'feeders' and 'non-feeders' offers insights into individual characters. In *Back When*, allusions to food relate less to characterisation than to comic tone, and a running joke through the novel relates to Biddy, Rebecca's stepdaughter and frustrated chef. She has a tendency to provide arcane delicacies rather than sustenance: 'a tray of runny cheeses garnished

with edible flowers, and a mosaic of tiny canapés studded with roe, and a sunburst of snow peas filled with smoked trout and dill' (BW, 13). Although this enhances the comedy of the text and demonstrates Tyler's interest in the linguistic discourse and semiotics of a gourmet menu, this use of food falls short of Tyler's best.

Indeed *Back When* seems, for much of the time, almost like Tyler by numbers - contrived, even mechanical. In this novel, Tyler herself is on the 'edges' of the formulaic from the start, for the opening is shaky, a sense of fairy tale never re-emerges, and it is derivative.<sup>5</sup> She seems to be rehearsing the 'Tyleresque' without any different sort of slant; this is coming close to self-parody. The mishap caused by Rebecca when Peter falls in the river is reminiscent of Maggie in *Breathing Lessons* and he is rescued like 'a sack of laundry' (BW, 10), the same image she used in describing Delia in the sea in *Ladder of Years*. NoNo, another step-daughter, supposedly has the gift of second sight, like Justine in *Searching for Caleb*, and she works for Budding Genius, a typical Tyler small business, where the punning is similar to Doggie Do, one of Muriel's places of work in *The Accidental Tourist*. The title *Back When We Were Grownups* suggests the notion of rerun and Rebecca fantasises about 'retracing her steps to where the fork had first branched' (BW, 41) before she met and married Joe. However, Tyler employed this to better effect in *Breathing Lessons* by making it an integral part of the liminal thrust of this earlier novel. The Nolan twins also make brief appearances in both books.<sup>6</sup> Anita Brookner criticised both novel and title; she 'suspected this of being an early novel ... even the title seems anachronistic'.<sup>7</sup> That said, as will be discussed later, her treatment of identity is interesting.

But certainly Tyler's representation of eccentricity, an expected component of the Tyleresque,<sup>8</sup> is retrogressive in this latest novel. Tyler's purpose in making Rebecca a social misfit who 'tended to stay on the fringe of things, observing from a distance, and she had noticed that what she observed was often outside the *normal* frame of vision' (BW, 59, my italics) is to provoke, to call into question (comically) behavioural boundary-lines and take issue with any terminology based on arbitrary distinctions between the 'normal' and the eccentric. As Tyler quite recently stated in an interview: 'I am always hurt when a reader says that I choose only bizarre or eccentric people to write about. It's not a matter of choice; it seems to me that even the most ordinary person, in real life, will turn out to have something unusual at his centre'.<sup>9</sup> Yet her depiction of Rebecca's aunt and mother comes close to the sort of indulgent, celebratory eccentricity of the first phase, reminiscent of that of the Potter sisters in *The Tin Can Tree* (1965), her second published novel and something of an apprentice work. In *Back When* she also employs the order/clutter motif rather too obviously to connote character. Aunt Ida, friendly and expansive, wears 'frilly too-young dresses and bright makeup' and has an 'apartment as cluttered as her clothing' (BW, 60). Rebecca's more mean-spirited mother is 'fastidiously tidy' and lives in a house where 'every object had the glued-down appearance of something that had stayed in the same position for decades' (BW, 56).

Her most effective representations of the eccentric are therefore not to be found in *Back When*, but in the novels from *Celestial Navigation* (1974) through *Earthly Possessions* (1977). Her depiction of Jeremy Pauling, her first fully developed eccentric individual, demonstrates a loss of the benign

approach to eccentricity of the earlier texts and suggests how eccentric behaviour can be viewed as a threat to dominant ideological values, but can also have a radical edge by questioning the validity of such patterns of behaviour. In this second phase of her writing Tyler also questions the prescribed boundary-lines of motherhood. Justine Peck in *Searching for Caleb* (1976) and Charlotte Emory in *Earthly Possessions* (1977) attain a sense of selfhood by flouting such conventions. This indicates a further concern of Tyler - the question of identity. In these two texts she employs an essentialist concept of self which indicates a stable singularity in many ways appropriate to the realism she primarily adopts. Although there is a suggestion of the fluidity of individual identity in the role play of Morgan Gower, the protagonist of her next published novel, *Morgan's Passing* (1980), it is not until *Ladder of Years* (1995) that she undermines the idea of a 'true' essence and leans towards a poststructuralist viewpoint on subjectivity by suggesting that Delia's self has become fragmented by the on-going set of external circumstances she has encountered and the place she finds herself in. Be that as it may, in *A Patchwork Planet* she reverts to the idea that a 'real self' can be attained, possibly because she is more concerned to represent successfully a first person (male) narrator. However, in *Back When*, Tyler does undermine, to a certain extent, the notion of a 'real self'. She constructs Rebecca as an unreliable narrator who makes flawed assumptions about her own identity, and she makes clear that Rebecca is misguided, not only in her belief that she has become an 'imposter' in her own life but also in the possibility of retrieving an 'original self' (BW, 136) which she has somehow misplaced in girlhood. That she has had to *acquire* the joyousness that is evident to the reader

throughout the text suggests that, like Delia, her self has become de-centred by experience and circumstance.

Indeed it is significant that it is in *Morgan's Passing* that ideas concerning identity and subjectivity seem, in a sense, unsatisfactory, for it is in this novel that Tyler's representation of eccentricity, anticipated in the unpublished *Pantaleo*, appears to be in crisis. In this text the radical edge of this representation is blunted. Morgan self-consciously adopts eccentric positions while disapproving of the sort of unconventional behaviour that marginalises Jeremy Pauling. Furthermore, in her characterisation of Morgan's wife (Bonny) and friend/mistress/partner (Emily), Tyler fails to question the parameters of their motherhood. Although representations of eccentricity still emerge through the writing, notions of liminality become evident in *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant* (1982) and *The Accidental Tourist* (1985). Here Victor Turner's three-tier model of the phases of rites of passage - separation from an old state, the inhabiting of a threshold moment/place and the passage from this limen into reaggregation - that is more or less replicated in *Earthly Possessions*, is re-configured and the permeability of the liminal zone becomes evident. Hence in *Saint Maybe* and *Ladder of Years*, the threshold between 'insiders' and 'outsiders' is indefinite and it is possible to shuttle through and across this space, in an unstructured way, thus implying the limitlessness of liminal experience. This emphasis on the role of outsiders also serves to undermine the 'givenness' of the nuclear family and the cluster of ideals and expectations which inform it.

Tyler also undermines the givenness of linguistic structures and points to their inherent contradictions. That she values such contradictions is evident in

the title *Breathing Lessons* and in *Back When*. As Rebecca and Peter play Scrabble '[h]e set an oxy in front of *moron*, which earned him *sixty points* because of a triple-word square' (BW,116, my italics). This gaining of a high score indicates Tyler's recognition of the significance of oxymoron, the archetypal rhetorical mode of antithesis. Similarly, the fact that she is aware of the value of exploiting the ludic possibilities of language is evident in the comic tone I have, implicitly, drawn attention to throughout this study. As suggested, Tyler uses punning, malapropism, humorous dialogue, running jokes and eccentric set-pieces to achieve this. Barbara Bennett also emphasises Tyler's subtext.<sup>10</sup> And this relates to the layering discussed later, for Tyler is aware of the multi-faceted nature of language and different levels of signification.<sup>11</sup> In two of her novels this concern with language is particularly evident. In *A Slipping-Down Life* (1970), while problematising the arbitrary relationship between signifier and signified, she suggests that empowerment can emerge from an understanding of the coded nature of linguistic structures. In *Ladder of Years*, while metafictionally drawing attention to her use of domestic imagery, she intertextually uses the language of romantic fiction to indicate the ideological effect it can have.

It is also apparent in the short stories when she 'feels free to be playful' that Tyler likes to experiment with the 'playfulness' of language. In 'The Feather Behind the Rock' (1967), the unreliability of the narrative voice needs to be detected. Some years later in 'The Bride in the Boatyard' (1972) Tyler is deliberately meta-fictional again, alluding to the further subtle dynamics between author and reader. She suggests that a writer of realist fiction needs to persuade the reader of the truth of the narrative through convincing detail.



The reader, in turn, has to 'crack the code' of the fiction by recognising literary/linguistic conventions and picking up ideological/cultural clues and references. This is not to say that, in other short stories written through the seventies, Tyler does not return to the more familiar ground of the Tyleresque. Indeed her last short story 'A Woman Like a Fieldstone House' (1989), which she was asked to write for charitable purposes,<sup>12</sup> can be firmly located within this terrain. The protagonist, Corey, as the title clearly indicates, is like a fieldstone house, for as her husband says: 'it takes a while for the weather to get through to you'.<sup>13</sup> This implies resilience rather than lack of insight and, like many of Tyler's female characters, Corey protects and endures. Tyler also uses appearance and clothing to connote different aspects of the 'feminine'. Hence Corey is rather colourless, 'pale and plain', unlike her friend Marilyn, described as 'all sharp angles and peroxided curls and red lipstick'.<sup>14</sup> Here again short and long fiction interact as this an echo of the difference between Rose Leary and Muriel Pritchett in *The Accidental Tourist*, written four years before, where Tyler's use of this sort of coding can be read as a critique of the patriarchal values which endorse such distinctions.

A further theme, implicit through Tyler's writing, drives the narrative of 'A Woman Like a Fieldstone House' - a concern with time, which makes it of particular interest here. One of the first full-length studies of Tyler's work was entitled *The Temporal Horizon*,<sup>15</sup> and here Linton comments on the importance of Tyler's favourite children's book, *The Little House*.<sup>16</sup> In an article in the *New York Times Book Review* Tyler recounts how the book was read to her as a child<sup>17</sup> and that 'the book spoke to me about something I hadn't yet consciously considered: the passage of time'.<sup>18</sup> Seven-year locusts<sup>19</sup> appear

at significant times in Corey's life; at 12, approaching adolescence, at 29, as a young mother, at 46, in middle age when her children have grown and, at 63, an elderly widow. The story, then, is 'Tyleresque' not only in the sense that she is addressing significant moments in female existence, but in her concern with the passage of time referred to by Linton. This preoccupation with time partly accounts for her admiration for Gabriel Garcia Marquez who, in her eyes, 'has somehow figured out how to let time be in literature what it is in life: unpredictable, sometimes circular, looped, doubling back, rushing through 60 years and then doddering over an afternoon, with glimmers of the past and future just below the surface'.<sup>20</sup>

In 'A Woman Like a Fieldstone House', Tyler's treatment of time, where she uses the technique of flashback, relates to Marquez's notion of past and future being just below the surface of the present. As I have suggested, this motif of temporal layering has persisted through Tyler's fiction. In her first published novel, *If Morning Ever Comes*, Ben Joe, looking around his bedroom, is stimulated by the layers of physical objects he observes: 'the more recent layers never completely obliterating the earlier ones' (IMEC, 154). These represent stages in his life; the rabbit and duck decals from when he was a small child, the early boyhood shoe bag with its Wild West symbol and the collection of *National Geographics* of later boyhood. Not only are these objects triggers to memory, they lead to Ben Joe's recognition of the importance of childhood experience, for whereas 'the top layer was flat and impersonal' the bottom layers were 'bright and vivid and always made him remember things in striking detail, that had happened years and years before' (IMEC, 154). At the end of her career, thirty-seven years later, in *Back When*,

the fridge is layered with photographs taken at significant moments of Davitch family life and the one of Joe 'had gradually become buried beneath a shingling of later snapshots'. Here, as often in Tyler, photographs freeze time and, as Rebecca says, 'tended to live in the imagination' (BW, 171). However, a photograph is used to more subtle effect in *Saint Maybe*. Thomas considers an old photograph of his (dead) mother 'holding a scowly baby (him!) in nothing but a diaper' (SM, 51). Here the photograph acts as more than a trigger to memory. Tyler heightens the pathos of Thomas' loss and his wish to 'climb into photographs' because 'he had no memory of that moment' and so has to imagine, rather than re-live, what it must have been like to be with his mother.

Time also relates to perhaps the most important motif that Tyler utilises - the opposition between order and clutter. The headline to Patrick Gale's review of *Back When* is 'The Mistress of Mess.'<sup>21</sup> And Tyler's one children's book, *Tumble Tower*,<sup>22</sup> illustrated by her elder daughter Mitra, concerns this opposition. Princess Molly the Messy's disorder becomes 'The Roomful of Riches' when the family are stranded because of a flood and Molly sustains them with leftover food and hidden books. The relationship between time and clutter is twofold. By layering/cluttering photographs, Tyler demonstrates how memory confuses and distorts past experience and also undermines any sense of life as an ordered linear narrative. Simultaneously she points up a need to de-clutter; Rita's role as 'Clutter Counselor' is to clear up the detritus of the Bedloe family's past in order that they can move on.<sup>23</sup> Tyler loads the motif of clutter with emotional freight, representative of either lack or need to control and insecurity or the messy tensions of family life. Also Tyler uses the

motif to suggest the mindset of her characters, which impacts upon the way they perceive themselves and others. Macon's order in *The Accidental Tourist* conflicts with Muriel's disorder to good effect. This is not the case in *Celestial Navigation*, where Jeremy's artistic order is at odds with Mary's domestic disorder. Relatedly Justine Peck's lack of order is emblematic of her spontaneity and Charlotte Emory's desire to free herself of clutter is indicative of her attempt to come to terms with her past.

Now, despite the fact that Tyler locates Justine and Charlotte at opposing ends of the order/clutter spectrum, she uses them *both* to undermine conventional notions of how a 'good' mother should behave. That she privileges neither order nor clutter points to a sense of neutrality in her writing where it is up to the reader to interact with the text, influenced by his/her individual preconceptions and patterns of experience. This stance is clearly influenced by Tyler's use of multiple viewpoints. In the majority of her texts, although written in the third person, versions of language patterns and cultural positionings are focalised through the voices of individual characters. Only two novels, *Earthly Possessions* and *A Patchwork Planet*, are entirely written in the first person<sup>24</sup> and here both the wry tone of voice and the unreliability of the narrators enhance the humour of the text. However, it would undermine the subtlety of Tyler's writing to categorise her as a 'comic novelist', as the comedy is often shot through with pathos and the boundary-lines between comedy and tragedy are blurred.<sup>25</sup> In the future I would like to pursue the idea of boundary/threshold that has informed this study and explore further the possibilities of this comedy/tragedy relationship and the sort of de-centred comic writing referred to in the epigraph to this conclusion. Perhaps, too, I

could compare this sort of approach with that of the British writer Nick Hornby, who is a great admirer of both the method and content of Tyler's writing.

In terms of method, Tyler demonstrates two interrelated strengths. She has the ability to express profound insights into human behaviour by utilising the mundane and the everyday. So her depiction of the ordinary activity of eating as a family can shed light on family dynamics and tensions and underlying cultural expectations. More specifically, she uses the Keep on Truckin' badge which falls out of Charlotte's cereal packet to suggest her entrapment within her marriage and need to escape. And physical objects can act not only as a stimulus to reader response but to Tyler's own writing practice. While still living in Montreal, having published her first novel, and when she was less resistant to interviews, she described the effect of an ornament in a shop window:

I remember once seeing a clam shell in a store window and inside it someone had very meticulously placed a farmer and his family, tiny carved figures all gazing out of the empty clam with the back of the shell curving up over their heads, I was so fascinated that I rushed home to try to describe it. But the curious thing is that when you look at something that excites you, which you think maybe the core of a story, you find that all kinds of other things grow up around it and by the time the story's finished the original image has more or less disappeared into the background.<sup>26</sup>

Tyler, then, acknowledged the relationship between the mundane and the profound very early in her career, after the publication of her first novel. This is something she has pursued - with greater or lesser effectiveness - throughout her career, and when it succeeds this is because of a further strength: Tyler's ability to select sharply observed detail and telling cultural reference. One of her comments about writing *Tumble Tower* was: 'I remembered how easily

children grew bored; so I knew I had to make every word count, which turned out to be an interesting challenge'.<sup>27</sup> In her best adult writing she meets this challenge. Furthermore, she presents a challenge to the reader for, as with the boundary-lines and thresholds addressed in this project, the effect of her writing as a whole is double-edged. On the one hand her realism of the domestic beguiles the reader into empathy and recognition, yet, on the other, it raises provocative questions about the nature of family relationships and the continuing accepted ideological patterns that can underpin them.

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1 Barbara Bennett, *Comic Visions, Female Voices*, Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1998, 12.

2 Anon, 'New Anne Tyler Treads Familiar Ground', *Boston Globe*, 14 May 2001, 13: 47, reprinted in [www.azcentral.com/rep/books/articles0515grownups.html](http://www.azcentral.com/rep/books/articles0515grownups.html) accessed on 15 July 2001.

3 From now on *Back When We Were Grown-ups* will be referred to as *Back When*.

4 As I discussed in Chapters 3 and 7, Tyler employed the motif of fairy tale rather heavy-handedly in *Morgan's Passing* and more successfully in *Ladder of Years*.

5 Grace Hobson suggests that 'the first scene in which she introduces the Davitch family plays slightly forced', *Kansas City Star*, 13 May 2001, reprinted in [//www.kestar.com/item/pages/printer.pat.fyi/3acca66d.507.html](http://www.kestar.com/item/pages/printer.pat.fyi/3acca66d.507.html) accessed 16 July 2001.

6 There are other examples of characters reappearing. The services of Eli Everjohn, the private detective, in *Searching for Caleb*, are sought again by Ian Bedloe in *Saint Maybe*. Furthermore the Bedloes go for dinner to Ezra Tull's 'homesick restaurant' and his fiancé, Ruth, stays at Jeremy Pauling's boarding house. Ideas re-emerge concerning the sort of role-play Morgan

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- Gower indulged in. There is a suggestion that Min Foo's many marriages 'were her way of trying on other lives' (BW, 29). Tyler also resurrects a detail edited out of *Dinner* when it is suggested to Rebecca that she could make friends by pretending to walk a dog: 'You could just walk around with a lease and an empty collar' (BW, 53). In the manuscript of the earlier novel one of Jenny's husbands had 'left her over an invisible dog' (manuscript, 292, *DU*).
- 7 Anita Brookner, 'A Formula That Shows its Age', *Spectator*, 2 June 2001: 40.
- 8 Indeed eccentricity is expected of Tyler. In 1985, she was asked to write a piece for *Art and Antiques* on the Cone sisters, whose collection of modern art is housed in the Baltimore Museum of Art. What is significant here is that she was requested to emphasise the quirkiness of the sisters rather than the nature of the collection: 'What I would like you to do is write about the sisters more than about their art. Just how did two Baltimore spinsters acquire a taste for such avant-garde art?', letter to Anne Tyler from Isolde McNicholl, 29 May 1985 (*DU*). And Charles Trueheart's reference to the article in which 'novelist Anne Tyler of Baltimore celebrates these eccentric bargain-hunters and their uncanny taste in a lovely little essay in November's *Art and Antiques*', indicates that she obeyed instructions, *USA Today*, 1 November 1985: 4D (*DU*).
- 9 Anne Tyler, 'Still Just Writing', in Janet Sternburg, ed., *The Writer on Her Work*, 1980, reprinted London: Virago, 1992, 31.
- 10 Bennett, 21.
- 11 Bennett cites Voelker who suggests that, in Tyler, 'More is heard in its silences, gaps, misunderstandings, and failures to listen than in the words themselves'. In my view this is to misconstrue Tyler's use of language, but I agree that not 'more' but as much 'is heard in the silences', quoted in Bennett, 23.
- 12 It was published in William Shore, ed., *Louder than Words: 22 Authors Donate New Stories to Benefit Share Our Strength's Fight Against Hunger, Homelessness and Illiteracy*, New York: Vintage, 1989: 1-15.
- 13 'A Woman Like a Fieldstone House', manuscript, 4 (*DU*).
- 14 'A Woman', manuscript, 4 (*DU*).
- 15 Karin Linton, *The Temporal Horizon: A Study of Time in Anne Tyler's Major Novels*, Uppsala, Sweden: Acta Universitatis, 1989.

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- 16 Linton, 10, referring to Virginia Lee Bourton, *The Little House*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1942.
- 17 Pearl Tull reads the book to Jenny when she is recovering from a breakdown, D, 217.
- 18 Anne Tyler, 'Why I Still Treasure The Little House', *New York Times Book Review*, 9 November 1986: 56 (DU).
- 19 These locusts emerge at the end of *The Clock Winder*, as discussed in Chapter 2. This is another example of the interplay between short and long fiction.
- 20 Anne Tyler, 'Writers' Writer: Gabriel Garcia Marquez', *New York Times Book Review*, 4 December 1977: 74 (DU).
- 21 Patrick Gale, 'The Mistress of Mess', *The Daily Telegraph*, 26 May 2001: A5.
- 22 Anne Tyler, *Tumble Tower*, New York: Orchard Books, 1993.
- 23 This is not simply getting rid of clutter, like the patronising House Doctor in the television series, but realising its implications and prioritising its value.
- 24 In *Celestial Navigation*, the Amanda, Olivia, Miss Vinton and Mary chapters are written in the first person.
- 25 A personal anecdote might support this. In an attempt to introduce a friend to Tyler's novels I bought her *Saint Maybe*, emphasising that she would enjoy the comedy. This was not the case. She pointed out the 'darker' implications of Danny's suicide at the end of Chapter 1 and suggested I read Helen Fielding's *Bridget Jones's Diary*.
- 26 Michael Ballantyne, 'Novel No. 1 Published, No. 2 Typed, No. 3 is Jelling', *Montreal Star*, 21 November 1964 (DU).
- 27 Letter to Susan Rado from Anne Tyler, 11 August 1993 (DU).



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