

# Big Houses, Small Politics: Public and Private Spaces in Anne Tyler's Fiction

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Anne Tyler has come under considerable criticism over the years for what some commentators have taken to be her anti-feminist views. One has to admit that Tyler herself has provided these critics with some ammunition. Fairly early in her career, in 1972,<sup>1</sup> Tyler said "I hate 'em all," in reference to "novels by liberated women" (Cited in Petry, 1994, 33). Expanding on the point a number of years later, she stated: "Certainly I don't hate liberated women as such. I assume I'm one myself, if you can call someone liberated who was never imprisoned" (cited in Petry, 1994, 33).

In "Still Just Writing" (Tyler, 1992), Tyler attempts in part to contextualize her political views within her writing, her life as a wife and mother, and her personal character by saying that:

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? ... I write my books and raise the children.... I know this makes me seem narrow, but in fact, I *am* narrow (Tyler, 1992, 33-34).

This *apologia* is not accepted by Susan Gilbert. While admitting that Tyler's primary focus is 'domestic life' rather than Politics, and that as a result "[c]ritics rightly refrain from complaining about what is absent from her work," Gilbert maintains that, beginning in the mid-eighties, Tyler has placed an increasing number of references to political events in her novels and that in so doing she presents the reader with a vision that "serves a static, politically conservative line on life, a nostalgic vision of an America of private houses and lawns" (Gilbert, 1990, 139). This, Gilbert concludes, is particularly troublesome since we may come away from Tyler's fiction with the lesson that life's difficulties are simply to be endured, and that with respect to "really changing things, there's little to be done" (Gilbert, 1990, 144).

I hope to defend Tyler against these sorts of criticisms. But I shall do so *not* by arguing that Tyler is in fact a radical feminist, long misinterpreted, for clearly she is no such thing. But neither, I believe, is she wholly conservative, in service to the patriarchal interests of men. Indeed, viewing Tyler's work in terms of a feminist-patriarchal conservative dichotomy is quite misleading. The confrontation within which Tyler functions is best seen as being between communitarianism and liberalism, with Tyler siding with some of the basic claims of the former. I shall attempt to establish in particular that Tyler denies a

fundamental point of contemporary liberalism—that an independent and unencumbered self can be autonomous in the Kantian sense of a noumenal self capable of escaping from the bounds of the phenomenal world which surrounds us. That is to say, liberalism assumes a pre-social self that can construct itself entirely through its radically free choices. Against this view, communitarianism has attempted to situate individuals *within* their social framework, and has argued that the individual is constituted by its web of relationships. Susan Sherwin (2000) calls this “relational autonomy” to contrast it with more traditional views of liberal autonomy. It is this relational sort of autonomy that, I believe, is the sort of autonomy expressed and endorsed by Tyler’s characters, and the happiness they seek (and to whatever extent possible, attain) is a kind of “relational happiness.”

Before turning to Tyler’s fiction, I begin in the first section by setting out some of the philosophical parameters of my essay, particularly with respect to various conceptions of autonomy.

### 1. Communitarianism, Feminism, and Relational Autonomy

Autonomy became a preeminent value during the Enlightenment. As Immanuel Kant expressed it: “*Sapere Aude!* ‘Have courage to use your own reason!’ That is the motto of the enlightenment” (Kant, 1959, 85). Kant thought of autonomy as the ability to use one’s own reason, freed from influences such as superstition and dogma either of the state or the Church. Emanating from this Kantian ideal of autonomy sprang the *political* ideal of liberalism expressed so well a hundred years later by John Stuart Mill when he claimed that: “...the sole end for which mankind are warranted, individually or collectively, in interfering with the liberty of action of any of their number, is self-protection... In the part which merely concerns himself, his independence is, of right, absolute. Over himself, over his own body and mind, the individual is sovereign” (Mill, 1974, 68).

Classical liberalism, then, argued for a policy of state non-interference in the ‘private’ lives of individuals. That is, a barrier was erected between ‘private choice’, which was to be at the discretion of individuals, and ‘public matters’, which affected others—or “harmed” them, as Mill’s “harm principle” expressed it—and over which the state had a legitimate interest. Oftentimes, this *political* ideal of autonomy has become conflated (both by liberals and their opponents) with autonomy *in general*. As Gerald Dworkin has pointed out, this can lead to confusion, for autonomy functions as a *moral* and *social* ideal as well as a political one (Dworkin, 1988, 10). Hence, for example while we may be able to agree, in terms of a political goal, upon the propriety of the state refraining from imposing any particular view of the good life on its citizens, it would be a mistake to think that people, as social beings, can choose outside any and all influences. As Dworkin puts it, there is no “unchosen chooser, no uninfluenced influencer” (Dworkin, 1988, 12). To think otherwise is to confuse *political* autonomy with *social* autonomy. We cannot, then, *contra* Kant, be obligated to invent the law entirely by ourselves for this would disavow our nature as social (and genetic) beings who are at least partially determined by these factors.

That we are, to a large extent, products of our nature and environment and that we can still make free choices is the germinal idea of some feminists, such as Susan Sherwin,

in their discussions of autonomy. It is not to be viewed, she contends, as the 'free choice' of some unencumbered, abstract, perfectly rational and self-creating being. People are much 'messier' than that. One of the things that feminism has taught us, she says, is that we exist in a world of relationships with others, and that these relationships, and the choices we make within the context they provide, is what constitutes our identity. Failure to see this will result, for example, in a failure to see the various ways in which women are oppressed: indeed, Sherwin argues, following Michel Foucault, that "in modern societies the illusion of choice can be part of the mechanism for controlling behavior" (Sherwin, 2000, 74). By conceiving of selfhood as relational, we can see the self "as an ongoing process, rather than as something static or fixed. Relational selves are inherently social beings that are significantly shaped and modified within a web of interconnected (and sometimes conflicting) relationships" (Sherwin, 200, 78).

Communitarianism appears to share this feature of the self as relational in common with feminism (even though, as Marilyn Friedman and others have pointed out, the two positions are not entirely friendly (Friedman, 1991)). Like Sherwin, the communitarian Charles Taylor has argued against the liberal view of the self as inadequate. He maintains that the liberal view presents us with what he calls a "disengaged self" which, though seemingly free to construct any view of the good life, paradoxically finds itself unable to articulate any substantive view of the good. In a passage reminiscent of Sherwin, he suggests that we must come to realize that "identity is defined by the commitments and identifications which provide the frame or horizon within which I can try to determine from case to case what is good, or valuable, or what ought to be done, or what I ought to endorse or oppose" (Taylor, 1989, 27). Without such a framework, individual persons have a tendency to experience a "loss of resonance, depth, [and] richness" in our lives (Taylor, 1991, 6).

Persons, that is, need to have a grounding in their lives: such grounding is most typically found in the contemporary world in our close relationships, particularly with our families and in our homes. But herein lies a paradox: first, because women have historically been restricted to the confines of the home, and second, because liberalism has traditionally defined the home as falling within the purview of the "private sphere" where the individual is supposed to be sovereign, and hence outside of state regulation and interference. As a result, a lot of harm has been perpetrated against women—e.g., spousal abuse—that liberalism traditionally has not perceived as such. This has led feminists to argue for state intervention in abusive relationships regardless of the official relationship between the parties concerned and irrespective of where the crime has occurred. On a different but related front, feminists of course have also argued for women to have the freedom to work outside the home in an increasing array of professions.

As mentioned earlier, however, Tyler has never felt herself "imprisoned at home:" in fact, she has admitted to the contrary that she loathes *leaving* home (Tyler, 1992). In fact, though, Tyler is highly ambivalent about home and the constraints it imposes, and of leaving home and the promises of freedom such travel provides. On a personal note, she admits that though she hates to travel: "Yet , I'm continually prepared for travel: it is

physically impossible for me to buy any necessity without buying a travel-sized version as well. I have a little toilet kit, with soap and a nightgown, forever packed and ready to go. How do you explain that?" (Tyler, 1992, 34)?

This ambiguity toward travel and home—between the private and public spheres of life—appears repeatedly, almost obsessively, in Tyler's fiction, a point made dismissively by some critics who complain that the plots of Tyler's novels can be summarized as "... in one book characters run away and then come home, in the next come home and then run away" (Gilbert, 1990, 141). These critics miss the point, however, that John Updike captures when he says that Tyler's work deals with the "fundamental American tension ... between stasis and movement, between home and escape" (Updike, 1992, 89). Indeed, to take this one step further, I suggest that in her fiction Tyler deconstructs the traditional assumption of home as private and the rest of the (traditionally male) world as public by showing the ways in which the traditional dichotomy fails to recognize important features of all of our lives. This is that relationships are the focal point of *all* our lives and that the liberal ideal of leaving home in order to express one's radical freedom is largely a fiction. Hence, the liberal notion of a transcendent autonomy from our everyday world is misguided.

## 2. Houses, Identity, and Men Who Leave Home

Janis Stout has argued that "Tyler identifies the self with its home, specifically with a house (Stout, 1998, 105). As a result, Tyler often opens her narratives with reference to the home of one the novel's central characters. For example, her first novel, *If Morning Ever Comes* (1964) opens, "When Ben Joe Hawkes left home." *Earthly Possessions* (1977) begins with Charlotte Emory's claim that, "The marriage wasn't going well, and I decided to leave home." The opening paragraph of *The Accidental Tourist* (1985) describes Macon and Sarah Leary driving home, having cut short their beach vacation. *Saint Maybe* (1991) opens by noting the way in which various houses on the protagonist's street are identified with their occupants (and vice-versa):

[E]ach house had its own particular role to play. Number Nine, for instance, was foreign. A constantly shifting assortment of Middle Eastern graduate students came and went ... Number Six was referred to as the newlyweds', although the Crains had been married two years now and were beginning to look a little worn around the edges. And Number Eight was the Bedloe family. They were never just the Bedloes, but the Bedloe *family*, Waverly Street's version of the ideal, apple-pie household. (*Saint Maybe*, 465<sup>2</sup>).

In this section, I discuss Macon Leary from *The Accidental Tourist* and Morgan Gower of *Morgan's Passing* (1980). I do this not only because both men are defined in terms of their relationship to their home(s), but also because they both leave home to seek a freedom unavailable to them if they stay. On the surface, such narrative lines would seem to offer support for feminist criticisms of Tyler and evidence against my view that no one—men as well as women—can escape the context of their relationships and make choices outside their parameters. As we shall see, however, when examined closely, despite leaving home and undergoing personal transformations, neither Macon nor Morgan really leave their old lives behind entirely.

Macon and Sarah Leary have had a son murdered by a complete stranger in a senseless, random act of violence: they both harbor resentment towards their spouse as a result of this incident and they are incapable, it seems, of moving past this event in their lives. Eventually, Sarah leaves Macon. After she does so, Macon moves from his marital home back to the obsessive, but for him comforting, order of his natal grandparent's house. This is a symbolic move back to the womb for Macon, and eventually, it allows for a rebirth of sorts since when he later becomes involved with an eccentric dog trainer named Muriel Pritchard, he is able to choose to leave his natal home to go to the dishevelment of Muriel's apartment in a run-down section of central Baltimore. Clearly, this choice is important, indeed determinate, in the construction of his self. Although Macon does return once again to his wife and to their marital home, he in the end chooses Muriel. All of this 'wandering about', has led at least one commentator to draw comparisons between Macon and Homer's Odysseus (English, 1994). In suggesting this, English implicitly categorizes Macon with tradition male figures who move freely through life in separation from their family. Stout (1998) argues, however, that Odysseus is not a fruitful heuristic for Macon and *The Accidental Tourist*. "Macon is not *kept* from home as Odysseus is, and if it is Sarah, his legal wife, who represents the faithful Penelope, having remained (so she says) chaste during their separation, it was she, after all, who first left—scarcely the act of Penelope" (Stout, 1998, 137). Deciding to leave Sarah for Muriel, then, is not simply another instance of a male fling followed by a return home.

For some, home is mere stasis. In fact, Sarah essentially tells Macon just this when explaining to him why she had returned and why she felt that the two of them belonged together: "Macon, I think that after a certain age people just don't have a choice... You're who I'm with. It's too late for me to change. I've used up too much of my life now" (*The Accidental Tourist*, 310). Macon comes to see eventually, that Sarah is mistaken. While one always chooses from a certain context which forms a certain set of constraints regarding choice, this does not mean that one can't choose change at all even though, as Macon tells Sarah when he leaves her for Muriel that it's "not the easy way out" (*The Accidental Tourist*, 352). Indeed, Tyler herself found the choice difficult. As she noted in a 1989 interview with Alice Hall Petry, "I wrote an entire final chapter in which Macon stayed with Sarah and then realized I couldn't do it—not only because it spoiled the dramatic line of the plot but also because it meant [Macon] abandoning [Muriel's son] Alexander" (cited in English, 1994, 160). Macon, then, is *not* running away from responsibility; rather, he is moving *toward* them. As Susan Kissel (1996, Ch.3) has pointed out, Tyler's characters, both male and female, like to feel needed. Hence, when leaving Sarah, Macon tells her that she doesn't need him while, at Muriel's, he says, "[t]here was so much that needed fixing" (*The Accidental Tourist*, 235). So, Macon's new life and his new identity are not established as a *tabula rasa*; rather, Macon, who, it is implied, will retain some sort of relationship with Sarah, will also be shaped by new sets of relationships and responsibilities with Muriel and Alexander. These apparently 'private' choices, then, actually have a 'public' dimension.

Like Macon, Morgan Gower of *Morgan's Passing* (1980) too has to make a choice

between two women, both of whom are identified with their homes. His wife Bonnie and he have lived in a rambling, slightly run-down, but still stately house in the exclusive older section of Baltimore called Roland Park, while Emily Meredith, lives in a small apartment of stark, minimalist simplicity.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, as Frank Shelton (1990) observes, their choices are inversions of the other: while the orderly Macon dreams of a less structured existence, the wildly eccentric and unpredictable Morgan dreams of a more orderly life. For both, however, their dreams can be met only by leaving their homes and setting out elsewhere. As we shall see, just as there are strong remnants of Macon's old life in his new, so too will Morgan's past remain to some extent in his present and future.

Although Morgan loved his wife, he admits that he "had married his wife for her money" (*Morgan's Passing*, 31). But there was something beyond money itself that attracted him; namely, the "large and formal and gracious" (*Morgan's Passing*, 30) house to which Bonny was attached. It was that combination of money and house that, Morgan thought, gave Bonny a certain "definiteness". Unlike Morgan, who is a sort of human chameleon constantly changing personalities as well as outfits, Bonny "was so clear about who she was" that she made Morgan feel "securely defined at last" (*Morgan's Passing*, 31).

Things do not remain so defined forever, however.

Something had gone terribly wrong both with his marriage and with his home: Fool house. Cabinets ... stuffed with tarnished silver tea services and dusty stemware that no one ever used. Jammed in front of them were ketchup bottles and cereal boxes and summer plastic salt and pepper sets with rice grains in the salt from last summer when everything had stuck to itself. Fool house! Something had gone wrong with it ... (*Morgan's Passing*, 30).

Morgan now begins to fall in love with Emily, ironically for reasons which both mirror and contrast with his initial attraction to Bonny. Once again it has to do with a house (or, in this case, apartment) but now, with Emily, Morgan is attracted to minimalism and to stark simplicity, which Morgan now hopes will simplify his life. Hence, Morgan is attracted to Emily's organizational skills which he, e.g., associates with her purse: "you could live in the wilderness for a month off that purse ... a ball of string, a roll of Scotch tape, her Swiss Army knife, a pair of needle-nosed pliers" (*Morgan's Passing*, 285). He also loves the fact that she is ready to leave at any moment. "'I'm even packed,' she said, 'or half-packed. I've been packed for years. These clothes are so foldable and non-crushable, they take up a single drawer and they'd fit with no trouble at all in the suitcase in the closet. I've worked it so I could grab my bag up at any time and go'" (*Morgan's Passing*, 260). Ironically, however, Emily loves Morgan for his 'homininess': for example, as she tells Bonny, "It must be wonderful ... to have him with you all the time, fixing things" (232). And, unlike Morgan, Emily loves it when her apartment overflows with 'stuff' once Morgan has moved in with her.

Trunks and dress forms, a rusty birdcage, barrels containing a gigantic cup-and-saucer collection muffled in straw, stacks of *National Geographics*, Brindle's catalogs, Louisa's autograph book, a samovar, a carton of records,

a lady's bicycle, a wicker elephant. And this was only what lined the hall, which had once been empty as a tunnel. ...

In Gina's room there was almost no floor—just a field of bureaus and unmade beds. ...

Emily loved it all.

She began to understand why Morgan's daughters kept coming home when they had to convalesce from something. You could draw vitality from mere objects, evidently ... (*Morgan's Passing*, 300-301)

Paradoxically, then, Morgan married for a home stability that, once achieved, eventually wears him out. He then seeks simplicity in its stead, but moves his complicated life, including his senile mother, eccentric sister, and old dog, along with tons of material things (furniture, clothes, etc.) into his new life with Emily. Morgan, then, has a complex relationship with houses, things, and people. Somehow, however, the new mix seems to work for him since at the end of novel, though he has given up his good job, his stylish house in the upscale Roland Park neighborhood of Baltimore, and his wife and family in order to live in a trailer traveling around the countryside performing puppet shows, Morgan has managed to some small degree to attain the stability he dreamed of initially with Bonny. "He started smiling. By the time he reached Emily, he was humming. Everything he looked at seemed luminous and beautiful, and rich with possibilities" (*Morgan's Passing*, 346).

So Morgan, like Macon, finds that he has to leave his house in order to continue productively with his life. This might well leave the impression that men must leave home in order to complete themselves. Yet Tyler gives no indication that she thinks this is the case. For one thing, there are male characters in Tyler's works whom do not leave home. For example, Ezra Tull in *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant*, remains at home his entire life, never even changing his boyhood bed, wall posters, and so on. And it is he, as opposed to his sister, who takes on the traditional female responsibility of bringing the family together for special occasions family dinner (even though they almost all fail miserably). And in *Saint Maybe*, Ian Bedloe remains home and occupies the traditional maternal role to raise his orphaned nieces and nephew.

Moreover, as we have seen, even though Macon and Morgan both leave their wives and their homes, they do not do so for the traditionally or stereotypically male (or patriarchal) reason of avoiding responsibilities. Macon leaves to be with another woman and to care for her son. And Morgan brings all sorts of responsibilities along with him as well, including the birth of a new child after his have all grown. For men, then, as for women, there is no completely dissociated 'freedom' for Tyler's characters. And those men, like the father Beck Tull in *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant*, who do attempt to run away completely, are looked upon with complete disdain.

### 3. Traveling (but Returning) Women

I turn now to a consideration of Charlotte Emory of *Earthly Possessions* and Delia Grinstead of *Ladder of Years*, two female characters within Tyler's work who, like Macon and Morgan, leave their homes and families. Unlike the two men, however, Charlotte and

Delia end up returning. I shall argue that despite this difference Tyler does not present return to home as the only viable option for women.

Charlotte's dissatisfaction with home revolves around what is, for her, its stultifying clutter, both of the people her husband Saul brings into the home and the various pieces of furniture he fills it with: "an end table in front of another end table, a sofa backed against the first. It was crazy. Every piece of furniture had a shadow, a Siamese twin" (*Earthly Possessions*, 100-101). Charlotte seeks the stark simplicity that Morgan had found so enticing about Emily's apartment in *Morgan's Passing*. Hence, she sees as her project the "casting off encumbrances, paring down to the bare essentials, stripping for the journey." Indeed, she adds, "My only important belonging since I have grown up is a pair of excellent walking shoes" (*Earthly Possessions*, 37; also see Shelton, 1990). But it's not only physical possessions that Charlotte conceptualizes as encumbrances, and seeks to cast off: "A husband is another encumbrance... And children even more so... I would have liked to strip myself of friends, too. I was pleased when I lost any friends" (*Earthly Possessions*, 37).

So Charlotte runs away: significantly, as she is doing so, she is kidnapped. This seems to suggest that try as we might, we are not able to effect that which Charlotte dreams of—a complete disengagement from the world, including all relationships. This would not produce the hoped for new person, but a *non-person*. This is perhaps why Tyler displays Charlotte as one who, despite her stated desires, has relationships stick to her like burrs: in fact, she eventually becomes friendly even with her kidnapper Jake and his pregnant girlfriend (see Stout, 1998, 131). Ironically, it is Jake who points out to Charlotte the error of her aspirations of escape in one of his rare moments of insight: "I believe," he says, "any time you see someone running, it's their old, faulty self they're running from." (*Earthly Possessions*, 157).

Having come to this realization, Charlotte returns home. Some, particularly feminist critics, such as Alice Petry Hall, are dissatisfied with this resolution. Charlotte's return, Hall maintains, is yet "another manifestation of her capacity to be passive... Charlotte returns, after all, to a less-than-satisfying marriage in a home which ... brings with it the weight of several generations of misery and guilt. Further, there is no indication that she will ever be anything more than a housekeeper who moonlights as a photographer... What was meant to be a "happy" resolution to *Earthly Possessions* is thus oddly unsettling" (Petry, 1994, 38).

Stout, however, provides a different interpretation. According to her, although Charlotte returns, she does so on her own terms. Her life may be identified with home, but she has come to reconstruct herself through her travels and has begun to take possession of her life. That is, "going back may be a going forward" because the person returning may have become a different person (Stout, 1998, 131, 119). As Charlotte expresses it to Saul at the end of the novel: "We have been traveling for years, traveled all our lives. we are traveling still. We couldn't stay in one place if we tried" (*Earthly Possessions*, 200). Stout is, I believe, quite correct in making this important point. It has a point that has been



made often enough in various contexts. For example, Wordsworth makes it in the *Prelude* when he says that though we “had hopes that pointed to the clouds,” these hopes and dreams can never be attained by the finite possibilities available within this world. This is true of all of us, not just of women, even though women living in a patriarchal and oppressive world will have fewer sources of choice and diminished chances for happiness than men not so oppressed. So I agree with Petry that the ending of *Earthly Possessions* is as unsettling as it is happy. But this surely is part of Tyler’s point. Just as Charlotte learns that she cannot escape all relationships and retain her personhood, and that her autonomy is relational, not ‘absolute’ in a way which disavows both her past and the web of relationships that constitutes her (and, by extension, all of us), so too she comes to learn that her happiness is relational as well. But relationships themselves are neither perfectly good or bad. But they are the paradigm within which we live and find value in our lives. For some, that means moving on, but for others, like Charlotte, physical or geographical travel is brief and comes with the realization that we can change wherever we are, even though a trip away may be necessary for us to realize this. In the end, then, we come to make whatever changes we can within the context provided by our identity and our situation. Although this is not an ideal prelapsarian state, it is an ideal nonetheless, but one tempered by recognition of the reality of people’s lives. Delia Grinstead of *A Ladder of Years* (1995) makes a similar point when she comments upon the difference between her life and the life of the women who populate the romance novels she is so fond of reading. “Real life continues past the end” of these novels, she claims: “Never ... would those women ... need to give a thought to the grinding years of daily life – the leaky basements, the faulty oven, the missing car keys... (*Ladder of Years*, 210). Tyler presents no Pollyanna picture: this does not make her anti-feminist, however.

Besides never having moved from their birth homes, Charlotte and Delia share the odd feature that their family incomes are dependent upon their homes (a feature also shared by Rebecca Davitch who I examine in the following section). Charlotte runs a photographic studio on the first floor of her home, a profession that she had taken over from her father. Delia’s situation is more indirect: her husband, Dr. Sam Grinstead, takes over the home office and practice of Delia’s father who was also a physician. Indeed, part of the concern that Delia begins to have about her life concerns this last point when she begins to wonder if Sam married her primarily for her father’s “nice, comfortable old home” and the practice contained therein (*Ladder of Years*, 218). That is, Delia wonders, as Macon and Morgan both wondered, whether she is a useful partner in her marriage or a mere superfluous ornament to it.

Hence, though the novel opens in typical Tyler fashion with a homey reference, the novel turns quickly to attend to underlying problems: “This all started on a Saturday morning in May, one of those warm spring days that smell like clean linen” (*Ladder of Years*, 191<sup>4</sup>). Spring, of course, is a time of change and hence while the opening line makes reference to the comfort of home, it also hints at changes to come. Sam, now suffering from angina, is in the process of getting himself and the house in shape. “I don’t know what’s come

over that man,' Delia said. 'He's been re—what's the word? – rejuvenating, resuscitating ... renovating, I mean: renovating this house to a fare-thee well'" (*Ladder of Years*, 203). Delia too, at least subconsciously, desires change as dull routine begins to stultify her: "What kind of life was she leading," she muses, "if every single one of last week's telephone messages could as easily be this week's" (*Ladder of Years*, 219).

Although Delia flirts with the idea of having an affair, she realizes that, as her husband points out, "[y]ou're not exactly the type to have an affair" (*Ladder of Years*, 248). Having *him* point this out, however, leads Delia to leave him, although neither he nor the rest of the family notices right away. In fact, Delia herself is unaware she has left until after she has completed doing so. Interestingly, she 'escapes' in an RV. Delia, never have seen one before, is enthralled with the idea of a home that moves: "I'd have nothing ... interfering, so at a moment's notice I could hop behind the wheel and go. Travel with my house on my back, like a snail" (*Ladder of Years*, 252).<sup>5</sup>

Eventually, she settles at a boarding house in the small town of Bay Borough in a room that delights her because there was "not the slightest hint that anybody lived there" (*Ladder of Years*, 267). But as she settles, she realizes how easy it is to slip back into old modes of existence:

Funny how life contrived to build up layers of *things* around a person. Already she had that goose necked lamp, because the overhead bulb had proved inadequate for reading in bed; and she kept a stack of paper cups and a box of teabags on her closet floor, making do till now with hot water from the bathroom faucet; and it was becoming clear she needed a second dress. Last night, the first really warm night of summer, she had thought, *I should buy a fan*. Then she had told herself, *Stop. Stop while you're ahead* (*Ladder of Years*, 270).

Delia works hard at her 'project ': she "avoids conversation as much as possible." And speaking of her landlady in particular, she notes: "Heaven forbid they should get to be cozy, chatty lady friends, exchanging news of their workdays every evening" (*Ladder of Years*, 277). But she slowly comes to realize that it is not possible to attain complete isolation: it's impossible to be a completely unencumbered self. What she wants really, she later comes to recognize when writing a note to her mother-in-law is "*beginning again from scratch*" (*Ladder of Years*, 303)." Tyler captures the impossibility and the childishness of such an aspiration, however, when she has the mother-in-law reply: "[W]hen you're finished starting over, do you picture working up to the present again, and coming home?" (*Ladder of Years*, 307). One's past cannot be abandoned however much we might wish at times that it could. This is brought out wonderfully in the novel by having Delia tracked down by her sister Eliza because there is an old, almost forgotten, family connection to Bay Borough: indeed, many of the streets are named after relatives, and a forbear actually knew the founder of the town.

But Delia refuses to return home. She manages, however, symbolically to move her old home to her new place of residence by becoming a 'live-in housekeeper' to a recently

separated man, and his twelve-year-old boy (an age before which, Delia muses, children “stopped being thrilled to see you coming” (*Ladder of Years*, 294). That is, Delia becomes in Bay Borough what she was back in Roland Park, Baltimore, a wife and a mother. One could argue that since Delia becomes what she always was, she, like Charlotte, fails to move on. But this would miss the fact that Delia has repositioned herself in her new life. She is no longer a silly and flighty middle-aged woman who never really grew up. In Bay Borough, unlike in Roland Park, Delia becomes a competent and wise woman who people turn to for advice and feel they cannot live without: “she seemed to have changed into someone else—a woman people looked to automatically for sustenance (*Ladder of Years*, 365)

Eventually, however, parental responsibilities send Delia physically back home in order to attend the wedding of her daughter, Susie. Almost immediately, she finds herself needed since a crisis is in process. The house itself gives a hint of this upon her arrival. Just forty minutes before the wedding is due to begin, it is almost “empty” and not “very welcoming” (*Ladder of Years*, 418). Susie, Delia finds out, is refusing to get married and Delia is called upon to patch things up between Susie and her finance, Driscoll. What the crisis is and how Delia manages to resolve it are not particularly germane to this discussion. What is relevant, however, is that not only does Delia resolve the crisis, she is *expected* to do so by her family. Delia has changed as a result of her travels, but so has her family as they come to perceive her in new ways, most particularly as a grown and capable woman. Hence, the resolution between she and Sam is not as insipid as some have taken it to be.<sup>6</sup> Sam, clearly searching for the right thing to say, blurts out, “Was there anything that would, you know. Would persuade you to come back?” to which Delia responds, “Oh Sam. All you had to do was ask” (*Ladder of Years*, 459). That is to say, Sam had to come to the realization that Delia was not a superfluous ornament in their life together, that she was no longer the little frivolous girl that he had proposed to but a mature woman, wife, and mother. Simply asking her to return, then, is not as easy as it may seem for it requires in Sam a change in perception towards his wife.

Delia perceives things differently as well. This comes out in a passage delivered by Nat, the grandfather of Noel who is the boy she had been caring for in Bay Borough. An elderly and rather sick man, Nat has recently remarried, and he and his much younger bride are expecting a child. For Nat, this attempt at a return to a former part of one’s life is perhaps not going to turn out well, but things are different for Delia. “It had *all* been a time trip—all this past year and a half. Unlike Nat’s, though, hers had been a time trip that worked. What else would you call it when she’d ended up back where she started, home with Sam for good? When the people she had left behind had actually traveled further, in some ways” (*Ladder of Years*, 460).

Just before Delia’s reconciliation with Sam, Nat delivers the following long speech at dinner which makes a similar point to one I made earlier in reference to the end of *Earthly Possessions*. The passage speaks to the matter of the extent to which there is a happy resolution to *Ladder of Years* There’s a picture

I'm reminded of that he took towards the end of his life. Shows his dining-room table set for Christmas dinner. Savage himself sitting amongst the empty chairs, waiting for his family. Chair after chair after chair, silverware laid just so, even a baby's high chair, all in readiness. And I can't help thinking, when I look at that photo, *I bet that's as good as it got that day. From there on out, it was all downhill, I bet.* Actual sons and daughters arrived, and they quarreled over the drumsticks and sniped at their children's table manners and brought up hurtful incidents from fifteen years before; and the baby had this whimper that gave everybody a headache. Only just for that moment ... just as the shutter was clicking, none of that had happened yet, you see, and the table looked so beautiful, like someone's dream of a table, and old Savage felt so—what's the word I want, so—... anticipatory (*Ladder of Years*, 455).

Part of the maturation process, it would seem—and part of the lesson that the travelers in Tyler's work must come to learn, is that their happiness, along with their choices, will never be absolutely satisfying. This is not to say that people need simply to endure their lot in life, for neither Delia nor Charlotte does that. In Delia's case especially, family members change as well as Delia, but that is still not to say that life will match childish expectations. Tyler is, above all, a novelist of middle age: she realizes the extent to which our happiness and our choices are remnants of life as actually lived.

#### 4. Grownup Lives

"Once upon a time, there was a woman who discovered she had turned into the wrong person" (*Back When We Were Grownups*, 1). So begins Tyler's most recent narrative, *Back When We Were Grownups*. It is the story of Rebecca Davitch, a fifty-three year old widow, step/mother, grandmother and caretaker of her deceased husband's ninety-nine year old uncle. Significantly, Rebecca's maiden name is Holmes, for homes and houses play a focal role in her life. Like Charlotte and Delia before her, Rebecca feels trapped in her home, yet, as we shall see, she is able to discover that she belongs there without physically having to move away.

Part of Rebecca's initial discomfort with the house she lives in—an "ornate but rumbling nineteenth-century Baltimore row house, with its two high-ceilinged parlors, front and rear, its antiquated backyard kitchen connected to the dining room by an afterthought of a passageway, its elaborate carved moldings and butterfly-parquet floors and seven sculptured marble mantelpieces overhanging seven fireplaces, five of them now defunct"—is that she thinks of it as "the Davitches house, not hers" (*Back When We Were Grownups*, 23).

Like the house, Rebecca too has past her youth. Despite their flaws, however, Rebecca still manages to muster enough appeal out of the house—under dim lighting and sufficient accessories—to have it function as "the Open Arms," a place to host all "Occasions from the Cradle to the Grave," according to the publicity they advertise about their business" (*Back When We Were Grownups*, 23). Ironically, there is nothing at all open about either the family. Despite being 'professional hosts' for over half a century, the Davitches failed

utterly in thinking that

... the Open Arms existed simply to provide a physical space .... What they hadn't understood was that almost as important was an invisible oiling of the gears, so to speak: pointing one person toward the liquor and another person away from it, finding a chair for an elderly aunt or loading her plate or fetching her sweater, calming an overexcited child, signaling to the DJ to lower the volume, stepping in to fill an awkward silence.... (*Back When We Were Grownups*, 56-57).

The reason for their mistake, in part, is that the Davitches are a rather mean spirited lot who are inward turning by nature and who much prefer private to public space. We get a sense of this very early in the novel, which opens with an engagement picnic organized by Rebecca for her youngest stepdaughter, NoNo. In a fashion typical for them, all parts of the Davitch family ignoring each other, and indeed, their cars are circling "the meadow like covered wagons braced for attack" (*Back When We Were Grownups* 1). It is Rebecca who has to coax them into any sort of familial activity.

This is ironic, not to say disheartening, according to Rebecca because she sees herself as shy, reserved, bookish, and private sort of person, not the bubbling 'party hostess' she has become. In her youth, she had been a serious young scholar who had been 'pre-engaged' to another serious young scholar, and both of them had plans to enter the academy, she as Professor of American History and he as Professor of Physics. But her life has taken a radical turn. "She had once been so political! She had picketed the Macadam cafeteria on behalf of its underpaid workers; she had marched against the war in Vietnam; she had plastered the door of her dorm room with anti-nuclear stickers." Now, however, "she could barely bring herself to vote. All she read was Anne Landers and her horoscope. Her eyes slid over Kosovo and Rwanda and hurried on" (*Back When We Were Grownups*, 156).

Rebecca, that is, appears to have lost her old and 'private' self which she comes to think of as "her true real life," opposes this life to her "her fake real life," i.e., the life she actually lives (*Back When We Were Grownups*, 94). Her (now deceased husband) Joe, she comes to think, "swept [her] off [her] feet... a fully grown man, someone who already had his life in order, was already *living* his life" (*Back When We Were Grownups*, 152). She and Will, in contrast, had merely been preparing for it, or worse yet, just playing at it. Her transition to real, adult life was swift, however, as she became not only a wife, but also a stepmother of three young girls (and soon to be a mother as well) in addition to acting as caretaker for an aging mother-in-law and uncle. Increasingly, as well, she is called upon to take the lead in the business of *The Open Arms*, which the Davitches are constitutionally ill-suited for. "It seemed," she said, "I got onto a whole different path, got farther and farther away from my original self." Rebecca thinks, however, that she is awaking from a long period of disingenuous life to realize that she is "an imposter in her own life" or, in other words, as she puts it: "It's *not* my life. It's somebody else's" (*Back When We Were Grownups* 152). Thus begins Rebecca's attempt to realize her 'old, true life': she begins subtly to disengage from her family, to research on her old B.A. thesis, subscribes to *The*

*Grownups* 152). Thus begins Rebecca's attempt to realize her 'old, true life': she begins subtly to disengage from her family, to research on her old B.A. thesis, subscribes to *The New York Times Book Review*, and attempts to renew her relationship with her former fiancé, Will.

Despite the initial attractiveness of the thought of this former life, she comes eventually to realize that there were good reasons for having left Will. He is a plodding man, rigidly stuck to an unchangeable routine. This is a man, after all, who cooks only chili, making enough each Sunday to be stored in separate containers for the six following suppers through the week. In grand understatement when he declines a salad containing hearts of palm, he says: "I'm not all that much for experiment" (*Back When We Were Grownups*, 247). As Poppy says of the family photo album, Will thinks that Rebecca and her family have "no order... Everything's jumbled up" (*Back When We Were Grownups*, 253). She also discovers that Will is given to a rather peculiar brand of snobbishness: he thinks it inappropriate that Rebecca is friends with the people who help her in her attempt to keep the Open Arms actually open for business—her plumber, carpenter, and so on. Hence, when her brother-in-law, Zeb, tells her, "It's never too late to do what you want to do" in life, she responds indignantly: "What? ... Well, of all the—Why, that's just plain wrong" (*Back When We Were Grownups*, 261). Life is not, she comes to realize, completely undefined, completely open. As she discovers that she actually loves the bothersome Poppy (after realizing that he has not suffered a stroke or heart attack), she also comes to the discovery that: "Apparently, you grow to love whom you're handed" (*Back When We Were Grownups*, 176).

Rebecca had wanted simply to believe that she was free to choose her life completely, and that her life would add up to something of public significance, or as she puts it: "she had just wanted to believe, she supposed, that there were grander motivations in history than mere family and friends, mere domestic happenstance" (261). This realization is of course disappointing for Rebecca, as it is for the rest of us. But the realization also brings with it the further recognition that relationships are not something that can be blocked off and placed into a separate corner of our lives. According to Tyler, and to the proponents of communitarianism, those relationships actually constitute the *whole* of us. Rebecca expresses this idea toward the end of the novel: "Some people," she says, "had experiences in their pasts that define them forever after... The loss of a child, for example... For Rebecca, it was the fact of her instant motherhood. That had been the most profound change in her life; it had made her understand that this *was* her life, for real, and not some story floating past" (*Back When We Were Grownups*, 264). From a global perspective, this can be depressing since all of us must realize, as Rebecca does, that "none of her little world's events had really been that important," (*Back When We Were Grownups*, 265) but as Poppy says, "your true life is the one you end up with" (*Back When We Were Grownups*, 283).

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Her first novel, *If Morning Ever Comes*, was published in 1964 when she was just 23 years old.

<sup>2</sup>References to this novel are taken from *Anne Tyler: Three Completed Novels. A Patchwork Planet. Ladder of Years and Saint Maybe*, 1998, 1995, 1991.

<sup>3</sup>As Susan Gilbert (1990) and others have pointed out, Tyler's characters often become happier when making a social and economic 'downward' move from wealth and leisure.

<sup>4</sup>References to this novel are taken from *Anne Tyler: Three Completed Novels. A Patchwork Planet. Ladder of Years and Saint Maybe*, 1998, 1995, 1991.

<sup>5</sup>This would be open up interesting possibility for the tension Updike mentioned between stasis and movement.

<sup>6</sup>Stout, e.g., sees the entire novel as "pointlessly repetitive" (Stout, 1998, 138).

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