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Schoene, Berthold  (2024) Max Porter's ruderalism, or what nature is now. Textual Practice. ISSN 0950-236X

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/0950236X.2024.2380254>

Publisher: Taylor & Francis

Version: Published Version

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To cite this article: Berthold Schoene (22 Jul 2024): Max Porter's ruderalism, or what nature is now, Textual Practice, DOI: [10.1080/0950236X.2024.2380254](https://doi.org/10.1080/0950236X.2024.2380254)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/0950236X.2024.2380254>



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Published online: 22 Jul 2024.



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Max Porter's ruderalism, or what nature is now

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ABSTRACT

This article draws attention to Max Porter's portrayal of the ruderal margins of our human lifeworld as the dominant landscape of the Anthropocene. My analysis reaches beyond conceptions of the ruderal as a liminal *terrain vague*, or 'edgelands', that constitutes a hybrid 'third space' between the cultural zone of urban or suburban settlements, on the one hand, and nature as incorporated by the countryside, or 'the wilderness', on the other. The article seeks to advance Environmental Humanities research by reading the ruderal as emblematic of the contemporary *zeitgeist* in a time of escalating environmental despoliation. In the Anthropocene the ruderal usurps 'nature' and emerges as culture's only enduring exteriority, an exteriority that grows in unpredictability and formidableness in direct proportion to the manifold anthropogenic disturbances inflicted upon it. The article traces Porter's progressively *ruderalist* aesthetics from *Lanny* (2019) to *Shy* (2023) as he lets go of traditional 'nature' in order to find new ways of relating to what nature has become in the Anthropocene, what nature is now. What this means for the novel is that it must cease as a humans-only monologue and recalibrate its aesthetic orientation from exclusive anthropocentric representation to more-than-human resonance and a *ruderalist* ecosemiotic rapport.

ARTICLE HISTORY Received 12 March 2024; Accepted 20 June 2024

KEYWORDS Max Porter; ruderal aesthetics; resonance; ecosemiotics; new nature writing; anthropocene novel

Max Porter has distinguished himself over the past decade as an experimental writer of uniquely innovative literary fiction which in 2015 won him a nomination for the Goldsmiths Prize. Even though his work is not primarily concerned with impending environmental catastrophe, his novels problematise, to varying degrees, humanity's 'extinction of experience' and our loss of resonance with nature. *Lanny* (2019) and *Shy* (2023), his second and fourth novels, which stand at the centre of this investigation, both show an explicit interest in our relationship with what nature has become in the Anthropocene, with what

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nature is now. *Lanny* features a wondrous young boy who lives with his parents in a home-counties commuter village where he forms a friendship with Pete, a middle-aged artist, a relationship of which his parents approve. However, when Lanny goes missing, it is 'Mad Pete' who is denounced as a paedophile and held responsible for the boy's disappearance. Only a few villagers suspect the actual culprit, the mythical Green Man figure of Dead Papa Toothwort, a spectral epitome of despoiled nature who secretly stalks the ruderal peripheries of their village. *Shy* by contrast centres on one night in the life of a disaffected urban teenager as he escapes from his borstal-like therapy centre intent on drowning himself in a nearby pond. Submerged in the water up to his neck and weighed down by a rucksack full of rocks, Shy gets distracted from his original plan when 'a gaswater corpse couple'¹ of putrefied badger remains floats into view, catching his eye and sparking his curiosity.

In the investigation that follows I repudiate readings of Porter's treatment of nature with reference to traditional paradigms of the Romantic and the sublime.² Much more interesting seems Terry Gifford's inclusion of *Lanny* in a new 'post-pastoral' canon. However, rather than simply aiming to 'achieve a vision of an integrated natural world that includes the human'³, Porter examines what, if anything, remains possible in the Anthropocene in terms of promoting human/nonhuman communication that could potentially alleviate humanity's severely diminished, 'ghosted' experience of nature. Another concern of the article is to identify the ruderal margins of our human lifeworld not only as the dominant landscape of the Anthropocene but moreover as emblematic of our era's *zeitgeist* or 'structure of feeling'. My reading of Porter's novels reaches beyond traditional conceptions of the ruderal as a liminal *terrain vague*, or 'edge-lands', that constitutes a hybrid 'third space' between the cultural zone of urban or suburban settlements, on the one hand, and nature as incorporated by the countryside, or 'the wilderness', on the other. As I demonstrate, in the Anthropocene the ruderal usurps 'nature' and emerges as culture's one and only enduring exteriority, an exteriority that escalates and gains in unpredictability and formidableness in direct proportion to the manifold anthropogenic disturbances inflicted upon it. The article traces Porter's literary practice of a progressively *ruderalist* aesthetics from *Lanny* to *Shy* as he lets go of nature as it has traditionally been conceived in order to find new ways of relating to what nature has become in the Anthropocene, what nature is now. What this means for the novel is that it must cease as a humans-only monologue and recalibrate its aesthetic orientation from exclusive anthropocentric representation to more-than-human resonance and a *ruderalist* ecosemiotic rapport.

1. Nature in the negative mode

Lanny introduces nature as the living dead. Enshrined in the spectre of Dead Papa Toothwort, nature manifests as a chaotic, zombified mess, a vestigial

assemblage of neglect and volatility. No longer ‘cyclically reliable’, disfigured and weighed down by ‘litter [...] a rusted ring pull [...] a petrified condom [...] Victorian rubbish’ (3), Toothwort heaves into view as a monumental environmental indictment, mocking our much vaunted commitment to conservation and sustainable green development.⁴ Nature is no longer ‘a beautiful place’; instead, what meets the eye is ‘a tapestry of small abuses, fights and littering, lake-loads of unready chemicals piped into [Toothwort’s] water bed, greed and decline, preaching teaching crying dying and walking the fucking dogs’ (53) – in other words, an ambience as anthropogenic as it is anthropocentric. Porter’s vision of nature could not be any more compromised, any more vexed, nor any less Romantic.

Toothwort also manifests as ‘living dead’ in a more strictly ecological sense. As Daniel Janzen explains, the term *living dead* describes ‘an individual stripped of the ecological circumstances that allow it to be a reproductive member of its population’. In other words, albeit still alive, the specimen in question is ‘evolutionarily dead’ because the circumstances that formerly supported the flourishing of its kind are ‘now gone [...] pesticed out of existence, or global warmed into oblivion’. Yet ‘because the adult lives on, we are lulled into thinking that the environmental damage really is not all that bad, that extinction has not already occurred’.⁵ While all this makes nature in *Lanny* appear not just unsustainable but hopelessly moribund, it seems important not to underestimate nature’s resilience. As Andreas Malm reminds us, in our era of climate change it may not ultimately be nature that finds itself on the wane. ‘We will not get less nature and more society as temperatures rise’, Malm predicts, ‘but rather the other way around’.⁶ We must not forget that nature is coterminous with ceaseless evolutionary diversification, and as a freak mutation eking out a living against all the odds Toothwort makes an excellent case in point. Instead of converting sunlight into energy through photosynthesis as is characteristic of most plants, the eponymous toothwort (*Lathraea squamaria*) embodies an aberrant, yet ingenious mutation. Unable to produce any chlorophyll of its own, toothwort exists as a parasitic woodland flower that sustains itself by leeching off the roots of trees.

Toothwort’s relationship with Lanny’s home village, of which ‘he’s a part [...] and has been for hundreds of years, whether he’s real or not’ (69), is complicated. Seemingly integral to the identity and self-image of the village, not only has he been ‘represented on keystones, decorative stencils, tattoos, the cricket club logo’, he has also been ‘in story form in every bedroom of every house of this place’. He is part of the villagers’ communal DNA – ‘in them like water’ (23). Yet it quickly transpires that the relationship between Toothwort and the village has turned increasingly one-sided. Toothwort continues to seek out opportunities for refreshing his ancient rapport with the village; in fact, so starved is he for intercourse with ‘this

place of his' that whenever he gains access to its 'English symphony' of everyday chit-chat (6), his response is entirely over the top, undignified and grotesque: 'He swims in it, he gobbles it up and wraps himself in it, he rubs it all over himself, he pushes it into his holes, he gargles, plays, punctuates and grazes, licks and slurps at the sound of it, wanting it fizzing on his tongue' (7). Meanwhile, the villagers display no equivalent appetite for such ecstatic revelling in mutual encounter. Whatever resonance, reciprocity, or sense of interdependence once prevailed between nature and humankind has gone experientially extinct. Paweł Wojtas appears mistaken when he suggests that 'as an ancient local legend, Toothwort is part of the collective imagination of the village. Non-existent but omnipresent, he is unable to speak for himself because he is already spoken about'.⁷ As I see it, Toothwort's deprivation of first-person narrative status, which segregates him from Porter's human characters (with the notable exception of Lanny, who is equally denied direct speech), is the result of humanity's alienation from the ecological sphere traditionally emblematised by Toothwort. What persists as the latter's tenuous presence within the community is as irrelevant as a dimly remembered nursery rhyme. That said, when in the aftermath of Lanny's disappearance someone sprays TOOTHWORT TOOK HIM on the bus shelter, they are quickly made to scrub it off, signalling that any reminder of Toothwort continues to inspire an *unheimlich* sense of menace and dread that must be nipped in the bud.

In *Lanny* humanity has grown so self-involved, inward-looking, and experientially challenged that Toothwort has become not just sensuously imperceptible to the villagers, but unreal. All that remains of him these days are a few imported 'comedy D[ead] P[apa] T[oothwort]s, nasty charmless things with guns, with fangs, with knives for hands' (45) that circulate within the culture evacuated of any genuine heritage value. As a result, Toothwort is reduced to haunting and stalking rather than fruitfully communicating with the village, and the action we see eventually unfold in Porter's novel – namely, Toothwort's kidnapping of Lanny – seems like a desperate last effort at drawing attention to Toothwort's enduring reality and ongoing significance. This endeavour must fail since rather than turning to the natural realm for answers, the villagers lose themselves in 'all the grinding lyric-practical nonsense' (33) of their own neatly enclosed, exclusively human environment, self-obsessed and thoroughly saturated by gossip and media hypes. Designed to keep at bay and render invisible any anxiety-inducing manifestations of exteriority or difference, this humans-only dynamic of village life ultimately results in confining the villagers to an illusory bubble-world experientially cut off and estranged from what else exists in the world.

In the following I argue that Dead Papa Toothwort is best understood not as a vision of nature as it has traditionally been conceived, but as an

embodiment of the ruderal. According to Malm, our relentless anthropocentrism has pushed nature into ‘a negative mode’ which by accentuating its more-than-human autonomy also serves to establish beyond doubt that ‘independent nature is the only thing that cannot come to an end. The paradox of climate change is that it makes it appear more strangely alive than ever’.⁸ A term that has acquired considerable currency among urban ecologists, *ruderal* refers to ‘organisms that spontaneously inhabit “disturbed” environments usually considered inhospitable to life: cracks in sidewalks, spaces alongside train tracks and roads, industrial sites, waste disposal areas, or rubble fields’.⁹ For the purposes of my enquiry, I would like to extend the terminological scope of ‘ruderal’ to encompass not only any disused, largely untended or neglected land that bears witness to a transmutation, restoration or adaptation of nature in the wake of human interference, but indeed any ‘touched’ or cultivated land, be it brownfield or greenfield. The first researcher to have given ruderal landscapes – or ‘edgelands’ as she calls them – due scholarly attention is Marion Shoard who elaborates on their singular complexity as follows:

Contrary to picture-book practice, Britain’s towns, cities and villages do not usually sit cheek by jowl with our countryside. Instead, betwixt urban and rural, stands a kind of landscape quite different from either. Often vast in area, though hardly noticed, it is characterised by warehouses and rubbish tips, road interchanges and sewage works, business parks and derelict factories, superstores and allotments, golf courses and travellers’ encampments and fragmented, frequently scruffy, farmland. All these heterogeneous elements are arranged in an unruly and often apparently chaotic fashion against a background of unkempt wasteland frequently swathed in riotous growths of colourful plants, both native and exotic. This peculiar landscape is only the latest version of an interfacial rim which has always separated settlements from the countryside [...] Yet for most of us, most of the time, this mysterious no man’s land passes unnoticed: in our imaginations, as opposed to our actual lives, it barely exists.¹⁰

It is indeed tempting, following Shoard’s definition, to describe the ruderal as a feral borderland ‘where town and country meet’¹¹ but this would mean picturing it as a clearly demarcated hybrid ‘third space’ that neatly separates the human from a pristine wilderness beyond. In the Anthropocene such wilderness can no longer exist as an ‘untamed biogeography that has its own will, its own boundlessness, its own destiny, and its own imagination’,¹² especially not in a densely populated part of the world such as England. Paul Farley and Michael Symmons Roberts agree that ‘an unseen, untouched English landscape is a myth’. As they see it, ‘a long and complex interaction between constant natural processes and more recent human activity has largely formed all the landscapes we can see today, and that landscape is indivisible from the human world’.¹³ Consequently, the ruderal not only encroaches upon what Shoard terms ‘the countryside’, but as human conquest escalates, it

assimilates and contains it. The ruderal thrives on human interference; humanity's compulsion to trespass, invade and disturb is its strength and its virtue. The more unconscionable our intrusion, the more fecund the response of the ruderal. Yet whereas therefore Dead Papa Toothwort does indeed make a perfect literary epitome of Malm's invocation of nature in the Anthropocene as 'something of a spectral creature [...] carried forward by a human past [...] that comes roaring back into society'¹⁴, it is possible also to view his appearance in a more positive and somewhat less apocalyptic light. The ruderal hosts also whatever endures of the wild, serving as a refuge where the most adaptable flora and fauna find a new lease of life and can reinvent themselves in often ingenious synanthropic ways. The ruderal covers disturbed and compromised, yet at the same time immensely resilient terrain, which Toothwort has witnessed 'outlive its surgeons, worshippers and attackers. It holds firm and survives the village again and again.' However, it no longer qualifies as untouched nature. As we are given to understand, Toothwort 'wouldn't do well in a wilderness' (66).

Shoard's exploration of the ruderal culminates in labelling these overlooked landscapes 'the ultimate physical expression of the character of our age',¹⁵ a pertinent assertion considering Shoard made it in 2000, the same year Paul Crutzen inaugurated a brand-new understanding of contemporary modernity by first floating the idea of the Anthropocene. Since even the earliest human settlements would have been likely to 'spawn a similar penumbra of land',¹⁶ Shoard's declaration not only infuses new life into the proposition that 'the very beginning of civilization with sedentism and agriculture [...] marks the beginning of the Anthropocene' but also that it might be 'simply "human nature" to alter and, eventually, degrade environments'.¹⁷ In other words, we might speculate that from the very beginning of the Anthropocene all land and indeed the entire planet has been destined sooner or later to turn ruderal. By the same token, Toothwort, of whose ancient provenance Porter's novel keeps reminding us, would be at least as old as agriculture, if perhaps not as old as nature.¹⁸ An intricate mix of nature and culture – or *natureculture*, in New Materialist parlance¹⁹ – Toothwort epitomises a volatile, yet incalculably fertile fusion of the oppositional impulses of domestication and feralisation, or, put differently, the anthropogenic ruination of nature and its ruderal resurrection. Architect Ignasi De Solá-Morales Rubio attempted as early as the mid-1990s to capture this intrinsic ambivalence of the *terrain vague* (his term for 'edgelands') by recognising ruderal land not only as 'void, absence [but also as] promise, the space of the possible, of expectation'.²⁰ Picking up on this unique utopian potential of the ruderal in *The New Nature Writing* (2017), Jos Smith promotes envisioning the edgelands 'as a space in their own right rather than as merely defined by what is on either side of them'.²¹

Indeed, as I argue, the edgelands have only one side to them; there is nothing beyond them. They are what is now culture's sole formidable other.

Reminiscent of Timothy Morton's hyperobjects, Toothwort's ghostly presence remains nebulous and intangible despite always already enveloping and on occasion intervening directly in human life. A comment from Shoard strikes me as particularly pertinent in this context as it serves to elucidate Porter's imaginative investment in Toothwort: 'Town and country may show us the surface of life with which we feel comfortable, but the [ruderal] interface shows us its broiling depths. If people were encouraged to understand this world more', Shoard speculates, 'they might feel less alienated and puzzled by the circumstances of their lives'.²² Porter's novels delve into precisely these 'broiling depths' to illuminate and, if possible, remediate what in interview with David Naimon, Porter terms 'Anthropocene blindness',²³ a concept intended to capture an all-pervasive sensuous impairment that sits at the root of the human predicament in the Anthropocene. Porter's work is driven by the need to undo this tragic desensitisation and reacquaint humanity with what has become erased from our lifeworld, yet continues to be indispensable for our ongoing survival:

Most people's relationship to the land isn't even defined by ecological fact: *I am breathing air that is filtered by these trees*, or *I am drinking water that has come up through these springs*, or whatever. It's literally just a place where they walk their dog, or it's a route to the football pitch [...] Most people's lack of engagement in it is actually [...] almost sociopathic. I don't know what the ecological equivalent of that would be. A kind of 'Anthropocene blindness' to the fact that you are living on a planet that sustains you. Almost like you're playing a video game – you haven't actually realized you're made of the same atoms [...] as this place.²⁴

The core part of *Lanny*, which reflects the community's reaction to the boy's disappearance, introduces us to a vacuous echo chamber where communal village life is shown to have contracted into a humans-only bubble-world entranced by a ceaseless, largely inconsequential monologue with itself. The community's choric cacophony never strays far from the banal, stereotyped and predictable, conveying nothing new or surprising while starkly exposing how far humanity has come to remove itself from the actual plot of the novel which unfolds exclusively in the novel's ruderal outskirts, the whereabouts of both the action's instigator (Toothwort) and its catalyst (Lanny). Ironically, at the same time as it reveals the villagers' ultimate irrelevance within the novel's grand scheme of things, their 'Anthropocene blindness' serves them also as a safeguarding mechanism that protects them from the worst of Toothwort's insatiable metabolism, 'his great need' (5) bent on extracting whatever he can from the human for his own gratification. At this point it seems important to be clear: the villagers of course represent us. The community in *Lanny* is a literary encapsulation of

western culture and civilisation at large. So, were *we* to look beyond our humans-only bubble and become aware of Toothwort hovering voraciously in the margins of our lifeworld, ‘clomp[ing] through the wood, wide awake and hungry for his listening’ (4), what might be our response? Judging from Porter’s live streaming of our wholly inconsequential chatter, our culture appears very poorly equipped to pre-empt, let alone successfully resist, any sudden upsurge of ‘nature’ (or whatever incalculable anthropogenic ghostliness of it remains).

2. Like bowerbirds do: liminality and ecosymbiosis in *Lanny*

‘Lanny’ is an unusual name, and it is unlikely Porter chose it at random. A quick internet search identifies it as a gender-indeterminate name, diminutive of *Roland* or *Orlando*, which both translate etymologically as ‘renowned land’. The name deepens our sense of the symbolic make-up of Porter’s ‘weird kid’ (118), but not in terms of ideas about England or Englishness specifically, which would define him – to cite David Abram – within ‘a purely human set of coordinates’. As Abram expands on the ecological impact of a concept such as nationhood, ‘the great danger is that [we] [...] may come to believe that our breathing bodies really inhabit these abstractions, and that we will lend our lives more to consolidating, defending, or bewailing the fate of these ephemeral entities than to nurturing and defending the actual places that physically sustain us.’²⁵ It seems far more fruitful therefore to examine Lanny’s eponymous affinity with the land in light of his relationship with Toothwort. Toothwort identifies Lanny as ‘his favourite [...] Young and ancient all at once, a mirror and a key’, declaring his intention ‘to chop the village open and pull the child out. Extract him’ (9). Lanny could be said to ‘mirror’ Toothwort in that he is by no means your standard prepubescent boy but appears otherworldly and ‘creaturely’ (11), ‘his eyes [...] like spring hornbeam, a very fresh green’ (25).²⁶ Prone to uttering ‘strange and wonderful things, mumbblings, puzzling things for a child to say’, he announces in characteristically precocious fashion that ‘I’m a million cameras, even when I’m sleeping, clicking, clicking, every second something is growing and changing. We are little arrogant flashes in a grand magnificent scheme’ (32). Possessed of an exuberant more-than-human sensibility, Lanny stands out from among the villagers, his position marked more by marginality than integration. Like a changeling he effortlessly crosses over into the ruderal *terrain vague* of Toothwort’s world, to which he appears to belong as much as to the village, if not in fact more so. As Toothwort asserts, ‘the boy understands. [...] He really truly knows me’ (54). Lanny can be seen to serve as ‘a key’ because his insertion in the community could potentially afford Toothwort insider access to the village. More importantly, however, in his manifestation as ‘Lanny Greentree’ (54), he promises

to mitigate his community's state of cosmophobic alienation by playfully venturing into the village's 'tensile frame' (54) and replacing the natural horror we have of this liminal space with something more akin to enchantment.

Exemplifying the British land artist Richard Long's suspicion that 'many people, mostly in cities, have the wrong idea that anything not urban is somehow romantic',²⁷ Clémentine Beauvais calls Lanny 'the Blakean child of the contemporary commuter town' and regards Porter's portrayal of him as 'archetypal, intensely Romantic in its deep connection to nature'.²⁸ As already demonstrated, it is not nature, let alone a romanticised rendition of it, that we find expressed in *Lanny* but rather the *ruderalism* that is constitutive of Anthropocene edgelands. As Shoard explains, it is the terrain adjacent to human settlements that children tend to seek out as 'a wonderful place to play'. Not only does the ruderal offer 'an obviously varied environment which is often wild, with plenty of places to hide and things to play with', more importantly 'its dereliction stimulates the imagination'.²⁹ When Lanny loses himself in the liminality of the edgelands and is assumed to have been abducted, or worse, he does not hide in a cave, den or burrow, or the hollow of a tree. Instead, he gets himself entrapped in a disused storm drain, part of 'the ramshackle and the rotten [...] the rusty and the rubbished' which, according to Paul Cloke and Owain Jones, make up the 'unclaimed territory' of the edgelands.³⁰ To read Lanny as Beauvais does with sole recourse to traditional paradigms of childhood means to overlook 'his ability to wriggle and twist free from every attempt to grasp him' (165).

Our understanding of the boy is much better served by taking literally Porter's description of him as 'enigmatic and special', as having 'a kind of magic' (143). Parsing Porter's decision to let neither Toothwort nor Lanny express himself by addressing the reader directly in the first person (unlike the other characters of Lanny's Mum, Lanny's Dad, and Pete), Tom Bradstreet helps to elucidate the complexity of the novel's portrayal of both figures. 'Just as Toothwort is defined precisely by his indefinability, by the absence of much of what allows the use of pronouns like "I" or "you"', Bradstreet writes, 'Lanny lacks the essence, the *ego*, that would allow us to pin him down, to *capture* him in words or images'.³¹ Bradstreet proceeds to invoke an intriguing synergy between Porter's ruderal aesthetics and Lanny's human/non-human transitionality. As he puts it, '[Lanny] exists only in the ambiguous liminal space of the third person, represented as a contingent materialization of phenomena that overspill the borders of the individual self'.³² The common denominator in this equation is of course liminality as a productive elision and disorientation of definitive boundaries and demarcations. Porter appears keen to find a sustainable measure of balance within what is categorically unsettled, be it the ruderal, the feral,

the queer, the liminal, or the *unheimlich*, all of which resound within the novel's possibly most memorable phrase, 'Away with the fairies, that boy' (121) which, deployed to both define and locate Lanny, in the end fails to accomplish either.

'Liminality' is traditionally understood as the second phase in a tripartite initiation rite which sees an individual, most typically a juvenile, cast out into the world on a journey of self-discovery. As Dag Endsjø explains with reference to Arnold van Gennep's anthropological classic *The Rites of Passage* (1909), 'first the subject has to go through a rite of segregation from his or her previous role in society. Then he or she goes through an intermediate phase, before finally being reagggregated into his or her new role'.³³ This describes of course also the trajectory of the *bildungsroman* where the protagonist's development propels them out of the life to which they have become accustomed as a child and exposes them to a series of challenging encounters with an unfamiliar exterior world before ushering them back into the confines of their original culture where they are assigned their future role within society. At first glance, this pattern suits *Lanny*. The novel sees a young person abruptly removed from his familiar surroundings, following which his life then hangs 'in the balance' for most of the novel. In the end he is rescued and brought back to the village where, stripped of his weird and wonderful nature which formerly defied all efforts at integrating him, he is shown to grow into a rather unremarkable young man: 'Lanny is taller and hairier now, he moves more slowly, asks fewer questions and thinks straighter about man and nature. He huddles behind the bus shelter smoking and laughing with his friends' (208). The boy could not be any more radically transformed. Indeed, he is 'Lanny' no more. As the novel informs us, 'he goes by another first name now'. And whatever magical intervention on Toothwort's part may have contributed to his rescue has been erased from memory: 'When asked, [the teenager formerly known as 'Lanny'] tells a simple story: he fell, he slept, he was scared; he survived because of a rucksack of snacks' (207).

Reading the novel in terms of trauma rather than as a rite of passage, Wojtas concludes that 'the irreparable damage has been done', leaving none of the characters 'unscathed' and preventing all of them from 'reclaiming their former selves'.³⁴ Indeed, it is disconcerting to see the novel's spirit of subversion crushed so definitively. Have we as readers been made to live through all that adrenaline-pumping turmoil only to find deadening normality restored? No longer breathing down the outer peripheries of the human lifeworld, Toothwort seems so successfully extirpated from the narrative that his only appearance, in greatly diminished form, comes in the 'Afterword', where we witness him sicken and turn to stone. Surely Porter cannot have invested so extensively in an exploration of liminality only to then let it all come to nothing? While liminality remains confined to the intermediate

phase of a rite of passage when viewed from a strictly anthropological perspective, I would like to suggest that in *Lanny* liminality does not just momentarily suspend business as usual for a particular individual *in extremis*. Instead, liminality always already engulfs the entire human lifeworld. Liminality is Toothwort's terrain which, as explained, represents not merely a threshold sphere 'bordered by one opposite at either side between which it may represent a state of transition'.³⁵ Disclosing its inherent affinity with the ruderal, in *Lanny* liminality is shown to encompass all that endures of the world exterior to culture. In a dream orchestrated by Toothwort, 'caught between what's real and what's not' (195), Jolie, Lanny's mum, finds herself transported to an otherworldly realm where she comes face to face with Toothwort in all his radically liminal, ceaselessly shapeshifting, entirely ungraspable essence. To behold him head-on, which we are given to understand would amount to catching a glimpse of nature incarnate, proves too much: 'Her brain and her eyes don't know what messages to send each other [...] He blinks and glimmers in and out of solid form, camouflaged or non-existent against the woodland, against her disbelief. [...] She watches so hard she might break' (201).

Porter, who through one of his more marginal characters voices a distrust of endings, regarding them as 'false things [...] Sustenance for fools and never what they claim to be' (207), concludes *Lanny* with a double vision that juxtaposes a realist ending with an enigmatic, quasi-mythical 'Afterword'. Distinctly different in tone and style, both endings are set in the *terrain vague* of the ruderal, and both seem committed to combating 'Anthropocene blindness'. In both instances our final view is of woodland, which we are assured will outlast humanity no matter what. In the afterword Toothwort withdraws into himself and turns to stone, yet rather than this being the end of the story, the 'small megalith' he leaves behind comes to take the place of Planet Earth on which 'it all rests'. In this markedly anthropocenic vision the more-than-human prevails and endures as 'the earth turns [...] shifting in deep-time, story-beating, pulsating, connected to all that is water and all that is air' (214). Meanwhile, seemingly unencumbered by the afterword's elegiac posthuman refrain that 'there was so much we did not see' (214–15), the antecedent realist ending shifts the novel's focus onto humanity's ongoing desire to commune with (whatever remains of) nature. The teenager formerly known as Lanny 'has tried to lose the memory of Dead Papa Toothwort. Like the last speaker of any language he has had to forget in order to survive, but some knowledge of it lives in his marrow' (208). This deeply ingrained, intuitive knowledge – more attuned perhaps to the bodily rhythms of the semiotic than the rigid, unequivocal referentiality of the symbolic – finds an outlet in art, practised in the company of the boy's now elderly artist-mentor 'Mad Pete'. Not so dissimilar from how it begins, then, the novel concludes in the ruderal edgelands, 'deep

in a *silvicultured* English wood' (208, my italics), that is, not within pristine nature but its cultivated-almost-to-death Anthropocene counterpart, where the two artists come together to 'draw the woods around them' (210).

Creativity, intuition, the imagination – these are the faculties that enable humans to stay in touch with what exists beyond their safely encultured life-world, that is, the bewildering realm of liminality where 'every element of existence may be found severed from its usual context [...] [and] even more basic opposites as human versus divine, human versus animal, dead versus alive, may be negated and reverted'.³⁶ Drawing our attention to 'the *subversiveness* of interfacial land' Shoard is in no doubt that the edgelands harbour a promise of magical transformation, which as far as she is concerned appeals not only to children who 'find the edgelands a *wonderful* place to play', but also 'to some kind of creative artist'.³⁷ It seems no coincidence, then, that Porter portrays Pete as a nature or land artist, as someone who is keen to capture the mysteries of life despite being fully aware of the clumsiness and aesthetic shortcomings of any such endeavour: 'I was into finding and cleaning the skeletons of dead things. Mostly birds. I would pull them apart, coat them in gold leaf, reassemble them wrongly and suspend them from wire frames. Little mobiles of badly made birds' (13). As Lanny reports to his mum, Pete is into 'seeing things properly. [...] how close we are to plants, how everything is connected' (87); in other words, he is the only villager intent on redressing his 'Anthropocene blindness'. Even more intriguing is the ruderal landscape that Pete's creative practice leaves in its wake as Robert, Lanny's dad, discovers when he searches for his son in Pete's garden, 'stepping over rusted paint cans and half-built frames, twisted bits of wood, slabs of rock, tables and ligatures, animal heads and god only knows what half-built sculptures or junk or both' (120). A garden ought to be a place of beauty and cultivated harmony, not a site of such apparent wreckage and chaos. Yet to Robert – 'the first man in a Paul Smith suit ever to tread this somewhat *enchanted* ground' (120–21, my italics) – Pete's garden manifests as a profoundly bewildering, entirely otherworldly order.

Young Lanny, too, is of an artistic disposition. And it is in his depiction of the art Lanny practises in the *terrain vague* of the ruderal – at once more intimately attuned to nature than Pete's could ever hope to be and more explicitly informed by a sense of communal purpose to do with Lanny's 'innate gift for social cohesion' (12) – that Porter surprises us by reintroducing nature explicitly as a third term of reference. Unlike Pete, who seems content to practise his art in isolation, or Toothwort, who in terms of communication remains a passive listener as he eavesdrops on human dialogue but never partakes of it, Lanny is on a mission, which is to set up a live channel of communication between the village and nature, implementing himself as ruderal conduit. One artwork – his building of a bower, 'like

bowerbirds do [...] a tiny museum of magic things' (57) – stands out in this context, not only because 'it's for the whole village and anyone who finds it. It's to make them fall in love with everything' (58) but also because it abandons symbolic language as we know it for an ecosemiotic mode of expression. Lanny may not be sharing Toothwort's capacity to assume non-human guise at will, but he certainly excels at behavioural simulation, a talent that enables him to act out in practice what the Australian poet-critic Stuart Cooke describes in theoretical terms as 'an ethological poetics [inspired by] the study of nonhuman creative forms'.³⁸ In putting on a carefully choreographed enactment of nonhuman behaviour Lanny attempts to get the villagers to acknowledge, see, and read 'the expressive qualities and aesthetic resources of things'. This will only work of course if we can find it within ourselves to reciprocate more-than-human nature's 'capacity to catalyze relation'.³⁹

As manifestations of an ethological poetics go, it is hard to conceive of something that could outshine in expressiveness, or in terms of sheer spectacle, the courtship behaviour of the bowerbird. Like many species of bird-of-paradise, bowerbirds erect elaborate architectural structures of twigs and other plant materials which they then bring to life with an artful display of colourful objects in order to attract a mate. Even though the bowerbird is an exotic species and not endemic to English woodland, many of us are likely to have previously caught a glimpse of its dazzling performance as part of a nature programme on TV. Together with Lanny's mum, Porter invites his readers to behold the boy:

darting about, delicate and focused, laying a few early markers, clearing the ground, drawing the perimeter with a stick, off again, back with a bundle, off again, like a time-lapse nature video [...] her little winged thing, attending to his creation [...] adding snail shells and chalk, fitting nuts and hard berries, dead insects and interesting twigs into every possible gap [...] (191–92)

Lanny emulates – indeed, he momentarily becomes – a bowerbird as he mimics the creature's wondrous work of ethological art. Even though the bird's performance does not address us directly, let alone convey a decipherable message, it is clear all the same that we are witnessing a form of expression that not only demands our attention but that also, depending on our aesthetic responsiveness, holds the potential to captivate us across species lines.

Cooke's theory of ethological poetics⁴⁰ draws on the practice of Canadian-Icelandic poet Angela Rawlings and her concept of 'asemic writing' by which she means 'the marks and traces of nonhuman bodies – balls of sand left on the beach by crabs, the growth/architecture of local plants, the congregating patterns of barnacles on rock, the flight of a bird'.⁴¹ As Cooke explains, Rawlings is interested in 'how the environment

actively composes texts, which humans might read not in order “to comprehend what is composed,” but to relish a state of incomprehension’. According to both Cooke and Rawlings, ‘Anthropocene blindness’ can be remedied by mindful listening, looking, and paying close attention to how life manifests and writes itself. Most critical in this context is Rawlings’ position that all life is at once expressive self-inscription and a communicative reaching out. As she puts it in interview, ‘the expression of an organism is a creative attempt to establish relation’.⁴² What matters in the world, then, is never full comprehension or intelligibility, which has traditionally been the pursuit of science, but a sensuous ecological practice of semiotic interconnectedness and mutual illumination. To Rawlings, affective being-in-the-world and responsive living-with are equivalent to vibrant ecological dialogue: ‘By envisaging the five senses of sight, touch, smell, hearing, and taste in combination with other senses such as magnetoreception, perception, rhythm, motility, and stillness’, she asserts, ‘the feasibility of conversations with, through, and in landscapes emerges triumphant’.⁴³ Lanny’s rendition of the bowerbird’s dance, which unfolds in the liminal-ruderal vision of his mother’s dream, affords us access to precisely such a dialogic ecosemiosis. However, ‘Anthropocene blindness’ can only be remedied if minds are open, and in *Lanny* as well as the world at large – except for a few notable exceptions – generally they are not.

3. Away with the badgers: resonance and ruderal aesthetics in *Shy*

Shy (2023) revisits Porter’s preoccupation with ‘Anthropocene blindness’, more commonly referenced in ecological scholarship as ‘the extinction of experience’. In a comprehensive review of the relevant research, Masashi Soga and Kevin Gaston cite Stephen Kellert who observed in the early 2000s that society had become ‘so estranged from its natural origins, it [...] failed to recognize our species’ basic dependence on nature as a condition of growth and development’.⁴⁴ Soga and Gaston are particularly interested in the impact the extinction of experience is having on people’s physical and mental health, as well as general levels of wellbeing and happiness among the wider public. Importantly, they also identify the phenomenon ‘as one of the fundamental obstacles to reversing global environmental degradation [...] [because] those who do not directly interact with nature [...] [tend to be] less motivated to want to visit and protect it’.⁴⁵ For the reception of Porter’s *Lanny* and *Shy*, which are focused on the experiences of a young child and a teenager respectively, it is also worth noting Soga and Gaston’s observation that ‘regular contact with nature is [...] thought to be vital in ensuring proper social, emotional, cognitive, and motor development in children and youths’.⁴⁶

The ecological health research summarised by Soga and Gaston corresponds with sociologist Hartmut Rosa's increasingly influential concept of 'resonance', which informs his theorising on how modern humanity can (re-)establish life-enhancing relationships with the world. Rosa regards resonance as 'constitut[ing] the "other" of alienation – its antithesis'.⁴⁷ Although Rosa does conceive of resonance as an inborn capacity, he does not regard it as inalienable. Resonance depends on the pro-active cultivation of a particular sensibility combining mindfulness with an inquisitive inclination towards the world. Put differently, it describes 'a mode of *being-in-the-world*, i.e. a specific way in which subject and world come into relation with each other'.⁴⁸ For Rosa, resonance occurs when 'two entities in relation [...] mutually affect each other in such a way that they can be understood as *responding to each other*, at the same time [as] each *speak[s] with its own voice*'.⁴⁹ Of particular relevance to Environmental Humanities scholars is that Rosa specifically singles out 'nature, art, and religion [as] constitutive resonant spaces for modern society'.⁵⁰ In other words, he regards these cultural spheres and practices as enablers of resonance that hold the potential to remediate and potentially reverse the extinction of experience that so tragically determines the *zeitgeist* of the Anthropocene.

While sharing many of the stylistic features and thematic preoccupations of Porter's earlier novel, *Shy* differs markedly from *Lanny*, especially in its choice of protagonist and investment in individual psychobiography. Deployed mostly as a narrative vehicle for potential communal redemption, Lanny never assumes shape as a psychologically consistent person. In stark contrast to the earlier novel's idealisation of a prepubescent child, whose countryside pursuits practically beg for a romanticised reading, *Shy* introduces us to a troubled urban teenager with considerable emotional baggage, whose volatility has earned him epithets such as 'Schizo Shy' or 'little lord mood swing'.⁵¹ 'Failed 11 + . Expelled from two schools. First caution in 1992 aged thirteen. First arrest aged fifteen' (21), Shy currently resides at Last Chance Home, a borstal-style therapy centre for 'psychologically disturbed juveniles requiring special educational treatment' (6). The temporal setting of *Shy* is the mid-1990s, a decade perhaps best remembered in literary circles for its proliferation of 'masculinity in crisis' fiction, or 'lad-lit', with which *Shy* appears to have a lot in common. Its protagonist recalls both the disenchanting, drug-dependent, suicidal and/or psychotic underclass heroes of Irvine Welsh's writing and the emasculated middle-class softies of Nick Hornby's work, who sought solace from their inadequacy in the acquisition of expert discographical knowledge about 'high-fidelity' pop. Resounding intertextually with both, Porter's hero turns out to be a perfect mix, a middle-class boy who has come down in the world, originally expected 'to go to college, then to uni, get a job, get married, have kids' (30), equipped with chances and a considerable 'crash net. A mum who loves you.

A good stepdad. Food. Care. This place. [...] Not prison' (61). When we first lay eyes on Shy, he has grown into a deeply alienated, despondent young adult who, one moonlit night, sneaks out of his dormitory to walk across the fields to a nearby pond where he intends to drown himself, 'carrying a heavy bag of sorry' (64) in the form of a rucksack filled with rocks.

Much grittier than its precursor, *Shy* accentuates the quaint otherworldly anachronism of *Lanny* while at the same time documenting our ever-accelerating extinction of experience. Glued to their digital screens (rather than, like Shy in the 1990s, umbilically attached to their Walkman), real twenty-first-century kids (from both urban and countryside backgrounds) no longer play outside like Lanny, preferring Minecraft to a den in the field, or if they really wanted to venture outside, their parents would be unlikely to let them without proper supervision. Besides, even though we would probably agree that it 'can't be good staying indoors all day' (13), do we honestly still perceive roaming the countryside as a sign of physical and spiritual health, as a prerequisite for being – as the character of Peggy puts it in *Lanny* – 'a proper human child' (82)? Or might we – like the villagers in *Lanny* – be more inclined to dismiss or downright pathologise such behaviour as a 'being away with the fairies'?

Referring to his current whereabouts as 'the mean old witchy littered English woods' (47) and 'the middle of bumblefuck nowhere' (104), Shy's view of the ruderal countryside to which he has been temporarily banished could not be any less favourable. Even though Porter's insertion of 'witchy' has a whiff of Toothwort about it, we are left in no doubt that this is a distinctly different kind of boy, and a very different type of childhood account altogether, from what we find in *Lanny*. That said, as Owain Jones demonstrates in his examination of contemporary childhood experience against the blueprint of traditional childhood fiction, there are at least three notable respects in which the pastoral ideal of the countryside incorporated by Lanny could be said to live on, however obliquely or spectrally, in the realist portrait of urban Shy. Firstly, 'urban childhoods are often prejudged against underlying notions of country childhood idyll'. Secondly, 'the wildness of (younger) children in the countryside is often seen as innocent and wholesome and mostly celebrated, but wild children in the city are seen as feral', and finally, there is 'the idea that city children are missing something key to childhood'.⁵² Cognisant of the manifold differences between the two novels, my following reading of *Shy* intends to render all the more significant the texts' representational and aesthetic concurrence on 'Anthropocene blindness', their concordant portrayal of the extinction of experience, as well as the bewildering promise of ruderal re-enchantment that they appear to share.

Porter's depiction of Shy's lonely progress to his lugubrious destination, the pond, includes sporadic glimpses of 'nature', some of which are rendered

more anthropomorphically than others, emphasising first the natural environment's ruderal resilience ('The lower garden is brambly and wild. They clear it sometimes and it grows right back. It grows back fast' [23]), then its capacity for self-articulation: 'The grass in the next field whispers' (43). Gradually, the ambience of the outdoors catches up with the boy until it is 'just him and the fields' (37). Yet what is building up here is very different from the daily 'fresh air and exercise' routine that forms part of Shy's therapeutic rehabilitation (71). This is the ruderal environment taking a hold of the disaffected boy, affording him opportunities for resonance that promise to coalesce into a singular moment of experience made just for him: 'The field is [...] tight and close around him like he's wrapped up in it. A block of night that moves with him, breathes as he breathes. Everything is pressing edge. Encroaching dense' (46). The experience on offer is bespoke, attuned perfectly to him alone, promising to fit him like a glove. Meanwhile, the ruderal surroundings of the pond erupt into view like a bewildering *natureculture* installation of weeds, trees, animal faeces, and litter, abject and downright revolting, yet not entirely without its own aesthetic allure:

Duck shit. Pigeon shit. Thistle. Diesel. Scrawny ash. Nettles. Veteran oak with red 'risk' mark. Struggling willow. Old rope. Plastic six-pack ring. Hard dry dog shit in a black plastic bag. Duckweed. Empty blue Rizla packet. Barn owl pellet. Wet wipe. Buddleia. Rat-tail plantain. Safeway bag. Foster's can. Cigarette butt. Meadowsweet. (83)

Shy has arrived in the edgelands of the ruderal *terrain vague*, which is Toothwort's realm, as previously encountered in *Lanny*. The scene is ripe for epiphany, but the problem is of course that attached to his Walkman, 'hidden in his hood in a perfect world of breaks and basslines and rapid-fire patter' (83), Shy cannot hear nor properly see, leaving him unable to respond in his own voice or discover his own unmistakable frequency. 'He can't hear his own voice because the tunes are so loud in his ears' (84), confirming Beauvais' diagnosis that 'adolescence, full of the songs of the music industry, has forgotten the language of nature.'⁵³ Shy's annihilation of experience seems total: when he eventually 'puts his hood down and takes off his headphones', the world that surrounds him presents as 'atrociously bare and quiet' (85).

As soon as Shy wades into the freezing pond, however – 'very stoned' (87), which presumably refers both to the spliff he has just smoked as well as the rucksack full of slate he is carrying – he is shown to come to his senses. Suddenly both his vision and hearing are on high alert, with smell kicking in presently. As his environment springs to life, Shy is gearing up for experience, both in body and mind:

Liquid rustling, slip trickling, step by step, everything blueblack, oily and sharp, moon back, slow tangled mesh in his thoughts. The reflection of the

trees on the water is the neatest thing he's ever seen. Nobody told him night outside a town was like this. Flat to a fault but focussed. Snuffling quiet. They should tell kids stuff like this. Tell them night's like outer space. (88)

Bent on suicide, Shy inadvertently instigates a process not dissimilar to a rite of passage, initiating him to a hidden world which hitherto he did not know existed. Increasingly yielding to liminality, he reaches 'the invisible point between the world he understands and the one he doesn't' (90). It is at this threshold that he comes face to face with an otherness that challenges him at both a visceral and intellectual level, threatening to make him 'shit his pants in the almost physical pain of not knowing what he's looking at' (92). By the other side of the pond, he catches sight of two 'Unidentified Floating Objects' (97), which turn out to be 'bloated dead badgers' (98). 'Paused at the exact midpoint between living things and decomposed things, when not even God could tell them if they were alive or dead' (97), these 'two engorged Halloween hell-pups' (107) emblemise the liminality of Shy's experiential state while pushing his cognitive faculties to the limit: 'The closer he gets, the less able he is to see what they are. They're *un*-clarifying themselves as he approaches' (92). The radical liminality of the scene also finds expression in Porter's dissection of one of the badgers as 'a little set of white fangs, a dry-fixed snarl, vicious with a hint of bliss' (96), which recalls Porter's fascination with the work of Francis Bacon, the subject of *The Death of Francis Bacon* (2021), his third novel. Shy's perception recalls the artist's. As Declan Lloyd writes about Porter's portrayal of Bacon's art, 'figures [are] turned inside out by his piercing gaze, opened and raw, transported into some shadowy purgatory, some barren inter-realm',⁵⁴ which mirrors Porter's tendency in *Shy* 'to flit between the ethereal and the visceral; between an extreme focus on the bodily, to an almost tender focus on the psyche'.⁵⁵ Unlike the teenager formerly known as Lanny, Shy does not undergo transformation into a land or nature artist. However, we see him apply an artist's gaze to what catches his eye and stirs his senses, to what resonates with him and brings him out of himself, something that all the soul-searching exercises his Last Chance therapists urged him to practise could not do.

In their exploration of 'disordered' ruderal terrain, Cloke and Jones portray the edgelands as a sphere of radical disruption 'in which the possibility occurs for an upwelling of otherness'.⁵⁶ Such disturbed, derelict space makes fertile ground for enabling and nurturing resonance. As Rosa reminds us, 'resonance presupposes the existence of that which is non-assimilable, foreign, and even mute', adding that 'we can establish a responsive relationship only to a counterpart that we cannot completely appropriate or adaptively transform, that ultimately remains foreign and inaccessible to us as a whole'.⁵⁷ Resonance is about experiencing affinity with an hitherto

unanticipated other and establishing a connection of intuitive reciprocity. The core experience of resonance is an encounter that does not distinguish between subject and object, receiver and recipient, but is focused instead on bringing both entities, whether human or nonhuman, newly to life.

Whether we choose to read Shy's experience in terms of Rosa's concept of resonance, or more boldly draw on Rawlings' metaphor of engaging in eco-semiotic conversation, some form of human/nonhuman communion is set in motion here, prompting Shy, newly stripped of his teenage bravado, to address the putrefied carcasses 'in his young voice, no swagger, no affected patois, no pretence, like he'd talk to his mum before, before everything became a fight. A scared boy with two dead bodies, beyond recognition' (99). 'It may appear that our conventional notions of conversation would make it impossible for humans to converse with an environment, since conversations hinge upon a shared language', Rawlings writes, yet such an approach fails to 'take into consideration the copious sensual elements of a conversation, the site where a conversation occurs, or the faculties of conversation participants'.⁵⁸ Shy's compassionate cross-species address of the badgers – 'Did someone do something to you? A human? How did you die?' (99) – is not uttered into a vacuum. His declaration of feeling 'colossally sad. Blisteringly sad. Almost ecstatically sad' (100) must not be misinterpreted as unilateral or solipsistic. The change that overcomes him is a *change-in-response*. So taken – so *away* – is he with the badgers that at one point he becomes badger himself, 'feel[ing] like he could sniff his way into individual microbes, earthy worming growgreen liquid stink, newts and shoots, silty, fruity' (101). At this point, 'he is all sense. He isn't having any thoughts, he's all smell and shadows and ruined trainers' (101). He is entirely present and at one with what surrounds him, fulfilling Abram's proposition that 'only as we come close to our senses, and begin to trust, once again, the nuanced intelligence of our sensing bodies, do we begin to notice and respond to the subtle logos of the land'.⁵⁹

I am reading Shy's experience as an antidote to what Eileen Crist calls 'the extinction of cosmic experience'.⁶⁰ Shy's badgers serve the same function as Lanny's re-enactment of the bowerbird's courtship display. They catalyse relation by exemplifying a mesmerising instance of ecosemiotic self-expression. Ultimately, I would venture, they are not so very different in aesthetic appeal or impact from a Baconesque painting or a postmodern art installation featuring dead animals submerged in formaldehyde.⁶¹ Shy's rite of passage is geared toward initiating him to experiencing resonance, teaching him to unlearn and free himself of 'Anthropocene blindness', seeing him progress from feeling 'how it is to seek and smell as a badger' to understanding 'how it is to try and send a message across a species divide' (113). His 'weird delirium' (108) as he slowly re-emerges from his experience and returns to Last Chance Home, all set now to begin a

brand-new life, recalls Matthew Battles' notion of 'bewilderment', which describes a liminal state of regenerative confusion, the direct result of an immersive encounter or responsive exchange with what has become of nature. As 'a condition that arises at the edges, along the hedgerows and fences, in the wastes between towns',⁶² bewilderment maps experientially onto the liminal *terrain vague* of the ruderal, which is as wild or indeed as natural as the world still gets in the Anthropocene.

Porter's unique experimental style, which treats prose as if it were drama or poetry while playing havoc with typographical conventions and the appearance of lines on the page, corresponds with Smith's statement that 'writing about edgelands is [...] very often a process of self-consciously renegotiating our relationship with landscape and place through complex hybrids of genre, convention and form.'⁶³ Indeed, in light of everything that has been said so far, it is tempting to describe both *Lanny* and *Shy* as Anthropocene novels written in a new *ruderalist* style. From the moment *Lanny* opens, we can feel narrative-gone-feral scratch, claw, pull and suck at the foundations of humanity's seemingly solid and impenetrable civilisational enclosure, threatening to tear and rip into its boundaries and demarcations, switching alarmingly to bold type whenever the menace peaks and thickens, and the dividing line between the ruderal world of the Anthropocene and humanity's domestic enclosure within that world is at its most tenuous and frail. A very similar narrative dynamic gains momentum as *Shy* arrives at the pond and removes his headphones. Traditional modes of representation and paradigms of experience begin to disclose their precarity, revealing themselves to be no longer secure or reliable, and this is considerably exacerbated by the pressure Porter ramps up when he literally creates a vacuum at the heart of his text by pulling *Lanny* temporarily out of the equation.

While within modernity the novel has come to excel at representing alienation, poignantly defined by Hartmut Rosa as 'a relation of relationlessness',⁶⁴ a significant part of the Anthropocene's specific aesthetic challenge comes from the need to dislodge the novel from its realist comfort zone by letting in the alterity of what nature has become, what nature is now, crucially *before* it altogether 'fall[s] mute as a sphere of resonance, [as] an independent counterpart capable of responding to us and thus giving us some orientation.'⁶⁵ At its best, then, the novel of the Anthropocene seeks out and cultivates resonance with the more-than-human, thus contributing to the rise of a new, more hopeful structure of feeling beyond climate fiction's self-defeatist doomsaying or its incorrigibly optimistic 'species parochialism' of – against all the odds – making humanity great again.⁶⁶ As Angela Rawlings reminds us, 'the largest difficulty currently facing humans is the capacity to comprehend what an ecosystem communicates' and to embrace 'landscape as a dialogic partner'.⁶⁷ In other words, the novel as

humans-only monologue must cease, with the emphasis in future firmly on resonance and rapport over representation. A quarter of a century ago, Shoard remarked that it would be interesting ‘to see artistic expression of the dynamism which the [ruderal] interface enshrines’,⁶⁸ predicting that ‘the interface will have its day – and sooner than might be suspected’.⁶⁹ In my view both *Lanny* and *Shy* answer her call.

Notes

1. Max Porter, *Lanny* (London: Faber & Faber, 2019), p. 104. All page numbers refer to this edition.
2. In *Critical Perspectives on Max Porter* (New York: Routledge, 2024), edited by David Rudrum, Paweł Wojtas and Wojciech Drąg, Julie Irigaray refers to Porter’s *Lanny* as ‘a vision of nature that recalls the Romantics’ (“‘An English Totem’: Construction of Englishness in *Lanny*”, pp. 52–69, p. 52) while Alice Durocher likens Dead Papa Toothwort to ‘the incarnation of a powerfully sublime nature’ (‘Lost Futures and Ecophobia in *Lanny*’, pp. 127–39, p. 130).
3. Terry Gifford, *Pastoral*, second edition (London: Routledge, 2020 [1999]), pp. 178 and 169.
4. The scruffy appearance of Dead Papa Toothwort is strongly reminiscent of that of the trickster figure of Crow in Porter’s debut *Grief Is the Thing with Feathers* (London: Faber & Faber, 2015). Crow barges into the protagonists’ lives with ‘a rich smell of decay, a sweet furry stink of just-beyond-edible food, and moss, and leather, and yeast’ (p. 6).
5. Daniel Janzen, ‘Latent Extinction – The Living Dead’, *Encyclopedia of Biodiversity*, 4 (2001), pp. 590–98, p. 590. DOI: [10.1016/B978-0-12-384719-5.00085-X](https://doi.org/10.1016/B978-0-12-384719-5.00085-X)
6. Andreas Malm, *The Progress of This Storm: Nature and Society in a Warming World* (London: Verso, 2018), p. 77.
7. Paweł Wojtas, ‘The Thunderstorm of Repetition in the Works of Max Porter’, *English Studies*, 102.6 (2021), pp. 713–34, p. 720. DOI: [10.1080/0013838X.2021.1952532](https://doi.org/10.1080/0013838X.2021.1952532)
8. Malm, *The Progress of This Storm*, p. 77.
9. Bettina Stoetzer, *Ruderal City: Ecologies of Migration, Race, and Urban Nature in Berlin* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2022), p. 4.
10. Marion Shoard, ‘Edgelands of Promise’, *Landscapes*, 1.2 (2000), pp. 74–93, p. 74.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 75.
12. Eileen Crist, ‘Witnessing Mass Extinction: What’s Impossible, What’s Visible, What’s Possible?’ *Biological Conservation*, 275 (2022), pp. 1–8, p. 6. DOI: [10.1016/j.biocon.2022.109696](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.biocon.2022.109696)
13. Paul Farley and Michael Symmons Roberts, *Edgelands: Journeys into England’s True Wilderness* (London: Cape, 2011), p. 26.
14. Malm, *The Progress of This Storm*, p. 77.
15. Shoard, ‘Edgelands of Promise’, p. 88.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 79.
17. Eva Horn and Hannes Bergthaller, *The Anthropocene: Key Issues for the Humanities* (London: Routledge, 2020), p. 29.

18. Peggy, a character from *Lanny*, refers to the Domesday Book which she says includes a mention of *Puer Toothwort*, *puer* being Latin for ‘(male) child’ or ‘boy’. Accordingly, ‘he’s been here as long as there has *been* a here. He was young once, when this island was freshly formed’ (p. 85).
19. Originally derived from the philosophy of Bruno Latour, the term *natureculture* is now widely used among New Materialists to express the ontological fusion and inextricability of nature and human civilisation in the Anthropocene. While testifying to a commendable desire to overcome the human/non-human binary in order to dismantle once and for all human exceptionalism, the neologism tends to conceal its deeply-ingrained anthropocentrism. In much New Materialist writing *natureculture* is used to imply that the Anthropocene finds nature overcome and always already irrevocably pervaded by culture rather than exposing culture’s parasitical dependence on nature. What informs my own understanding of the ruderal is that culture can never gain the upper hand over nature or even be on a par with it. (See also my article ‘Arboreal Obliquity or Trees Doing the Human in Murray Bail’s *Eucalyptus*’, *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, published online: 19 January 2024, pp. 1–13, pp. 10–11. DOI: [10.1080/00111619.2024.2305262](https://doi.org/10.1080/00111619.2024.2305262))
20. Ignasi de Solá-Morales Rubio, ‘Terrain Vague’, in Cynthia Davidson (ed.), *Anyplace* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995), pp. 118–23, p. 120.
21. Jos Smith, *The New Nature Writing: Rethinking the Literature of Place* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), p. 105.
22. Shoard, ‘Edgelands of Promise’, p. 89.
23. Like other critical concepts reliant on illness or disability as metaphors, Porter’s coinage of ‘Anthropocene *blindness*’ must appear awkward. Over the course of my own argument I am substituting it with the term ‘extinction of experience’, which is at once more Anthropocene-specific and less likely to offend.
24. Max Porter quoted in Tom Z. Bradstreet, “Is This One of Your Endings?” *Lanny* and the Humanist Limits of Narrative Possibility’, in David Rudrum et al, *Critical Perspectives on Max Porter*, pp. 108–26, pp. 110–11, transcribed from a 2019 TinHouse podcast featuring Max Porter.
25. David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-Than-Human World* (New York: Vintage, 2017 [1997]), p. 267.
26. By referring to Lanny as ‘prepubescent’ I am assuming he is of approximately the same age as the two sons in Porter’s *Grief* where ‘before puberty’ is synonymous with ‘before self-consciousness, before secondary school, before money, time or gender got their teeth in’ (p. 67).
27. Richard Long, ‘And So Here We Are: A Conversation with Michael Craig-Martin, November 2008’, in Clarrie Wallis (ed.), *Richard Long: Heaven and Earth* (London: Tate, 2009), pp. 172–77, p. 175.
28. Clémentine Beauvais, ‘Innocence, Experience and Other Childly Songs in Max Porter’s Work’, in Rudrum, *Critical Perspectives*, pp. 21–36, pp. 23 and 22.
29. Shoard, ‘Edgelands of Promise’, p. 84.
30. Paul Cloke and Owain Jones. “Unclaimed Territory”: Childhood and Disordered Space(s), *Social & Cultural Geography*, 6.3 (2005), pp. 311–33, p. 319. DOI: [10.1080/14649360500111154](https://doi.org/10.1080/14649360500111154)
31. Bradstreet, ‘Is This One of Your Endings?’, p. 113.
32. *Ibid.*, p. 114.
33. Dag Endsjø, ‘To Lock Up Eleusis: A Question of Liminal Space’, *Numen*, 47.4 (2000), pp. 351–86, p. 354.

34. Wojtas, 'The Thunderstorm of Repetition', p. 720.
35. Endsjø, 'To Lock Up Eleusis', p. 354.
36. Ibid.
37. Shoard, 'Edgelands of Promise', p. 84 (my italics).
38. Stuart Cooke, 'Toward an Ethological Poetics: The Transgression of Genre and the Poetry of the Albert's Lyrebird', *Environmental Humanities*, 11.2 (2019), pp. 302–23, p. 302.
39. Ibid., p. 302.
40. A splendid example of Cooke's own practice of ethological poetics is *Lyre* (Crowley: UWA Publishing, 2019), a volume of radically experimental poetry designed to capture the ethological self-expression of an intriguing assortment of plant and animal species, including the Albert's lyrebird.
41. Denise Newman and Hazel White, 'When Language Meets an Ecosystem', *World Literature Today*, 89.6 (2015), n. p.
42. Graham Nunn, 'Fauna Sounds: An Interview with Angela Rawlings', *Cordite Poetry Review* (1 November 2012), www.cordite.org.au/interviews/fauna-sounds/.
43. Angela Rawlings, 'Ecolinguistic Activism: How and Why to Rite', in Stefan Herbrecter and Elisabeth Fris (eds), *Narrating Life: Experiments with Human and Animal Bodies in Literature, Science and Art* (Leiden: Brill, 2016), pp. 267–302, p. 300.
44. Masashi Soga and Kevin Gaston, 'Extinction of Experience: The Loss of Human-Nature Interactions', *Frontiers in Ecology and the Environment*, 14.2 (2016), pp. 94–101, p. 96.
45. Ibid.
46. Ibid., p. 97.
47. Hartmut Rosa, *Resonance: A Sociology of Our Relationship to the World*, tr. by James C. Wagner (Cambridge: Polity, 2019 [2016]), p. 184.
48. Ibid., p. 166.
49. Ibid., p. 167.
50. Ibid., p. 173.
51. Max Porter, *Shy* (London: Faber & Faber, 2023), pp. 56 and 33. All page numbers refer to this edition.
52. Owain Jones, 'Little Figures, Big Shadows: Country Childhood Stories', in Paul Cloke and Jo Little (eds), *Contested Countryside Cultures* (London: Routledge, 1997), pp. 158–79, pp. 159, 165 and 171.
53. Beauvais, 'Innocence, Experience and Other Childly Songs', p. 25.
54. Declan Lloyd, "'Dripping Venison Memory": The Radical Ekphrasis of Max Porter's *The Death of Francis Bacon*', *Textual Practice* (published online: 13 November 2023), pp. 1–19, p. 7. DOI: 10.1080/0950236X.2023.2281683
55. Ibid., p. 8.
56. Cloke and Jones, 'Unclaimed Territory', p. 314.
57. Rosa, *Resonance*, p. 185.
58. Rawlings, 'Ecolinguistic Activism', p. 268.
59. Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous*, p. 268.
60. Crist, 'Witnessing Mass Extinction', p. 6.
61. I am drawing this comparison even though in *The Death of Francis Bacon* (London: Faber & Faber, 2021) Porter presents Bacon's response to the request 'Show me nature' as: 'I can't. I'm the least green painter in the history of marks' (p. 50).

62. Matthew Battles, *Tree* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2017), p. 32.
63. Smith, *The New Nature Writing*, p. 106.
64. Rosa, *Resonance*, p. 184.
65. *Ibid.*, p. 274.
66. Claire Colebrook, *Who Would You Kill to Save the World?* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2023), p. 41.
67. Rawlings, 'Ecolinguistic Activism', p. 300.
68. Shoard, 'Edgelands of Promise', p. 91.
69. *Ibid.*, p. 93.

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my gratitude to the two anonymous reviewers for their thoughtful and very detailed suggestions for revision.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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