Innocence, experience and other childly songs in Max Porter's works

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**Innocence, Experience, and Other Childly Songs in Max Porter’s Works**

In Patrick Ness’s 2011 novel *A Monster Calls –* first published for children with illustrations by Jim Kay, then in a text-only version suiting the more limited comprehension of adults – the young hero, Conor, summons a monster made entirely of yew, who tells him stories, but also threatens to swallow him up. As a backdrop to this Green-Man adventure, Conor is bullied at school, his mother is ill, his father distant, his grandmother despotic. Every time the monster manifests itself, destruction of objects, or people, ensues; for it is a healing monster, but also a destructive one, feeding on the hopes of a child for the survival of his mother, and forcing him to accept his ultimate inability to save her. On the page where Conor’s mother’s treatment fails, a crow is flying over the text. Another caws, hysterical, in a gloomy landscape, while the monster tells the story of how “*people began to live* ***on*** *the earth rather than* ***within*** *it*” (Ness 109, original emphasis and italics).

Dead mothers, visionary children, dangerous but compassionate green men, brutal schools, birds of ill omen, humans’ disconnection from nature, lost adults failing to address children’s dreams and making their world a nightmare: no wonder Max Porter’s first two novels, *Grief Is the Thing with Feathers* and *Lanny*, attracted the attention of this children’s literature scholar for their uncanny resonances with Patrick Ness’s famous masterpiece. They have in common their strange mixture of British folkloric figures, Gothic recesses, a Romantic longing for lost nature, an ambiguous “child-loving” aesthetic (Kincaid), and an obvious fondness for modern moral panics surrounding children. They are also shot through, all the way, with a peculiar kind of Christian melancholia, at once full of faith that salvation will come from children, and resigned to the necessity of destroying their innocence.

The resonances of Porter’s early works with classic and contemporary-classic texts of children’s literature justify their study side-by-side, in a typical “kinship” critical approach to literature, across children’s and adult boundaries, theorised by Marah Gubar. Accordingly, throughout the chapter, Patrick Ness’s tree-creature and others from the underworlds of children’s culture are occasionally summoned, as reminders that Porter’s poetics follow on from a long tradition of literature for children, folk and fairy tales, nursery rhymes, playground songs, and their ancestral gallery of characters and settings: orphans, parents, monsters, forests, homes. Childhood in Porter’s works and the *childly* qualities of Porter’s writing – its *childness* (to use the adjective and noun coined by Peter Hollindale) have much in common with the kind of literature typically aimed at children, and are to a large extent self-conscious about that heritage.

But if anything, Max Porter’s early novels are, counter-intuitively, even *more* obsessed with childhood than most of the children’s texts they call upon; even more idealistic, nostalgic, Romantic – as if their being written for adults made their hope in the child more urgent, their grief for lost childhood more searing. In a word, they are disarmingly *candid* about their idealisation of childhood through writing. Porter’s early novels revolve around, but are not aimed at, children; they talk of childhood to people who have already lost theirs, and their childness (I get to that concept later) is not just tagged to child characters. It infuses everything, a fluid, ambivalent quality, contaminating everyone, across characters, land, time, plot; a quality that the novels continually hope to sustain and strive to recover, notably through their poetic style.

On one level, Porter’s representation of children is archetypal, intensely Romantic in its deep connections to nature, and crypto-Christian in its longing for prelapsarian innocence. It also, as I discuss later, borrows from late twentieth-century discourses on ‘toxic childhood’, relaying anguish surrounding the disappearance of both childhood and actual children, and portraying children’s sorrows as a tool for the moral edification of adults. Through those representations, hope, that central quality of childhood, is transformed into grief: grief, in no small measure, for a childly appreciation of the world that exists nowhere else than in adults’ child-loving fantasies.

At the heart of those conservative representations is a fascination for the consumption of children, by both adults and monsters. That consumption of children and of childhood happens through the very poetic style of the novels, lulled from within by the rhythms and music of a long history of child verse. But that consumption, as I eventually argue, transforms adults, and their literature, more than it truly harms children – to a large extent thanks to the devouring love of the good-enough monster, the mother, who throughout Max Porter’s novels births and rebirths the ideal child.

**Contaminating Childhood**

It all starts with a song, “warm on his creaturely breath” (*Lanny*, 11): Lanny is all sound, noise, and little writing: not a reader, not a writer. Unlike his own mother, who writes books (which she sees as inappropriate for him) and unlike the painter Peter Blythe, who occasionally draws naked people – and unlike Blake’s poet, who “stain[s] the water clear” – all we know of Lanny’s writing or drawing is that he likes to rub things out. He is, of course, interested in painting, but there is a sense that it is not the making-marks-on-paper process of painting that Lanny enjoys; much more the walking-around-in-the-forest aspect, and looking at nature, and singing with and within it, and asking a grown-up questions. Lanny, described as a muse, as a fairy, as a wizard, as a sweetpea plant, as a mystery, an acolyte of elves and goblins, is the Blakean child of the contemporary commuter town, his “half-song half-hum chit-chat” a reenactment of “Mary and Susan and Emily/ With their sweet round mouths sing[ing] ‘Ha, ha, he’” and other melodic and onomatopoeic moments of William Blake’s *Songs of Innocence* (“Laughing Song”).

It is tempting to attempt to read between the lines when talking about Porter’s representations of children and childhood – tempting to try to be clever – because in novels so subtle, stylised and self-conscious, there seems to be, on the subject of childhood, just *so little subtext*. “Am I missing something?” the cynical reader of contemporary novels for adults asks themselves. “Surely those books can’t be taken at their word; surely they’re aware of their Romantic candour when it comes to childhood.” Well, yes. But clearly they do not mind. Those novels are as insolently earnest about the beauty and specialness of childhood, and about the unbearability of its loss, as R. L. Stevenson’s opening poem to *A Child’s Garden of Verses*, from 1885:

So you may see, if you will look  
Through the windows of this book,  
Another child, far, far away,  
And in another garden, play. …

He has grown up and gone away,  
And it is but a child of air  
That lingers in the garden there.

It is rare to see in contemporary works of literature such a textbook portrayal of a Romantic child (see for instance Austin) as in *Lanny*, mingled with the later iconic literary children springing from that tradition: the “pastoral child” and the “dark pastoral child” and the “child of the green world” (Natov, passim), the ideal children of Golden Age children’s literature (Carpenter), their natural goodness and numinous connexion to nature set against the corruption of society and the perversions of urban life (see Irigaray, in this volume, for further exploration of the Englishness of this representation). Lanny has the double vision, the double knowledge, dear to Romantics, of nature and of the world of ideas, his “philosophical mutterings and bits of tune” (*Lanny* 66) a balance of Platonic anamnesis and being a bird.

Lanny is all the children of Romantic, pastoral and eternal childhood tales. He is Peter Pan, he is one of the Lost Children, he is Alice disappearing into a hole in the ground, he is the discoverer of secret gardens, he is the Little Prince talking about faraway planets to his painter friend, he is all the little seers that Wordsworth bumps into every couple of days. His mother wants to eat him up, Dead Papa Toothwort too (we get to that later): so he is every child threatened with being eaten by a monster or a parent, from Little Red Riding Hood to Max from *Where the Wild Things Are*. He is the erotic child of the Victorians’ “child-loving” imagination (Kincaid), Lewis Carroll’s Alice Liddell, the child who sees the fairies and the dead children, the child who dies too soon and is “with the angels” (*Lanny* 141). Preyed upon by a lustful creature of rubbish and sewage, he is the child corrupted by a decaying society. His childhood everywhere at risk, ultimately taken, he is Nabokov’s nymphet, his mother’s early cry for him not to grow up a reiteration of Humbert Humbert’s famous plea (itself a reiteration of Carroll’s): “Let them play with me forever. Never grow up” (Nabokov 21). He is a god-child, something like a sprite, a Puck, a folkloric baby Jesus: “They should worship him!” (*Lanny* 48) booms Dead Papa Toothwort. By being all these children, Lanny is very little a child of his own: he has little interiority, and his sole individuality is the fact that he is special. Not special in the sense that every middle-class child is a special snowflake; but *really* special, endowed with some kind of magical, or at the very least mysterious, power. In short, Lanny is the child relentlessly made into a projector-screen for adult desires and demands, the incarnation of childhood “held in place”, “fixed” by the adult scopophilic and nostalgic imagination, as Jacqueline Rose phrases it in her landmark analysis of *Peter Pan*.

All of this could have been ironic, sarcastic, but it is not. Certainly there are moments of sarcasm, when talking about Lanny; excesses of epithets making the child a hyperbolically magical child, some mockery over the adults’ compulsive adoration of him. Still: that representation remains brazen, unapologetic. And Porter is a recidivist of representations of childhood of the kind that Jacqueline Rose theorises; his children are wildly and unashamedly idealised. In *Grief Is the Thing with Feathers*, the two boys, Lost Boys again, are arch-orphans, “imps”, Hansel and Gretel, seen by the crow-monster in the glorious androgyny of their iconic childhood: “Two forms, but one shape, could be female, could be male… and tiny little hopeful faces” (*Grief* 45). Hope, of course, has been drained from their personal stories, replaced by its grim underside in the very title of the novel. But still their faces are hopeful, bearing that primordial quality of childhood: a temporality inflected towards the future, and towards a – one would *hope* – good future.

Being very special children as they are, Porter’s children are doomed to an Icarus fate: they cannot leave the labyrinth of childhood without their wings melting (see Pattison). Sure, their future as adults in society might be solid – good job, good prospects, a good life in suburbia. But the loss of childhood cannot be avoided. The books everywhere bemoan the passing of that time “before puberty, before self-consciousness… before language was a trap, when it was a maze” (*Grief* 60). In one episode of *Lanny*, the little boy navigates a maze, impossibly fast, seemingly walking through the hedges to the astonishment of his parents. But the ‘trap’ is in place. Language, in particular – or at least the kind of banal adult language that bathes the everyday, as in the disincarnated sentences in *Lanny* – is a threat. Once language occurs, once the child is no longer the *infant*, who cannot speak – who can only sing, or cry – then childhood is dead, Dead Papa Toothwort no longer understandable: Lanny, now a teenager, speaks only Adult, “like the last speaker of any language he has had to forget in order to survive” (*Lanny*, p.177). That last chapter of *Lanny* is, correspondingly, much less versified than the rest; much less song, and suddenly looking much more like a book, as Alice would deplore, “without pictures or conversations” (Carroll 2).

*Shy*, Porter’s fourth novel, with a teenage boy as its main character, usefully reinforces that point. Lydia Kokkola theorises that adolescence as a cultural concept is used by adults as a buffer zone, a place of chaos into which to expel all that is undesirable in childhood: sexuality, violence, depression, and so on – the better to sanctify and protect childhood. *Shy* explores that buffer zone expertly. Shy’s recent loss of childhood is expressed in part through half-forgotten memories of classic children’s literature and theatre – *Tom’s Midnight Garden* (5), *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat* (22) – and also through the searing realisation that his mother has discarded his Hot Wheels toys (74), even though he “hadn’t looked at them in years”. And with this loss of cherished stories and toys comes, strikingly, the loss of natural song. Shy’s Walkman music certainly holds nostalgic value for readers born in the late 1970s/early 1980s, but it is also presented recurrently as a source of miscommunication, lack of communication or self-exclusion from the world. Tellingly, Shy, in an attempt to talk to the dead badgers he encounters when wading through a pond – a baroque retelling of Lanny’s own disappearance underground – sings them “one of [his] favourite tunes” (“Valley of the Shadows”, by Origin Unknown); but “No. The badgers don’t know that tune” (99). Later on, the badgers do speak to Shy – but it is clear to everyone, including Shy, that those are “imaginary voices he’s giving the badgers” (107). Adolescence, full of the songs of the music industry, has forgotten the language of nature.

All of the above is about motifs, character types, easily identified. But there is more in Porter’s works than the recapitulation of centuries of representing children as a projector-screen for adult desires of eternal innocence. Because the *childness* of Porter’s works, their dead-serious, obsessive interest in and sensitivity to childhood, define the novels even when child characters are not present. Elsewhere I have talked about how, when adults write about children writing, their own writing sometimes acquires childlike qualities (Beauvais). In a similar way, typical of that odd process of contamination, the metaphorical imagination, sensations, liminality, hybridity, and musicality of childhood infuses Porter’s writing to such an extent that one cannot be sure whether there are children in this text, or whether the text *is child*.

Or, to use a bit of jargon, whether the text itself is *childly*. Children’s literature and childhood studies theorist Peter Hollindale coins the noun *childness*, and its associated adjective *childly*, to define the ways in which a text captures something of the quality of being a child, always, of course, contextually, but in conversation with centuries of representations, conceptualisations, fears and desires around childhood. Childness, Hollindale argues, is a composite quality, extractable from the text through specific processes of literary analysis; neither an attribute of a given character, nor dependent on the sole intentionality or opinions of the writer. It is the result of a cocktail “of the grown-up’s memories of childhood, of meaningful continuity between child and adult self, of the varied behaviour associated with being a child” (Hollindale 49) in a given place at a given time. In the case of a children’s book, there is ineluctable didacticism in the text’s childness, a hopeful command: “Most children’s books will embody a childness which includes both an implied sense of the natural and an implied sense of the ethical: an implied psychology and philosophy of childhood” (53); and that command is also the beginning of an intergenerational conversation, as the implicit child reader might pick up on it to transgress or reshape it. This conversation takes place, Hollindale continues, across the “cultural time-gap” that separates adulthood from childhood, that chasm so large that it is not countable in mere years; only commensurate with the symbolic distance that sets apart children and adults in the collective imagination (see also Cook).

But in the case of works for adults imbued with a childness so transparently Romantic, where there is no cultural time-gap between implied author and implied reader, what of that conversation? This is adulthood in dialogue with itself, striving to recover something of itself it has lost, and yet telling itself (more or less comfortingly) that this loss was not only necessarily but structural for the ego. Within this poetic tradition, “infant experience persists in adult life as an absence”, as Alexander Freer analyses in relation to Wordsworth (89). The cyclical operation by which adults lose, long for, and attempt to recover, childhood, is everywhere in Max Porter’s works: the novels paint adulthood as hyper-aware of both its lost childhood and of the artificial, extreme idolatry it sustains towards it. In that respect, it is also Nabokovian again: gloriously, hyperbolically self-conscious about its child-loving aesthetic.

The innocence of child characters contaminates Porter’s world. Around the children, space, time and other characters are oddly deformed, adopting childly traits, or become defined in relation to the child. The gallery of dramatis personae in *Grief* is not Children, Husband, Wife; it is Boys, Mum, Dad: identity defined by descendants, not ancestors. People are parents in progress, seen from the narcissistic gaze of children: “This is what we know of Dad. He was a quiet boy … He was waiting to be our Dad” (*Grief* 89). Adults are also turned into children all the time, or try to be, or more rarely, resist it. Walking into the morality play, Pete, Robert and Jolie, scared and huddled together, are compared to children (*Lanny* 153). Volunteers looking for Lanny are asked to think like an odd child (*Lanny* 145). In the presence of the two boys, the widower becomes a boy again, a baby even; he is himself an orphan, he eats the children’s food. Lanny’s father, meanwhile, is so contaminated by Lanny’s joy, having spent a day in London with him, and having not checked email, not worked, that he comes home to a “giggly natural no-stress romp” (Lanny 53), closing the childly day with a very childified way of doing very adult things. In contact with childhood, adults slip back into laughter, nature, unadulterated pleasure. Life, and death also, are the companions of those childhood-thirsty adults: the dead mother, says crow, is not in heaven or hell but back to her childhood days: she has become a *puella aeterna* in death. Lanny, as for him, will not truly be the *puer aeternus* (see Perrot) as he eventually grows up, but in the place of his lost childhood sprouts a sapling the exact size of a child.

So those children are not just pure, contained childhood; they also leak, they contaminate the adulthood of others with their childness, they make others experience ordinary life in a childly way. Their sounds and songs go everywhere, preceding them, signalling them even when they are not yet visible. Their smells too fill whole rooms: they smell of milk, of talcum powder – incomprehensible baby smells, mismatched with their age. Even in the relatively child-free *Death of Francis Bacon*, childhood spills into adult spills, in an abject mixed erotic of childly and adult fluids: “Rather wonderful actually, to be reminded of childhood sickness and post-coital exhaustion in the same second. Rather comforting. Close.”

Close: every time Porter’s children get close to anything, they saturate it with childness. They exude it, they fill spaces with it. The mechanics of that contamination, however, are not just located in character or plot; they are poetic. Porter’s childly poetics, I believe, work through the literary inoculation of a spirit of childhood characterised by its great fluidity and permeability to the world – which makes it both easily contaminated, and easily contaminating for the reader. For Porter, of course, writes in verse, but not just any kind – he writes with imagery, rhythmicality, visual layout and motifs extremely familiar to scholars of children’s poetry, as I now explore.

**Texting Childhood**

Karen Coats, in a beautiful study of children’s poetry from a cognitive poetics perspective with Lacanian inflexions, studies the peculiar, intensely embodied nature of this kind of text. Children’s poetry, she theorises, has the function of making text body, and body text: stitching together the corporeal and the verbal. From the earliest nursery rhymes, where parents gently tap and stroke words into their babies’ skin, rocking them to sleep and into language, to the later learning by heart of letters, colours, days, seasons through music and rimes, children “live in an unarticulated and chaotic swirl of sensation that is nevertheless held in check by the rhythms and symmetries of their own bodies and the consistencies of repetitive experiences” (Coats 136). Children’s poetry, in its great mission of welcoming the child’s body into language and language into the child’s body, is a “holding” thing – *comforting*, Porter’s narrator might say – and by its very nature participatory, collective, shared. Coats again: “rhythm is contagious” (137).

And so is childness in Porter’s work: holding, always in text and in body, contagious, contaminating; because like children’s poetry, Porter’s borrows from a childly poetics of repetition, cumulation, participation and rhythmical regularity, exaggerated sound effects, piled-up childish gerunds riming richly with alliteration generously ladled on: “spinning and surfing, wafting and curling” (*Lanny* 42) in a village full of “funny busy worker bees”. At the heart of horror, vanished Lanny is almost a limerick character, all bouncy anapaests and raging alliteration: “He’s a sex slave in Saudi Arabia, he’s a busker in Fez … he’s acid, he’s sewage, he’s concrete” (*Lanny* 126). Onomatopoeic glee everywhere, in playground-song poems: “hop/look/hop/stop… humps, huffs and puffs” (*Grief* 91). The abundance of repetition in Porter’s poetic style, which has already been the object of an article (Wojtas) is another clue to its childly aesthetics, steering tongue and memory back to that pre-reading time when the child is all rote memorisation, all chorus and refrain, with what children’s literature theorist Nathalie Prince calls the “stammering aesthetic[[1]](#footnote-1)” of childly language (155).

Lists are a distinguishing feature of children’s poetry, as Debbie Pullinger analyses. A poetic list

points towards a world in which we do not know the boundaries. It keys into the child’s mode of experiencing and engaging with the world through a fascination with the infinite and the extreme, through an affinity with abundance and through an instinct to collect. It undertakes, too, the child’s essential task of ordering and classifying, the universal human behaviour that enables us to make sense of the world. (Pullinger 105)

It is both a totalising enterprise and a miniaturising one: the child narrator of poetic-list-type children’s poems is amazed by the enormousness of the world and wants to gather it all; fails, of course, but marvels at what is left, names it again and again, counts it all, adds it all up. The poetic list is never complete, it has “no boundaries”: in it we hear again the poetic sounds of the porousness of the childly imagination, the possible overspills, the invitation to keep adding. No equivalent obsession with lists in adult poetry, says Pullinger – and even poets for adults who start writing poetry for children suddenly start writing list poems: the simple suggestion of an implied child reader contaminates the poetic imagination with list frenzy.

Porter’s poetry is, of course, full of lists. Childly activities, an endless list, ventriloquized by an adult but mimicking a rambling toddler’s summary of their day: “We made bases, camps, dens, shelters, forts, bunkers, castles, pill-boxes, tunnels and nests” (*Grief* 60); a similarly impressive list later recounts all the aspects of a birthday party. Childly characters described list-like, *Gruffalo*-style: “green and leafy, … tree demon, uncle and dad, king of the hawthorn hope…” (*Lanny* 40). And *The Death of Francis Bacon* is of all of Porter’s novels perhaps the most obsessed with lists; within the chapters, but also the book itself, organised into a list of paintings, its intention recapitulatory, cumulative, ordered by a hectic, organic lust to (re)collect and appropriate.

Anthropologists Iona and Peter Opie famously compiled children’s songs and rhymes into a big book, textualising that oral culture to ensure its permanence. But Porter’s approach s not about writing down children’s words: it is about speaking adult bodies into childhood. Porter’s poetics, a pastiche of childly song, steer the adult reader towards the kind of reawakening to language, and to the link between language and body, that they once experienced as children, cradled and stroked as words spilled into them. This time the inoculation works the other way around: it is the lost childhood that seeks to speak to, spill into, the hard adult body. Porter’s works are not just full of child characters who are the object of adult obsession; they are a childly text rapping at the chamber door of the adult body, urging to be re-incorporated.

The childness of Porter’s works, therefore, isn’t just *an interest in childhood*: it is everywhere in the body of the text. We are within it like a young child in the lulling arms of their parent, or even in a womb sometimes in *Lanny*. We are bathed in unattributed sounds and speech, floating in from the outside, in the form of calligrams of lines from some chorus of voices, nowhere and everywhere around us. A poetics, in short, to make the adult reader childly, if not quite child,anew.

**Vanishing Childhood**

But no sooner is childhood recovered than it is lost again (and again).

Lanny’s parents cannot quite believe they’ve got Lanny. In fact, they often have *not* got him. The story begins with Lanny disappearing, which he often does. In the middle he disappears for real, though only temporarily. At the end he disappears again, this time for good, by growing up. In *Grief* it is more often the father, this childlike man, who disappears from time to time; but the children, when they disappear off to sleep, make the house stand still, like Sleeping Beauty’s castle. Later they will, like Lanny, disappear into adulthood; in fact we cannot even be sure, as Alice Durocher argues in this volume, that there will even *be* a future for those children in a world of environmental and social crisis. This future life, imagined briefly and only temporarily, is fairy-tale-like in its opening, mundane in its developments: “Once upon a time I am grown up, I have a child. And a wife. And a car. I sound a bit like Dad” (*Grief* 85). No child is forever, even those that are “pure crow”, even those whose adulthood is unimaginable (*Lanny* 44).

But leaving the disappearance into adulthood for now – as we have seen, it is counteracted within the text itself by a poetics of recovery of childness – let us focus on the more prosaic, “real”, disappearance of child characters in the stories. Child disappearance in fiction is an old, haunting trope, which draws its literary power to no small extent from its being metonymic for disappearing childhood: “Within present webs of meaning, the child lost by parents, the non-existence of children, kidnapped, abducted and killed children… are all related cultural phenomena, also connected to the several theories that warn that childhood is disappearing” (Morgado 244). The fear of disappearing childhood is a somewhat tired, yet constantly re-energised, late-twentieth-century moral panic: fear of childhood gone, eaten up by divorce, video games, pornography, the general immorality and corruption of the world of adults (Postman); fear of childhood curdling, becoming “toxic” (Palmer), the fear of adults harming the children they should protect; the fear, too, of boundaries blurring, adults conducting themselves like children, children conducting themselves like adults (Malewski). Even in *The Death of Francis Bacon*, this uncanny queering looms, with what under the eyes of the adult “becomes a face, becomes a chubby potato, becomes the oversized child I fancifully yearned to care for” (46). Adults, those oversized children, who are not even nice-looking potatoes, cannot stop grieving for the sweetpea-like grace of those children who embody childhood, and who constantly lose it before their very eyes.

*Lanny* is haunted by adult guilt for toxic childhood or disappearing childhood, and recapitulates the strict moral implications for adults of that “fact”, the existence of which it both ironically doubts and compulsively stresses; “the missing child was the thing we most deserved” (*Lanny* 137). It is “the only story left”, to no small extent, because Lanny was the only child left. Lanny vanishes because he is the last of his kind, the last true Romantic child – as Pete tells him, he is not locked into a fake world of screens (72). He is not just a vanishing child, he *is* vanishing *childhood*, taken into the ground, Eurydice-like, by the poison of that modern snake, a consumerist, morally and physically dirty society, a society that ecologically and culturally preys on childhood. For his parents and Pete, Orpheus-like, to sing Lanny back to life, they will thus need to acknowledge the immorality of their ways, their weaknesses, their impossibility to keep alive and safe this sole paragon of ideal childhood that was Lanny. The father confesses his lust; poor Pete Blythe, whose name evokes at once Peter Pan and hints at his *blithely innocent* belief that hanging out with a child would not attract any bad attention, will face the inappropriateness of his childlike naivety. Again, even though it is far from devoid of irony, it is not often in adult fiction that we encounter such a didactically carnivalesque ending, drawing its unique blend of competitive confessional grandiloquence from both reality TV and *Everyman*. It is the logical conclusion, narratively, emotionally, and morally. Once the child disappears, metonymically taking with him *the whole of childhood*, adults have no choice but to atone in spectacularly cathartic ways.

Atone for what? I talked of lists earlier; *Lanny* is itself a list of adult fears around children’s disappearance, the responsibility adults bear for that disappearance, and the guilt they feel for it. Fear, responsibility and guilt for checking email, for writing thrillers, for drawing naked people, for watching porn, for hanging out with a child as an adult, for not looking after the child enough as an adult, for letting the child be a latchkey kid (a keyword of last-century moral panic around childhood); guilt for wanting the child to remain a child, for wanting the child to grow up; fear and guilt for a world full of dirt, danger, child-molesters, TV, tabloids, bullying, cigarettes, and alcohol. Even when it is a child who is guilty of something – like the child who sprays “Toothwort took him!” on a bus stop – it is understood that this child is already contaminated with the toxicity of the adult world: he is a “little privileged berk with his hundred-quid backpack” (*Lanny* 132). The child is quickly absolved, though, by dissolving into a stream of excuses, and adults share with him the task of cleaning the graffiti. In *Grief*, fear of parental death, guilt for not looking after children responsibly enough, fear of talking about war, fear of intruders pretending to be mothers, guilt of trying to replace the mother with another woman, guilt of being parented by one’s child. That adult world is a constant danger to children; there are hurricanes, children get hurt by fallen branches (*Grief*), by forests that swallow them up (*Lanny*), by stories full of enemies, all the way to an infanticidal father (*Grief*). Wherever there is childhood, there is risk; wherever there are children, there is, instantly, more life, but immediately after, there follows death, or the threat of death.

By a process of contamination inverse to the one described earlier, disappearing children stand for disappearing childhood which stands for the disappearance of all childlike, childly things. The world is harmful not just to children and their childhood, but also to everything innocent, natural, small, beautiful and fragile. Harmless, gracile animals – a hedgehog, a guppy fish – are brutally killed, in very similar fashion, the former by Lanny’s mum, the second by the two boys, suddenly turned Lords of the Flies, a rare flipside to their angelic Romantic selves.

The extreme, intensely self-conscious didactic treatment of child disappearance in *Lanny*, and its haunting presence in a less definite form in *Grief*, turns children and childhood into tools for the moral edification of adults. Such is the overall arch-narrative of the disappearance of childhood in Porter’s works: the impossibility for children to just be children, individual, psychologically distinct, with personal histories that impact on their decisions, with interiority, just engaged in routine childish things. Instead, they are either pure life force, pouring their energy, joy and mystery into adults; or they are pure death and absence, siphoning all joy from the earth where their songs no longer echo.

In some sense, there is no child in Porter’s works. There is only childness, childhood, something that radically endangers the characters to whom it attaches itself, stuck there by the fearful fantasies of adults and the guilt of a morally corrupt society. There are no more children in Porter’s works than there is a Lolita in *Lolita*: just the music of childness, texts trying to be childly and to make the reader child. And this is to a large extent because, like the famous nymphet, Porter’s children only exist in so far as they are designed to be consumed by adults, as I discuss below – an ambiguous consumption, bringing both destruction and salvation.

**Consuming Childhood**

Porter’s adults and adult world are vampirical, and permanently hungry. Adults and monsters alike aspire to swallow and consume children; they live for it. The crow is planning to boil the boys. Dead Papa Toothwort is “drunk on the hydration and nourishment of the boy” (*Lanny* 31), as he “watches the child drinking milk and he sees the cold liquid pouring into the boy’s belly, trickle puddle pond lake, into the cellular cathedrals of his organs, into his bones”, and here we could let Humbert Humbert’s voice finish the dissection: “her unknown heart, her nacreous liver, the sea-grapes of her lungs, her comely twin kidneys…” (Nabokov 174). The ground will ultimately engulf Lanny, and that necessary katabasis is, in textbook Joseph Campbell style, presented like a swallowing.

And then comes the rebirth, complete with “panting and swearing”. A moment that hints at the other type of consumption that threatens the child: the “good” consumption, of the “we’ll eat you up/ we love you so” kind (Sendak n.p.). It is the consumption and ultimate (re)birth of the son by the mother. For in both novels, the boy is saved by a mother’s love, or the boys are saved by their love for a mother, and boys also save mothers simply through their love. Lanny, on the threshold of death, speaks to Jolie and tells her he loves her; when she births him again out of the undergrowth, the only things remaining in the world, it seems, are “Just a mother and the name of her child” (*Lanny* 176), the original dyad. “I LOVE YOU I LOVE YOU I LOVE YOU”, the boys yell at the very end of *Grief* (95), screaming their way out of their mourning (see Drager, in this volume, for more analysis of that line). Mothers: they could eat you up, apparently, but they are the only way into life and back into life, several times per existence if needed. Both mother and son(s) are consumed in that love and by it, and ‘tis a consummation devoutly to be wished.

Again, it is hard to write about mother-son dyads in Porter’s early works without trying to look for some kind of perversion, somewhere. A mummy complex, some kind of trauma? But Porter is no cynic when it comes to mothers; he is often subtle and sometimes a bit humorous and sometimes a bit melancholy, but mostly very tender, riffing on Ted Hughes’ “Anniversary”, with a glorified mother “in her feathers of flames” (291) who closely aligns with the boys’ mother in *Grief* (whose own parents pretended to her that she was born with wings, which she refutes). He echoes Camus’s “Mother died today. Or, maybe, yesterday; I can’t be sure” (1946 1) (itself referenced by Hughes) in the equally unsure quasi-opening of *Grief*: “Four or five days after she died…” (*Grief* 8) He takes after Proust, who, in the questionnaire that was soon to bear his name, identified his “greatest unhappiness” as “being separated from Mummy” (Bloch-Dano[[2]](#footnote-2)).

The mother-son couple is the foundation of Max Porter’s children and novels on childhood, and even in *Shy*, that book about a lost teenager, the mother is never truly as awful as Shy thinks her to be; reading between the lines, it is clear that he is loved, loves his mother, and hates his stepfather perhaps because of the above. The mother-son couple is, in Porter’s early works, the ultimate plot point, narratively important enough to build a whole story upon it (*Grief*) or to climactically solve it (*Lanny*). And that dyad is less an inheritor of Freud’s family romance, ambiguous and perverse, than of the Virgin and child couple, pure love and pure light – a comparison explicitly made in *Lanny*, and whose good faith we have little reason, as a reader, to doubt. Again Porter’s brazenness surprises, amidst novels full of contemporary Jocastas and Medeas, and decades of essays suspicious of motherhood. But there is little space in Porter’s mother-son dyads for anything else than grace, salvation and adoration. Motherly guilt is not tinged with bitterness: Lanny’s mother, admittedly, often fears that she might not be the “good-enough mother” (Winnicott), but she never expresses regret, frustration, or any ambivalent thoughts about the constraints of motherhood on her own freedom. In *Grief*, there is no indication that the boys’ dead mother was anything other than Madonna-perfect. Mothers are irreplaceable: the widower never finds anyone else, of course; and Lanny has extra father figures, but not mother ones.

A very different treatment to Patrick Ness’s novel *A Monster Calls*, with which I started this essay, and which also stages the gradual loss of a mother. At the very end, Conor understands from the yew-monster’s tales that he must let go, must allow his mother to die; which he does, in dramatic fashion, by literally letting go of her hand that he is holding, in a recurring nightmare, above the void at the top of a cliff. In death, Conor’s mother falls; Porter’s boys’ mother rises. Conor, the motherless child of children’s literature, is thus egged on by a monster to *drop* his mother, to stop letting her grab onto him: that is how he will survive and move on. Meanwhile, the orphaned children of Porter’s novels for adults free themselves from the monster through a kind of Assumption of the Virgin episode featuring their dead mother. The educational value of the episodes differs accordingly. *A Monster Calls* is all Bildungsroman, all about learning, maturing and overcoming the monster through the experience of that extreme bereavement; whereas the crypto-Christian *Grief* is ambivalent about the learning experience, and only intensely serious about the access, through motherly love, to a kind of transcendental love. The former teaches the formative experience of grief, while the latter, respecting the promise of its title, leaves the reader on a scene where grief, which once landed unannounced into the children’s souls, now flies off again into the sky.

**Conclusion**

“Bound and weary, I thought best/ To sulk upon my mother's breast”, says the unhappy baby of William Blake’s “Infant Sorrow”, one of the bleaker poems of *Songs of Experience*. But Porter’s boys, forever innocent, never get to sing that song of “experience”. So we started out with the songs of innocence and with them we remain: with boys wrapped in milky smells, preceded and followed by their angelic sounds, music, animal noise, pre-adamic tongues – the “tune without the words” of Emily Dickinson’s original poem “Hope is the thing with feathers” – and also the occasional visionary insights, as promised by the Romantic poets. On the page, the more experienced, or experience-weary, characters, are responsible for the corruption of that innocence – their guilt and fear and erasure of children and childhood infuse the novels. The reader, however, is on track to becoming a better adult, a more childly adult, lulled by the novels into a different kind of song of experience: the experience of recovering childness. For Porter’s books, pulsating with the rhythms of childhood, seek to set into similar motion the bodies of adults, in a process of recovery as earnest and as complex as in the works of the Romantics.

No child was harmed in the process, for, in some sense, there are no children in Porter’s novels, other than the placeholders, as, again, Jacqueline Rose would say, that they set up for the childly adult reader to inhabit. In those places, secured by the unsurpassable love of the mother and the rhythms of body, grief and hope are interchangeable because they are two sides of the same coin: childhood always wins, and always dies. Reaching the end, we have ourselves consumed childhood, been consumed by it, grieved for its loss, hoped for its rebirth, and been sung to in the most childly fashion that a book for adults can muster.

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1. ‘esthétique du balbutiement’ [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Reported as ‘Quel serait votre plus grand malheur ? Etre séparé de Maman.’ [↑](#footnote-ref-2)