

“PROGING” THE DARKNESS IN JOHN CLARE’S “THE MOUSE’S NEST”

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Abstract: The emergence of dark ecology signals a critical rupture in the bright green veneer of Romantic ecocriticism – a shock not only to its anthropocentric assumptions but also to its varied areas and methodologies of scholarly inquiry. Driven by the pioneering work of Richard Bridgman and the theoretical impetus of Timothy Morton, dark ecologists set ugliness and horror on equal footing with the beautiful and the sublime, while promoting a discursive style pervaded by irony and doubt. Yet this darkness and doubt, as I would like to suggest, are informed not only by life’s ephemerality – its tendency, that is, toward inevitable death and decay. Even generative or life-giving manifestations of nature may startle with their grotesque, irreducible otherness. John Clare’s “The Mouse’s Nest” is a striking example of descriptive verse that mingles dark ecology with the fecundity, the teeming plenitude, of natural life. Distilled to sonnet form, but even more so, to a sequence of seven rhyming couplets, the poem manifests the experience of startlement, a sort of disorienting moment-by-moment process of perception in which expectation is initially baffled, then recalibrated, but ultimately thwarted in its coming to terms with the teleology of non-human life and reality. Clare, moreover, makes his language complicit in this epistemological bewilderment, shifting from verbs of efficacious physical action to those of open-ended speculation, with the dialect verb “proged” – meaning “poked at” – signalling the transition between these realms. The sonnet as a whole, as I will argue, functions as a mystifying “prog” into the dark corners – or weirdness – of our ecosphere.

Keywords: dark ecology, ecocriticism, John Clare, sonnets, weird

The following analysis of John Clare’s “The Mouse’s Nest,” while focused ostensibly on the ripples of shock triggered by a minor Romantic sonnet, is also interested in the larger theoretical structures upon which the poem, and others like it, have historically been staged. Those structures, which I will associate with the relatively recent development of ecocriticism as an academic discipline, themselves bear

evidence of unexpected upheavals and permutations, ruptures in the scholarly landscape that are every bit as surprising as the poem itself. And some of these ruptures, reflective of our changing views of our planet, are continuing to widen under our feet in the age of the Anthropocene, threatening to sweep away the last vestiges of that idyll of "nature" whose naïve portraits, whether fashioned in childhood or in nostalgia, no longer appear to hold true.

It was not of course always thus. Indeed, throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the confluence of art and nature tended to yield celebratory and solacing representations that served as a bulwark against the encroachments of industrialization, urbanization, and mechanization. Green writing and green reading were for much of our literary past therapeutic practices that reinforced a discrete set of values, some of them rooted in awe and ecstatic wonder, others more stilling and consolatory. But what they had in common was an unspoken set of assumptions – a faith, really – about what nature was and seemingly would always be. In concert with that faith, and at times nourished by it, was a proliferating academic, intellectual, and scientific apparatus that, over the last 200 years, has given humans new insights into the natural world, its probable future as well as its past, by which we have established ourselves as the first credible authors of natural history who could claim to read its patterns and write its stories. Those stories, however, have not proved conducive to a wiser or more responsible stewardship of the earth; indeed, too often they have had the ironic effect of separating us from the biosphere as an object of study rather than more deeply enmeshing us in it. As Timothy Morton observes, we have used literature, natural history, and the natural sciences to establish not networks of coexistence but, contrarily, realms of separation ordered by constructs of "inside and outside, here and there."¹ Nature in this dynamic is what is there, at the far end of our deictic gesturing – a distant object for human reflection and delectation, typically green, wild, pure, enduring, serene, harmonious. That string of modifiers should be familiar to us not because it is in any strict sense true or verifiable, but rather because it has exercised over the human imagination such enormous power – as a signified it functions as an apotheosis of aspiration, a construct become real because it is so earnestly wished for. And the first wave of ecocriticism, generally associated with scholarship from the late 1970s to the early 1990s, could not ignore that construct and often in fact trafficked in its assumptions and imagery. We might think of it as the "green & pleasant Land" trope, to use William Blake's phrase² – a recurrent interest in and evocation of the celebratory, the nostalgic, and the elegiac modes, especially as they were mobilized in Anglo-American poetry

¹ Timothy Morton, "John Clare's Dark Ecology," *Studies in Romanticism* 47, no. 2 (2008): 185.

² William Blake, *Milton*, ed. Kay Parkhurst Easson and Roger Easson (London: Thames and Hudson, 1979), 62.

of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. That was the material upon which ecocriticism was founded as a scholarly discipline.

Yet here and there, if one strained to look, cracks were also visible in the shiny green veneer of this new academic bauble. The work of Richard Bridgman represents one such crack. His study of Henry David Thoreau, appropriately titled *Dark Thoreau* and published in 1982, long before darkness and ecology were paired together in our cultural understanding, caused reviewers a great deal of consternation because it opposed itself so vehemently to the received image of Thoreau as a “backwoods saint.”³ In the words of Michael Meyer, Bridgman produced a writer of “fundamental morbidity and pessimism” whose perverse instincts were neatly aligned with a natural environment similarly beset by “the predatory actualities of life.”⁴ The world of nature in Bridgman’s account – including Thoreau himself and the multitude of species and habitats he chronicles – is riven by violence, discord, and death; its patterns, where any emerge, are “confused and opaque,” seemingly impenetrable to the human observer.⁵ And perhaps that is what made Bridgman’s work so “likely to infuriate Thoreau enthusiasts.”⁶ He not only proposed a sharp corrective to the “green & pleasant Land” trope but he also insisted that nature is still, even today, fundamentally beyond our human fathoming; it is dark not only because it is ruled by the inevitability of death but because it absorbs without reflecting the light of our knowledge. These are the same conclusions that Morton drew many years later in their theorization of “dark ecology” as a perspective upon the world governed by “hesitation, uncertainty [and] irony” – a perspective that sets “ugliness and horror” on equal footing with the beautiful and the sublime.⁷

While this conception was something of a shock to the whole ecocritical enterprise, dark ecology has in recent years gained increasing support from members of the scientific community, most notably those who study global warming and have found that ecology may not be self-correcting or self-balancing after all, that the Anthropocene is irrevocably altering once stable feedback systems and pushing us closer to a series of “climate tipping points,” to use the

³ Carol Johnston, review of *Dark Thoreau*, by Richard Bridgman, *South Atlantic Review* 50, no. 3 (1985): 112.

⁴ Michael Meyer, review of *Dark Thoreau*, by Richard Bridgman, *American Literature* 54, no. 4 (1982): 613; Richard Bridgman, *Dark Thoreau* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1982), xii.

⁵ Johnston, review of *Dark Thoreau*, 112.

⁶ Meyer, review of *Dark Thoreau*, 612.

⁷ Timothy Morton, *The Ecological Thought* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), 16-17.

language of Johan Rockström.⁸ Among science writers, commentators, and journalists, dark ecology has likewise gained traction. Mackenzie Wark, for example, invites readers to think of nature as “recalcitrant, enervating, [and] unpredictable,” especially in short-lived species and non-linear systems.⁹ And if we work our way down to even smaller realms and manifestations of life, what is today the speculative domain of biomathematicians, we find even less coherence and more latitude for chaos. As a humanities scholar, approaching this work directly can prove overwhelming, so I try to find accessible points of entry geared to non-specialists. A recent memoir by Patrick Bringley, for example, whose brother Tom worked in the field of bio math (or what is sometimes referred to as theoretical biology), offers a poignant distillation of dark ecology at the cellular level:

Pure math is obviously extremely beautiful [...]. It’s elegant. Physics too is elegant. Biology is anything but elegant. It’s an absolute mess [...]. Put it this way. If you or I were to build a machine, we’d go about it logically, with the fewest necessary parts moving in clean, efficient ways. But living nature doesn’t work that way at all. It builds via the most fantastic redundancies and curlicues, millions of little variations around a theme, so that if three quarters go haywire, life survives. The results are Rube Goldberg devices, but sturdy Rube Goldberg devices, unimaginably weird and densely layered [...], literally unimaginable in that our brains aren’t adequate to comprehend the sort of microscopic megacities hidden within the tiniest cell.¹⁰

This glimpse of nature’s microscopic “mess” is appropriately set off by Morton’s favourite adjective: *weird*. Cells, according to Tom Bringley, are “unimaginably weird” but weirdness for Morton needs no modifier. If something is weird, it is already unimaginable – like hyperobjects, which is Morton’s term for massively scaled and distributed phenomena that we can theorize, study, and compute but not in fact process through our sensorium; to put it simply, we cannot perceive them or fully grasp them as ideas.¹¹ Global warming is the hyperobject *par excellence*

⁸ Johan Rockström and Gill Einhorn, “Risks to Earth Systems Are Rising. The Good News? Businesses Are Taking Action,” *World Economic Forum: Climate Action*, 11 June 2024, accessed 20 June 2025, <https://www.weforum.org/stories/2024/06/risks-earth-systems-are-rising-businesses-are-taking-action/>.

⁹ Mackenzie Wark, *Molecular Red: Theory for the Anthropocene* (London: Verso, 2016), 82.

¹⁰ Patrick Bringley, *All the Beauty in the World: The Metropolitan Museum of Art and Me* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2023), 26.

¹¹ Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 1.

and its weirdness has everything to do with its unpredictability and its surprising contradictions – the way for example that the rapid warming of the Arctic over the last forty years has shifted patterns of atmospheric circulation over the North Pole, pushing more fast-flowing high-altitude air (known as the polar vortex) into lower latitudes and thereby increasing, not decreasing, the likelihood and severity of cold-weather events in these regions. For this reason, some climate commentators have abandoned the designation of “global warming” altogether because it is too simplistic and even misleading; what they have adopted instead is the term “global weirding” – with the weird here signalling, in the words of Mark Fisher, the “conjoining of two or more things that do not belong together,”¹² like warming and polar vortex. These unlikely conjunctions are the clearest expression of dark ecology itself.

For literary scholars, this represents a fascinating development because we have of course our own unique term, with a much longer and richer provenance, for the conjoining or bringing together of unlike things: *metaphor*. What metaphor accomplishes in the realm of language and ideas (or signifiers and signifieds), dark ecology, through the manifestation of weirdness, facilitates for us environmentally: it emphasizes connections and relationality, doing away with those conceptual barriers that I alluded to earlier, the here and there, inside and outside, human and nature. You cannot really keep things apart when everything is already connected. Moreover, dark ecology through its resonant weirdness bursts in upon our solipsism and self-reliance, making everything relational and contingent whether we like it or not. That last point is important, because our connection or nearness to what is weird is also bound to make us uncomfortable. The bonds we make willingly, out of love or filiation or perhaps some transactional goal, are one thing; but the bonds that are forged outside of our will and suddenly revealed as a condition of our existence, like the noisy neighbours upstairs or the inebriated seatmate on the metro, these carry risks for the egoic subject. At the very least, they compel us to accept certain limits on the sovereignty of the human – and, on a more intimate level, they threaten to discompose our tranquillity, our inner solitude, with their brazen, interruptive otherness.

That experience of being discomposed and unsettled – with all of its attendant shocks and surprises – is essentially what John Clare dramatizes in his sonnet “The Mouse’s Nest,” my case study text for how weirdness manifests itself in the world and in the perceptions of those accosted by it. Written around 1835, after Clare’s fraught relocation from Helpston to Northborough, a move of only six kilometres that he found utterly disorienting, the poem discovers this most local

¹² Mark Fisher, *The Weird and the Eerie* (London: Repeater Books, 2016), 11.

of poets suddenly at odds with his surroundings. In other poems from this period he attends to his estrangement, tries to process it by dwelling on objects in the natural world – flowers, birds, even the sun – that once secured and consoled him with their familiarity. In these texts, however, the strangeness originates in the poet himself, in his acute sense of displacement or uprootedness; he is not where he wishes to be and his perceptions accordingly register a kind of distemper. But in "The Mouse's Nest" a different manner of revelation unfolds, not about himself principally but about the world into which he, and we as readers, bring certain assumptions. What has so fascinated commentators about this poem – everyone from Seamus Heaney to Jonathan Bate to Morton – is the congruence it establishes between the surprises of nature and of art. To put it another way, the poem exemplifies both the weirdness of the physical world and the weirdness of poetry as a commentary thereon, each of these realities conjoining things that do not belong together.

Let me begin with the weirdness of the physical world. Like so many of Clare's descriptive poems, "The Mouse's Nest" is built on a rapid itemization of movement and perception, like the fieldnotes of a naturalist. We do not have here the polish of narrative structure or any particular investment in artful language or even the benefit of the poet's inner reflections; what we get instead is an accretion of short impressionistic glimpses directed to an encounter in the world, without any preparation or context, as if the reader had just been dropped on all fours into a field in the Northamptonshire countryside to bear witness to some trifle of existence. And while in some of Clare's poems there is at least an element of quest and discovery, giving them if not a narrative then at least a temporal arc, "The Mouse's Nest" short-circuits those expectations by arriving in its first line upon the object of interest: "I found a ball of grass among the hay" (1).¹³ By foreshortening the action so dramatically, Clare causes everything (including the reader's interest) to hinge upon this curious spectacle. And for just a moment it is only curious, certainly not weird, this ball of grass in the haymaker's field. But everything changes when the poet initiates contact, for the nature of that contact is itself unexpected and from it springs a startling metamorphosis – a sort of unravelling of the ball that also unravels the poet's expectations. Rather than bending over it for a closer look or even nudging it with his hand, Clare writes that he "proged it" (2), using a regional or dialect verb meaning to "prod, poke [...] prick, stab, pierce."¹⁴ This spectrum of significations from "prod" to "pierce"

¹³ John Clare, "The Mouse's Nest," in *Poems of the Middle Period*, Vol. 5, ed. Eric Robinson, David Powell and P.M.S. Dawson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2003), 246. Line numbers are in parentheses in the text.

¹⁴ *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, "prog," accessed 25 July 2025, https://www.oed.com/dictionary/prog_v2?tab=meaning_and_use#28113297.

registers increasing violence and may imply the use of a stick, an interpretation also supported by the rest of the line, with the poet hurriedly passing the object and going away, as though he cannot bear to look at it or at what he has done. Yet in the next line he does look (with what one can imagine is an admixture of dread and fascination) and what he sees when the object – the “something” (3) – finally resolves itself is even for modern readers unexpected, perhaps unpalatable, certainly unpoetic: “an old mouse [...] / With all her young ones hanging at her teats” (5-6).

Bridgman first and Morton later had given scholars to believe that dark ecology is principally reflected in scenes of death, corruption, and decay, that aspect of the life cycle of all things that humans have had the most difficulty reconciling with the purpose and the power of art. But that is a narrow conception of darkness. Clare’s poem centres the speaker’s revulsion not on death or negation, but on teeming life and abundance. Indeed, it is the spectacle of too much life – “all the young ones hanging at her teats” – that causes the speaker such evident discomfort. Why this should be is not made clear. As noted earlier, we rarely get in Clare’s descriptive poems that distinctive Wordsworthian investment in personal reflection, but in this case the adjectives he uses to describe the scene do hint at something more than just quotidian surprise or aversion. The mouse, he writes, “looked so odd & so grotesque to me” (7) – a sequence suggestive of Clare’s ongoing difficulty in processing what is in front of him. We tend to use the word “odd” as a general marker of something unaccountable but its association with a mathematical leftover is also relevant here. The “odd” mouse is an excess or a remainder in the even tally of nature, the ideal of which is established in the Genesis story of Noah and the flood, where everything exists in twos. The mouse, on the other hand, cannot be paired with anything else; it is an outlier, an unreconcilable singularity. And the word “grotesque” then twists that idea into weirdness; its etymological root “*grotta*” from which we derive the word “grotto” obviously hints at an origin of darkness, but as a form of decorative art the grotesque is also characterized by “unnatural combinations”¹⁵ usually of human and animal forms – things, in other words, that do not belong together. So, is it the juxtaposition of the old mouse suckling young ones that disturbs Clare, an image reminiscent of Milton’s allegorical figure of Sin in *Paradise Lost*? Or is it the fact that his intrusive “proging,” by which the ball of grass is animated into motion, produces this unnatural combination, his humanity momentarily conjoined with the mouse in a grotesque configuration? Is that what disgusts him, that he is himself implicated in – literally made part of – this unnatural, unsightly spectacle?

¹⁵ *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, “2.a, grotesque,” accessed 25 July 2025, https://www.oed.com/dictionary/grotesque_n?tab=meaning_and_use.

A definitive answer is not needed here. What matters is that nature can appear to us as unnatural; it is in the nature of nature to be weird.

I would like, in closing, to touch also on the weirdness of poetry as a commentary on nature and its processes. What has intrigued readers about "The Mouse's Nest" has more to do with its form than with its odd and grotesque content. The poem is ostensibly a sonnet but not one that shares much with either the Italian or English traditions of the form. Yes, it has fourteen lines of fairly consistent iambic pentameter, but the rhyme scheme of six distinct couplets (one is repeated twice) is rudimentary and completely uninformed by the rich Romantic tradition of sonnet innovation. What Clare has produced here (bearing in mind the probable period of composition) is an outmoded Augustan poem of heroic couplets, not all of which are even logically connected to one another. The final two lines, for example – eruptions of what Angus Fletcher has characterized as "the suddenly strange"¹⁶ –, seem imported from a different poem or directed to a different audience entirely. Indeed, their emphasis on the glittering light of distant "sexpools"¹⁷ starkly juxtaposes the darkness of the speaker's immediate perceptions, by which I mean not only his revulsion at nature's fecundity but also his inability to grasp its protean forms. His impulsive "proging" or piercing with a stick appears to yield no definitive answers, no redemptive insight of any sort, either about the mouse or himself, even while the natural world around him, all light and water, gleams transparently.

Commenting on this disjunction, Joseph Phelan concludes that "The Mouse's Nest" and indeed many of Clare's later sonnets are not real sonnets at all but only "fourteen-line poems" that could without irreparable harm be amended by the addition or subtraction of two or three lines.¹⁸ That is surely an ungenerous assessment and certainly not proof that the poem is weird in the Mortonian sense, but these debates over form have prompted some critics to think of "The Mouse's Nest" in entirely new terms. Laura Wells Betz, for example, in a recent analysis regards the poem as a literary embodiment of an actual nest, held together by the adhesive qualities of its rhyming couplets and tiered or stacked into layers of random observations in much the same way that animal nests are composed of whatever environmental scraps are suitable and near at hand.¹⁹ The poem as a thing on the page thus embodies the mimetic potential of art; Clare could have done no better by sketching an image of the nest on paper.

¹⁶ Angus Fletcher, *A New Theory for American Poetry: Democracy, the Environment, and the Future of the Imagination* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 60-61.

¹⁷ A variant of "cesspools," likely referring to puddles of rainwater or standing water between a river and its bank.

¹⁸ Joseph P. Phelan, *The Nineteenth-Century Sonnet* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2005), 42.

¹⁹ Laura Wells Betz, "John Clare's Sonnets as Nests," *John Clare Society Journal* 43 (2024): 5-6.

This represents a fascinating reading of the poem, but I would like to push the analysis in a slightly different direction, especially with the theme of Romantic shocks and surprises in mind. Nests, after all, tend to be static objects, while the poem is full of movement. As Seamus Heaney points out, the “seven couplets [are] wound up like clockwork and then set free to scoot merrily through their foreclosed motions.”²⁰ This horological image gets us nearer to the metaphor I have in mind. The poem’s true animating force is, after all, not the mouse but the speaker himself who with his inquisitive “proging” sets the entire scene in motion. And his movements, although overshadowed by the prepossessing spectacle of the mouse, are every bit as strange: in line 2 he passes the nest and goes away; in line 3 he hesitates and looks back; in line 4 he turns again; in line 8 he runs around confused, then stands still in line 9 and pushes (or progs) again at the mouse’s hiding place; in line 11 he finally goes away but lines 13 and 14, with their descriptive view of a distant prospect, suggest that he is still in the vicinity, only no longer looking down but looking around. Sue Edney has described the poet’s movements as a “curious country dance”²¹ – an apt analogy because it accommodates both choreographed and random movement. The poem’s choreography, we might suggest, is its iambic rhythm, the repeated pulse of unstressed and stressed syllables: da-dum, da-dum. The random movements, meanwhile, are supplied by the poet’s running to and fro, his coming and going, drawing near and then withdrawing in a welter of excitement. On that basis, the sonnet is not so much like a nest as it is like a heart; it registers the poet’s heightened state of arousal and confusion, almost like an arrhythmia. The second line is a notable example of this irregular rhythm; after the stressed word “proged” we get three unstressed syllables before the iambic pattern resumes with “passed and went away.” What is weird in all of this is that the poem is also nothing like a heart in its function, complexity, and design; any cardiologist would tell you that these two things do not belong together. Yet poetry as art has audacity on its side and can, even if only for a few moments, appeal to our collective interest in connection, in life conceived as fundamentally relational. The poem can gesture to this possibility and thus, in vicarious excitement, cause our hearts to skip a beat.

²⁰ Seamus Heaney, “John Clare’s Prog,” in *Finders Keepers: Selected Prose 1971-2001* (London: Faber and Faber, 2002), 277.

²¹ Sue Edney, “Wild Freedom and Careful Wandering in the Poetry of William Wordsworth and John Clare,” in *Wild Romanticism*, ed. Markus Poetzsch and Cassandra Falke (Abingdon: Routledge, 2021), 36.

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