

REGENT COLLEGE

**FORMING, FILLING, AND NAMING:
*THE LOST WORDS AS CREATIONAL RE-ENCHANTMENT***

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Introduction

“Once upon a time, words began to vanish from the language of children.”¹ So begins the preface to *The Lost Words*, written by Robert Macfarlane and illustrated by Jackie Morris. This fairy-tale preface alludes to the 2007 edition of the *Oxford Junior Dictionary*, which had culled “outdoor and natural” words deemed irrelevant to modern-day childhood—words like *acorn*, *adder*, *bluebell*, *conker*, *dandelion*, *fern*, *heather*, *heron*, *ivy*, *kingfisher*, *lark*, *newt*, *otter*, and *willow*—and replaced them with “indoor and virtual” words like *blog*, *bullet-point*, *chatroom*, and *voice-mail*.² *The Lost Words* is Macfarlane and Morris’ creative protest, which endeavors to re-enchant us into the world of these lost creatures.

As it plays with various genre, through word and image, *The Lost Words* re-enchants us into a vision of the natural world which is remarkably consistent with a biblical theology of creation. Without any explicit reference to Christianity, Macfarlane and Morris playfully explore three themes which are central to the biblical account of creation: *forming*, *filling*, and *naming*. Their playful exploration of these themes re-enchants us into a *participatory* engagement with the natural world which does not claim *mastery*, but marvels at *mystery*.

Re-Enchantment

The Lost Words aims for re-enchantment. It opens with “Once upon a time...” and declares itself to be a “spellbook,” summoning children and adults alike with its playful and

¹ Macfarlane and Morris, Preface to *The Lost Words*.

² Macfarlane, “The word-hoard.”

inviting tone.³ Its large scale—standing a foot-and-a-half tall—invites us to enter in, to immerse ourselves in a world of wonders.

The Lost Words plays with genre as an “estranging technique” by which it re-enchants us.⁴ Indeed, *The Lost Words* defies classification into any one genre. It is “a proper *grimoire*,” a “spellbook,” a collection of poems and illustrations which invite the reader to “conjure back” the lost creatures.⁵ It is “a ‘spelling’ book in more ways than one,” Morris quips, with alphabetically-arranged acrostic poems that play with alliteration and rhyme.⁶ It is an illuminated manuscript, whose tale is “told in gold”—“the gold of the goldfinches that flit through its pages in charms.”⁷ It is a modern-day bestiary without explicit religious reference.⁸ It is a book of painted “icons” of priestly and kingly creatures.⁹ In *The Lost Words*, Macfarlane and Morris employ these various genre as “estranging techniques,” which, in Alison Milbank’s words, awaken in us “a new sensitivity to the splendor and strangeness of the world ... a religious sense of the mystery of the real.”¹⁰

³ Macfarlane and Morris, Preface to *The Lost Words*.

⁴ Milbank, “Apologetics and the Imagination,” 38.

⁵ Macfarlane, “Badger or Bulbasaur.”

Note: The title for this article, “Badger or Bulbasaur,” refers to studies which showed that children in the UK were better at identifying Pokémon characters than real animals and plants.

⁶ Morris, “The Lost Words.”

⁷ Macfarlane and Morris, Preface to *The Lost Words*.

Note: Macfarlane explains, “The bird which became the guiding, gilding spirit of *The Lost Words* is the goldfinch. Goldfinches flit across its cover and gleam from its pages. They are present in part as a sign of hope, for those bright birds represent a rare conservation success story in Britain, their numbers having surged by almost 50% over the past 10 years. They are there, too, because the collective noun for goldfinch is a ‘charm’ – a word which also means ‘the chanting or recitation of a verse supposed to possess magic power’ and ‘the blended singing of many birds, or children’” (Macfarlane, “Badger or Bulbasaur”).

⁸ The bestiary tradition is native to England and dates to as early as the 12th century. A bestiary was essentially a “medieval encyclopedia” in which each creature was described and depicted with an eye toward its spiritual significance “within the Christian worldview, rather than as a purely scientific phenomenon.” Bestiaries depicted creatures real and imaginary, with elements that were legendary, mythical, and fantastic (Harrison, “What is a bestiary?”).

⁹ Macfarlane, “Badger or Bulbasaur.”

¹⁰ Milbank, “Apologetics and the Imagination,” 36, 38.

Into what vision of the world does *The Lost Words* re-enchant us? It re-enchants us into a vision of the natural world which is remarkably consistent with a biblical theology of creation which emphasizes *forming*, *filling*, and *naming*.

Forming and Filling

As we turn the pages of *The Lost Words*, we notice a distinct pattern by which we “conjure back” each creature. First, we encounter a double-page spread that is mostly negative space, with scattered letters and a sparse natural motif. Macfarlane calls this the “‘absence’ page,” in which Morris suggestively depicts the *absence* of the yet-to-be-named creature.¹¹ The strewn-about letters on this page anticipate the naming of the creature: the letters which comprise the creature’s name are colored differently than the gold letters with which they are scattered. Second, we encounter a “spell,” Macfarlane’s acrostic poem of the creature’s name, set beside Morris’ vividly painted “icon” of the creature itself.¹² Third, we encounter a double-page spread in which Morris depicts the creature in its natural habitat, amongst other creatures.

While Macfarlane and Morris employ this pattern to suggest the loss of a creature and its being “conjured back” as the “spell” is pronounced, the pattern is remarkably consistent with a biblical theology of creation which emphasizes the *forming* of formlessness and the *filling* of emptiness. After Genesis 1:1 declares, “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth,” Genesis 1:2 notes that the earth was “without form and void.” The following account of creation addresses this “unformed (*tōhū*) and unfilled (*bōhū*)” state.¹³ As biblical scholars such as Meredith Kline and Bruce Waltke have noted, the account of the days of creation presents us with two triads: in the first three days, the earth is *formed* into separate realms; and in the second

¹¹ Macfarlane, “Badger or Bulbasaur.”

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Waltke and Fredericks, *Genesis*, 57.

three days, the earth is *filled* with creatures who inhabit and are said to “rule over” those realms.¹⁴ Kline describes these as “creature kingdoms” and “creature kings,” respectively—all of whom exist within the cosmic Temple of God, the “Creator King.”¹⁵

The pattern of *The Lost Words* follows this movement from formless and empty to *formed* and *filled*. The scattered letters of the “absence” page are arranged into an acrostic poem as the “spell” is spoken; the empty, negative space is *formed* as a particular landscape and then *filled* with particular creatures. The beauty of the double-spread landscape elicits benediction: “it is good.”

On this reading, the style of the illustration which accompanies each “spell” is particularly suggestive. Morris depicts each creature in the recognizable form of an icon—painted in vivid color, set against a background of gold (or green, or gray) leaf. Each creature is thus presented as a royal priest or sacred king. Macfarlane plays with the language of priesthood and kingship in his accompanying poetic “spells”: Heron is “old priest,” Newt dubs himself “king of the pond,” and Raven claims to be “Prince of Play, King of Guile.”¹⁶ In this aspect, too, *The Lost Words* is consistent with the biblical-theological notion of “creature kings” in their “creature kingdoms,” all situated within God’s cosmic Temple.¹⁷

¹⁴ Kline, *Genesis*, 10. Cf. Waltke, *Genesis*, 57.

| Creature Kingdoms | Creature Kings |
|----------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Day One: Light | Day Four: Sun, Moon, Stars |
| Day Two: Waters, Sky | Day Five: Fish, Birds |
| Day Three: Land | Day Six: Animals, Humans |
| Day Seven: Creator King | |

¹⁵ Kline, *Genesis*, 10. Cf. Waltke, *Genesis*, 60.

¹⁶ Macfarlane and Morris, “Heron,” “Newt,” and “Raven,” in *The Lost Words*.

¹⁷ Kline, *Genesis*, 10. Cf. Waltke, *Genesis*, 60.

Naming

Central to *The Lost Words* is another key theme in a biblical theology of creation: the art of *naming*. The book is dedicated to a person “who loves the names of things and knows the importance of naming.”¹⁸ Each “spell” is an acrostic poem, structured on the letters which form the name of a particular creature. Moreover, the poems play with various creaturely names and nick-names. In “Dandelion,” for example, the poetic voice plays with various names, from “Dent-de-Lion” or “Lion’s Tooth” and “Milkwitch” to “Bane of Lawn Perfectionists” and “Fallen Star of the Football Pitch.”¹⁹ In “Kingfisher,” the poetic voice muses, “Halcyon is its other name – also ripple-calmer, / water-nester // Evening angler, weather-teller, rainbringer and // Rainbow bird.”²⁰ In the tradition of Gerard Manley Hopkins, *The Lost Words* celebrates the creative coinage of new names and nick-names for natural phenomena.²¹

As humans, “we are and always have been name-callers, christeners,” reflects Macfarlane.²² Naming is, indeed, a markedly human endeavor—a prerogative of humankind as divine image-bearer. Genesis 1 recounts how God, the Creator-King, created “by sovereign fiat” and named the “creature-kingdoms”: “God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night... God called the expanse Heaven... God called the dry land Earth, and the waters that were gathered together he called Seas.”²³ Genesis 2 recounts how God then invited Adam, as a king and priest in the Garden, to name the animals:

Now out of the ground the LORD God had formed every beast of the field and every bird of the heavens and brought them to the man to see what he would call them. And whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name. The man gave names to all livestock and to the birds of the heavens and to every beast of the field.²⁴

¹⁸ Macfarlane and Morris, Dedication Page in *The Lost Words*.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, “Dandelion,” in *The Lost Words*.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, “Kingfisher,” in *The Lost Words*.

²¹ Macfarlane, “The word-hoard.”

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Kline, *Genesis*, 10; Genesis 1:5-10.

²⁴ Genesis 2:19-20.

As we speak the “spells” of *The Lost Words*, we are like God, speaking creatures into existence; we are like Adam, exercising our God-given dominion, naming the animals in the childhood of mankind.

Human beings have, of course, misappropriated this prerogative of naming, distorting *dominion* into *domination*.²⁵ Especially in the modern era, mankind has postured himself as a *detached observer*, seeking *mastery* over what he names. In his extensive writings about our naming of nature and our language of landscape, Macfarlane warns against the “tyranny of the nominal,” which he describes as “a taxonomic need to point and name, with the intent of citing and owning.”²⁶ This approach to naming marked the Scientific Revolution: as Owen Barfield notes, in the “positivist” or “materialist” approach to naming, man meticulously observed and categorized natural phenomena in order to manipulate nature for his own ends.²⁷ This is strikingly evident in the writings of Francis Bacon, who sought to name and understand the natural world in order to master it—and claimed biblical warrant for this endeavor by appealing to the cultural mandate of Genesis 1:28.²⁸ Perhaps counterintuitively, this apparently hyper-attentive approach to nature actually yielded “a habit of *inattention*”—inattention to the *mystery* and *meaning* of nature.²⁹

Instead of the sort of naming by which a *detached observer* asserts *mastery* over nature, *The Lost Words* presents a practice of naming in which an *engaged participant* becomes attentive to *mystery*.³⁰ This latter approach to naming need not be any less *precise* than the former;

²⁵ Bauckham, “Human Authority in Creation.”

²⁶ Macfarlane, “The word-hoard.”

²⁷ Barfield, “The Rediscovery of Meaning,” 11.

²⁸ Bauckham, “Human Authority in Creation,” 159, 162-163.

²⁹ Barfield, “The Rediscovery of Meaning,” 12. Emphasis shifted from *habit* to *inattention*.

³⁰ Macfarlane, “Badger or Bulbasaur.”

precision in naming does not eradicate mystery.³¹ Precise names not only impart accurate knowledge; they also “summon wonder” by fixing our attention on *particular* creaturely phenomena.³² If, as Macfarlane asserts, “language deficit leads to attention deficit,” then learning and speaking particular creaturely names trains our attention.³³ Without such detailed precision and particularity, “the natural world can quickly blur into a generalised wash of green”—what Macfarlane memorably terms a “blandscape.”³⁴ *The Lost Words* presents us not with a “blandscape” but with an intricate and wondrous world in which we are invited to marvel at what Hopkins called the “thisness” (*haecceity*) of each particular creature.³⁵ We learn, for instance, about the Conker, which Cabinet-maker cannot craft, King cannot command, and Engineer cannot design.³⁶ We follow Fern’s fronds as they unfurl.³⁷ We witness the statuesque stillness of Heron, who “magically... / *unstatures*” as he “hauls himself into flight.”³⁸ We marvel at Starling’s murmurations, the “ghostly swirling surging whirling melting” mix of “Northern lights” and “shoaling fish” and “swarming flies” and “clouding ink.”³⁹

In *The Lost Words*, naming is a *participatory* endeavor which, in Barfield’s words, “involves a participation by the knower in the known.”⁴⁰ The creaturely names spelled out in *The*

³¹ *Ibid.*, “The word-hoard.”

Note: A self-proclaimed “word-hoarder,” Macfarlane has spent decades collecting precise and evocative words which describe natural phenomena across the UK. This endeavor is chronicled in Macfarlane’s book *Landmarks* (2015), a celebratory lexicon of the language of landscape. For Macfarlane, such collections are not merely scientific archives; they are “*wunderkammers*” (“wonder-rooms” or “curiosity-cabinets”) which “[celebrate] the visions these words [open] in the mind, and their tastes on the tongue” (“The word-hoard,” “Badger or Bulbasaur”).

³² *Ibid.*, “Badger or Bulbasaur”

³³ *Ibid.*, “The word-hoard.”

³⁴ *Ibid.*, “Badger or Bulbasaur,” “The word-hoard.”

³⁵ *Ibid.*, “Badger or Bulbasaur.”

Note: Macfarlane cites Hopkins as a key influence: “...I tried, futilely, to catch at what Hopkins called the ‘thisness’ of each creature.”

³⁶ Macfarlane and Morris, “Conker,” in *The Lost Words*.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, “Fern,” in *The Lost Words*.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, “Heron,” in *The Lost Words*.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, “Starling,” in *The Lost Words*.

⁴⁰ Barfield, “The Rediscovery of Meaning,” 18.

Lost Words function as “portals,” and naming as a “magical art” which opens for us “adventures into the mysterious worlds of different creatures, even different kinds of matter.”⁴¹ As we imaginatively embark on these adventures, we do so not as *detached observers* but as *engaged participants*.⁴² We ascend into the heavens with Lark, who flies ever higher “into deep space, past dying stars and / exploding suns,” where we hear her “sing [her] heart out at all dark matter.”⁴³ We follow “shape-shifter” Otter to the riverbank, where we are invited to slip off our skin and change our matter, to pour our outer being into Otter.⁴⁴

Nonetheless, we participate as *human beings* with our own creaturely limitations.

However precise our vocabulary and however expansive our imagination, mystery remains: human language can never ultimately circumscribe creation. Macfarlane reflects,

There are experiences of landscape that will always resist articulation, and of which words offer only a distant echo. Nature will not name itself. Granite doesn't self-identify as igneous. Light has no grammar. Language is always late for its subject.⁴⁵

While the creatures depicted in *The Lost Words* occasionally dialogue with the human poetic voice, they ultimately speak a language that humans cannot know. This becomes strikingly evident in “Willow,” in which the poetic voice pleads, “O open up your heartwood to us will you, willow...?” and Willow responds: however long you listen, “*you will never hear what willows speak / what willows say,*” “*you will / never speak in leaves, or put down roots into the rot,*” “*you will never know a word of willow – for we are willow and you are not.*”⁴⁶

The Lost Words thus humbles us, reminding us of our *common creatureliness* with these named creatures. As Richard Bauckham reminds us, our common creatureliness is an oft-

⁴¹ Macfarlane, “Badger or Bulbasaur.”

⁴² We are not “buffered” selves, but “porous” selves, in Taylor’s words (*A Secular Age*, 37-39; cf. Smith, *How (Not) to be Secular*, 29-30).

⁴³ Macfarlane and Morris, “Lark,” in *The Lost Words*.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, “Otter,” in *The Lost Words*.

⁴⁵ Macfarlane, “Badger or Bulbasaur.”

⁴⁶ Macfarlane and Morris, “Willow,” in *The Lost Words*.

neglected point of emphasis in the biblical creation account.⁴⁷ Even as we are given dominion, we remain “fellow creatures” *within* the created order—not detached “gods” who transcend creaturely limits.⁴⁸

Conclusion

As we speak the “spells” of *The Lost Words*, we “conjure back” wondrous and mysterious creatures.⁴⁹ We are like God, speaking creatures into being; we are like Adam, naming the animals in the childhood of mankind. Yet, in a more profound sense, the “spell” we cast is cast on *us*. In speaking these “spells,” we do not re-enchant *the world*; rather, *we ourselves* are re-enchanted—called beyond our secular, scientific, and technological outlook, called out of our “simulated screen life.”⁵⁰ *The Lost Words* re-enchants us by *re-tuning* us, inviting us to *pay attention* and to *see* the world more truly as it *is*—not a meaningless universe to be mastered, but a mysterious and meaningful cosmos.⁵¹

Moreover, *The Lost Words* invites us to inhabit this world differently—not as *detached observers*, but as *engaged participants*. *The Lost Words* inspires us to orthopraxy, to care for this creation, which is *formed* and *filled* with wondrous creatures we come to know by *name*.⁵² After

⁴⁷ Bauckham, “Human Authority in Creation,” 147.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 128.

Note: Bauckham traces how human beings have done the most damage to creation when we have neglected this horizontal dimension of our “common creatureliness” and over-emphasized the vertical dimension of dominion.

⁴⁹ Macfarlane, “Badger or Bulbasaur.”

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, “The word-hoard.”

⁵¹ Smith, *How (Not) to be Secular*, 27. Cf. Taylor, *A Secular Age*.

Note: Taylor and Smith mark the movement from a meaningful cosmos to a meaningless universe as a key indicator of disenchantment.

⁵² The call to orthopraxy is, indeed, a central concern for Macfarlane and for *The Lost Words* in particular. In his extensive writing on our naming of nature, Macfarlane argues that the ways we address the natural world actively form not only our imagination, but also our ethical relations with nature (“Badger or Bulbasaur”). He quotes Wendell Berry: “people exploit what they have merely concluded to be of value, but they defend what they love, and to defend what we love we need a particularizing language, for we love what we particularly know” (“The word-hoard”). A postscript to *The Lost Words* declares, “A portion of the royalties from each copy of *The Lost Words* will be donated to Action for Conservation, a charity dedicated to inspiring young people to take action for the natural world, and to the next generation of conservationists.” The publication of *The Lost Words* inspired not only a

all, as Wendell Berry reminds us, “people exploit what they have merely concluded to be of value, but they defend what they love, and to defend what we love we need a particularizing language, for we love what we particularly know.”⁵³

campaign for Oxford University Press to reinstate the culled nature words, but also educational and practical conservation efforts (“The word-ward”). See, for example, the John Muir Trust’s set of resources inspired by *The Lost Words*: <https://www.johnmuirtrust.org/john-muir-award/ideas-and-resources/literacy-and-nature/the-lost-words>.

⁵³ Berry, *Life is a Miracle*, 44.

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