

The Marion E. Wade Center
Celebrating
50 Years

The Space Inside | Luci Shaw

The Space Inside

On the Celebration of the 50th anniversary of

the establishment of the Marion E. Wade Collection
at Wheaton College, Wheaton, Illinois
English Department, Blanchard Hall, 1965

There we were in Dr. Kilby's Blanchard office—late afternoon sun lining the space with light that glances off the glassed-in bookshelves and high ceilings. Anticipating, together with our honored sage and mentor, we awaited a delivery—the Wardrobe, shipped in a crate across the ocean to this place. We remember, even after fifty years, how it arrived heavy with promise and mystery, and how our fingers, trembling with curiosity, traced the runes and circles in the dark oak doors; how we, like Lucy, pushed beyond the stiffly opening doors, though there, within the must and incense of old cloth, hung no winter furs, nothing but a long great-coat. We fingered the dark tweed, investigated its deep pockets, sniffing for, perhaps, tobacco smoke? Did we discover there some tattered animal skin, and was it tawny as a lion pelt? Or did we glimpse, perhaps, a lonely planet floating in its wooden sky? But, nothing. No fabled, battered hat. No lamp-post and no snow, or fauns, or beavers. No evidence of magic. Only a dry breath of British air and an implicit invitation, an entry to the deep pockets of story, myth, and scholarship. Thus it was the stores of riches further up and further in began to open for our investigative minds.

It was Lewis who first showed us how our human love may live four-fold, divine love glory-heavy, with Narnia next door, heaven and hell divorced and reunited, miracles multiplying and human griefs observed. Ongoing, we marvel at his legacy—now widening and shining as the Utter East. Does our late story-teller grasp its magnitude, this universe that keeps enlarging long beyond his lift away from mortal life? We wonder, is he grateful that the pictures in his mind continue to expand in stories living on, seen multicolored in this place at Wheaton's heart? For it is here his narratives live on, cheek by jowl with those of all his friends, and now become the stuff of studies, faith, dialogue and debate—the widening of hearts and minds and souls.

And now, at fifty years, we marvel how in heaven's name it grew (for surely heaven was at work as gifts and gatherings enlarged the space inside, only to flare in more than three dimensions as imagination colored in the countries of the mind). As Kilby, Dorsett, Mitchell, Mead, and all the zealous stewards of the work received and catalogued the sheaves of letters, typescripts, furnishings, books first-time in print, with parchment-colored pages, narrow British margins and their marginalia—an amplitude of acquisitions opening to fresh worlds of faerie and faith for new-sprung generations. The burst of offerings engorged the space inside as tapestries from relic threads of oral history were woven, human gatherings hosted, the space expanded, moved, and moved again until, for permanence, this place was built for all the added documents as they were garnered and got dusted off. The seeds of Inklings kinship burst into a plenty, a harvest of artifacts and letters—indelible images from the pens of six scholar men and one intrepid woman.

Quantum physicists talk today of multiverses, but it was within the Wardrobe and the Wade we intuited them first. *In there* was the place of the Lion, conceived by Williams, Lewis's singular, esoteric friend, who introduced to us strange realms of magic where substitution, co-inherence and exchange reshaped and kindled past events, and in which Plato, Angelicals, and Hell took form and narrative coherence.

And Barfield, lecturing at Wheaton, our house guest for half a week, words, meanings, consciousness—his literary treasury rests *in there*. (He left us with a small memento—a dottle of tobacco ash knocked from his pipe into a convenient vase!) As for soul friendship—Owen was the ally whose thoughtful, conversational philosophy dismantled Lewis's atheism.

In there we saw the thrust of Tolkien's conversation arrowing through friendship with Lewis into a contagious faith. *In there* JRR spun his mythic history of Middle-earth, its narratives in angular Elvish; there he limned for our imaginations the Shire with its unlikely hobbit heroes. Gandalf, Galadriel, Smaug, Gollum, orcs and elves and ents, Mordor and the power Ring—in *there* are creatures beatific and horrific. *In there* still sings the Silmarillion.

In there, in Sayers' fecund lines, the Maker's mind was diagrammed as Trinity, a rebuilt cathedral became a play, and Peter and Harriet a couple. For her a wartime bomb shelter was the setting to bring Dante up to date in terza rima.

In there we read our way into George MacDonald's "old soul," his Scottish brogue giving words to the North Wind, cold-breathing at his back. *In there* he turned the Golden Key, unlocked and liberated the Light Princess, expounded the wiles of Lilith, dramatized Phantastes' quest, and told of Curdie, the Princess, and the goblins. His sermons were unspoken but well-lived, and, Lewis told us, it was he, "The Master," who "Baptized his imagination."

In there we find Chesterton's odd invention—an invisible man. And it was his opinionated Father Brown who searched a moral universe for clues. *In there* we came to recognize the power of Orthodoxy's apologetic, springing from both reason and imagination. We long to listen to his disputations, his treatises of erudition and irony. And so we can. *In there*.

The evidence is there—real, valued, displayed, available, speaking louder than any of our words about it. All this, and more, the fruit of Kilby's welcome, ushering Lewis, Joy, and throngs of friends into our ken. Now, as these prophetic messengers live on, such remnants as “northern-ness,” conviviality and verse, briarwood pipes, strong ale, and bawdy conversation in an Oxford tavern thrive! Though dead, our heroes of the spirit live today, as their invented mythic worlds—in words and images—take root in avid minds. Today, *in here*, we celebrate them, each and all!

Bless God, the Lewis Wardrobe's open wide,
inviting all the world to come inside.

— Luci Shaw

Luci Shaw is a 1953 high honors graduate of Wheaton College, and served on the Board of the Wade Center. She was co-founder and later president of Harold Shaw Publishers, and since 1988 has been Writer in Residence at Regent College, Vancouver, Canada. A charter member of the Chrysostom Society of Writers, Shaw is a prolific poet and author of many books, including several volumes of poetry and works with and about Madeleine L'Engle. A long-time friend of the Marion E. Wade Center, she studied under Dr. Clyde S. Kilby during her time at Wheaton College.

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