Bigger on the inside

by Carol Zaleski in the March 18, 2015 issue


The Tardis prop exhibited at a BBC Wales reception. Some rights reserved by almost witty

I've never seen *Doctor Who* and don't plan on beginning now, but I often hear from my students about the Tardis, a space-and-time ship capable of camouflaging itself as an ordinary London police box. The Tardis, I'm told, is "bigger on the inside."

Whatever the technical marvels of the Tardis may be, places that are bigger on the inside are as common as carrots in folklore and fairy tales. I think of the small cave on an island in Lough Derg, Ireland, where medieval pilgrims could explore the precincts of purgatory, or John Crowley's magic realist novel *Little, Big*, in which the geography of fairyland is "infundibular"—an ever-widening series of concentric rings, such that "the further in you go, the bigger it gets."

If you find this idea as enchanting as I do, perhaps that's because it tells us something about our ordinary as well as our otherworldly concerns. I've never knowingly visited purgatory or fairy land, but I have set foot in a few small places that, once entered, prove to be bigger on the inside. Small libraries, for example: I spent much of my childhood in the 23rd Street branch of the New York Public

Library, reading the entire Landmark biography series from Jane Addams to the Wright brothers. Good books open onto great worlds.

There's something especially enchanting about small libraries that owe their existence to the devotion of a collector to a particular subject. One such library can be found in the Marion E. Wade Center on the Wheaton College campus. The Wade Center, which is celebrating its 50th anniversary this year, began as the personal collection of Wheaton English professor Clyde S. Kilby and developed into a major archive, research library, and museum for the study of Owen Barfield, G. K. Chesterton, C. S. Lewis, George MacDonald, Dorothy L. Sayers, J. R. R. Tolkien, and Charles Williams—seven authors linked by friendship, fellowship in the Inklings, or profound affinity, who have done more than any other group of modern writers to make the belief that reality is bigger on the inside imaginatively plausible.

The Wade Center is wonderfully inviting. Some archives can be snooty; this one is as hospitable to the autodidact as to the credentialed researcher. For anyone who loves the Wade's seven authors (and very few people are lukewarm toward them), to sit in the book-lined reading room, with impeccably conserved manuscripts, letters, and photographs to view on request, is an exhilarating experience. To borrow Crowley's term, the effect is infundibular. It seems fitting that a small house in the Midwest should contain the entrance to Narnia by wardrobe and lamppost, the world's end in a stable, Eden in a biscuit tin. What a perfect place for Charles Williams to end up, who could not be at peace until he had turned his workplace into a hierophantic mystery drama; for MacDonald, whose hero discovered a door to fairyland in his desk; for Barfield, for whom words contained the traces of ancestral consciousness; for Tolkien, who found all love enclosed in the eucharistic tabernacle; for Sayers, who saw the mind of the Maker mirrored in human creativity; and for Chesterton, who reveled in the paradox that "the hands that had made the sun and stars were too small to reach the huge heads of the cattle."

David danced before the ark of God because it was bigger on the inside; the womb of the Virgin, the stable in Bethlehem, the world itself, are too small to contain the Redeemer incarnate within. The human mind, Augustine tells us, is bigger on the inside, and God is more interior than its innermost chamber. By contrast, hell is big on the outside—its ramparts span the power centers of our globe—yet if Lewis is right, it is almost annihilatingly small on the inside.

These are not mere curiosities. The moral world, the spiritual world, the real “other world,” is not far away, but further in. There are scientists who claim to explain our deepest values by taking the measure of our small brains; but to be human is precisely to be bigger on the inside, to live in a way, and in a world, that will forever elude such measurements.

In “Transposition,” originally a sermon for Pentecost, and his finest piece of apologetic writing, C. S. Lewis makes this point clearly. Falling in love may be accompanied by a sensation like seasickness; but where the emotion is present, the accompanying sensation is taken up into it and becomes a carrier of that richer life. The richer, higher things of our experience have this power to transfigure the lower, sensory structures of our existence. Yet viewed from below, Lewis says, “there will always be evidence, and every month fresh evidence, to show that religion is only psychological, justice only self-protection, politics only economics, love only lust, and thought itself only cerebral biochemistry.”

If there is a purpose to fantasies and fairy tales like *Phantastes*, *The Man Who Was Thursday*, the Space Trilogy, and *The Lord of the Rings*—other than the perfectly good one of providing innocent entertainment—perhaps it is to wean us away from this view from below and help us see that our mortal life is bigger on the inside.