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THE WRITINGS OF JOY DAVIDMAN LEWIS (1915-1960)

by

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Part I

I was a child of Glome and the pupil of the Fox; I saw that for years my life
had been lived in two halves, never fitted together.

—*Till We Have Faces*

C.S. Lewis's wife has left us a volume of poetry; several scattered poems and verse translations; two novels; a short religious book; divers essays, prefaces, book and film reviews, short stories, etc. Probably few now read any of this who are not C.S. Lewis fans. Those of us who go to her writings do so because we are (naturally enough) curious about her personality. I trust that doesn't doom us among those listed to the "personal heresy"; a man's motive for picking up a book need not, after all, limit what he gets out of it. But in any case, since our interest in Joy Davidman is bound to be at least partly biographical, I propose to set the author's works in the context of the story of her life. [Note: We shall know a good deal more about her life shortly. Lyle Dorsett, the soon-to-be new curator of the Wade Collection (See December *Bulletin*), is writing a biography of Joy Davidman to be published by Macmillan late next summer. I am grateful to Professor Dorsett for very generously supplying me with a list of addresses where Joy Davidman lived and schools she attended. The rest of my information comes from materials which anyone can inspect at the N.Y. Public Library.]

She was born Helen Joy Davidman, here in Manhattan, on Sunday, April 18, 1915. Her parents, Joseph Isaac and Jeanette Davidman, were public school teachers who lived and worked in the Bronx. As children they had been droplets in the wave of East European Jewish immigration at the turn of the century. Growing up in the New World, both had abandoned their religion; not only its rites and special laws, but its very affirmation that God exists. They were rationalists and their reason forbade them to try to have it both ways. "Many Jews," their daughter wrote, "got rid of the traditional forms of Judaism, but kept a vague and well-meaning belief in a vaguely well-meaning God Such halfway measures, however, were not for my parents or me." Joy Davidman dedicated her second novel (a book with an explicitly Christian message) to her father, who "helped me find out." Perhaps he had done this chiefly by imparting to her his devotion to clear thought. He would not be the first atheist schoolmaster we have heard of who thus helped bring a pupil to Christ.

The Bronx Joy Davidman grew up in was notorious for dullness rather than squalor. There were some tough neighborhoods, but by and large the Bronx was what we should today call a "middle-

income suburb.” When Joy was born the Davidmans lived at 908 Tiffany St., a five-story yellow brick apartment house in Morrisania. Soon they moved to 1094 Woodcrest Ave., in Highbridge. When Joy started school, at P.S. 21, they moved to Williamsbridge. Her father was now a principal (apparently at P.S. 19 in Woodlawn) and the family lived first at 762 E. 222nd St., then at what must have been a more convenient location—halfway between the father’s school and the daughter’s—at 636 E. 232nd St. At the latter (a detached two-story stucco house) they remained till Joy began junior high school. Then they moved to 2277 Andrews Ave. N., between Fordham Rd. and the N.Y.U. uptown campus (now Bronx Community College). Joy attended J.H. (then P.S.) 45, a mile east by Fordham Rd. The school’s principal was Angelo Patri, whose books on education and syndicated newspaper column, “Our Children,” were widely read. The movie actor John Garfield (then known as Julius Garfinkle) apparently attended P.S. 45 at the same time.

The typical Bronx apartment house built in the Teens and Twenties is a six-story pile of dingy yellow brick hung with fire-escapes and embracing a small entrance court often flanked by cast-cement lions. By that standard, the home of Joy Davidman’s adolescence is picturesque. The general shape is the usual one but its material is red brick, its basement and quoins rough-hewn stone, and the squareness of its top relieved by sham-Tudor gables and half-timber. If one goes there today one can see, opposite the Davidmans’ apartment (4-D), another entrance court, guarded by sculpted griffins. At the end of the block a winding road shaded by plane trees leads to the lawns and classical buildings of N.Y.U.

We may, not unreasonably, believe that the young Joy Davidman sometimes stood in the Hall of Fame colonnade and looked out over the Harlem River and Washington Heights to the long, stiff line of the (then still unencumbered) Palisades and beyond them, in imagination, to the great expanses stretching on to the Great Plains. That view was probably as familiar to her as the one from the Hollywood hills to Belfast Lough and the misty Antrim coast was to the young C.S. Lewis. Nor is it likely to have moved her less; for she says in her girlhood rapturous experiences of nature happened “fairly often”—

When I was fourteen I went walking in the park on a Sunday afternoon, in clean, cold, luminous air. The trees tinkled with sleet; the city noises were muffled by the snow. Winter sunset, with a line of young maples sheathed in ice between me and the sun—as I looked up they burned unimaginably golden ... the sacrament at the heart of all beauty lay bare; time and space fell away, and for a moment the world was only a door swinging ajar. Then the light faded, the cold stung my toes, and I went home.

It was to take her (as it took Lewis) many years before she could fit the content of such experiences into the rest of what she believed about the universe.

Meanwhile her favorite reading was fantasy: “Ghost stories and superscience stories; George MacDonald in my childhood, Dunsany in my teens.” And she adds,

I believed the three-dimensional material world was the only thing that existed, but in literature it bored me. I didn't believe in the supernatural, but it interested me above all else.

We recall that Lewis made a similar observation about the double life of belief and imagination in his own childhood.

Like Lewis, too, Joy Davidman read voraciously (it made her nearsighted). She also “scribbled verses ... in a blind fury.” As a schoolgirl she appears to have been bright and ambitious, proud of her own, and impatient of other people's intelligence. She was an immigrants' daughter who believed (while it lasted) in American prosperity—but, she avows, in little else.

After graduating from Evander Childs High School in the Bronx she went to Hunter College. There she wrote for the literary magazine *The Hunter College Echo*. She was barely eighteen when she produced a spirited and learned essay on the Irish novelist George Moore. The essay strikes poses, drops names, and sparkles with rash epigrams. Yet it pleases by taking its own pretentiousness lightly, and by being often really clever. Its style is a pastiche of Moore's own—“the later one, the beautiful one—so much himself that one falls into it writing of him.” The appropriate note of egotism is struck at the very beginning:

I turned away from the piano, because my father had just called out that George Moore was dead; but my hands had not fallen from the keys, and presently they wandered from Wagner to Chopin, thereafter to that slow lonely tune quoted in the last tale of *The Untilled Field*. The tale “Wild Geese” it is in which a shepherd's flute plays this air in the mist [the music is given] But I was thinking how appropriate my gesture was, and that he would have liked it; an Irish air of the land which was alien to him and always hated his books

Like all clever people, Moore derived from France He was just Irish enough to keep him from ever being English, so that he turned to France; which was fortunate for our literature. For our prose narrative is thin and brittle as dry glass; drained of life, trivial and deadly, all for lack of *l'esprit gaulois*

Somehow the young Irishman came to know Degas, Cézanne, Manet and Monet; he met Stéphane Mallarmé, Paul Verlaine, Villiers de l'Isle Adam He met everybody, he loved everybody, his accounts of those early years are heartbreaking to lonely students far away from Paris.

After an analysis of Moore's style she passes the works in review, from the early realistic novels (flawed by their “sprawling adolescent English”) to the “delightful ... innumerable books he wrote about himself,” and his fancy life of Jesus, *The Brook of Kerith*. At the end she proclaims George Moore to be the “greatest” of all English novelists!—for his style, his wisdom and, above all, his *feeling*: “for Moore knew that intellect and passion travel hand-in-hand, that a cold man is a stupid one” He knew, too, “that only the Philistine seeks for spiritual meanings.” He was “a thorough

pagan, serenely untroubled by the ugly things called moral codes.”

All this passionate aestheticism is miles removed from the mature Joy Davidman. Yet aesthetes will moralize despite themselves, and even here we catch a glimpse of the future author of *Smoke on the Mountain*:

Men are always ready to confess whatever they have done, but only George Moore was strong enough to admit things he had forgotten to do, that he had forgotten to write a letter of recommendation or to send ten pounds to an old servant. No one is free of such recollections; they come to us slily in the night, and we toss from side to side to evade them. Moore wrote them down, and was the better artist for it.

Joy Davidman also wrote for the *Echo* some verse translations from R gnier, Jammes and Verlaine; a smoldering sonnet sequence addressed by a fawning but formidable young woman to the disdainful object of her love; and two short stories.

“Reveal the Titan” is about a young composer named Philip who, having quarreled with his girlfriend, Marian (whom he has, unknowingly, made pregnant), “tears off to France to be a genius!” Years later, jaded with celebrity, he returns to his home town of Presque Isle, hoping to complete a tone poem about Prometheus for which his inspiration has run dry. One day, inevitably, he runs into Marian and her six-year-old son, Paul. Love—of a sort—is renewed. Meanwhile Philip has discovered that Paul has absolute pitch and begins to teach him music. Man and boy soon become friends, though Paul never learns that Philip is his father. One day, while turtle fishing, Paul falls into the shallow water; the accident triggers an explosion of Marian’s pent-up jealousy. “You want him for a toy to make music,” she shouts. “I’ve had him, he’s mine—there’s no part of you in him! You might have drowned him!” In her fury she mashes Philip’s fingers under the lid of the piano keyboard. He flees, wanders about the streets, comes at last to the beach. He throws himself onto the sand. Presently, out of the depths of his dejection,

so softly, so vaguely that it was only rippling water, a violin awoke at the back of his mind. Light as a feather, the song dipped and circled; and then it grew till it was a full chorus of the strings resounding. There came a deep-voiced answer from the horns.

Philip sprang to his feet and stood with arms outstretched. So the dawn parted to reveal the Titan, transpierced upon the rock within the empty sky!

Faintly the violins whispered together; the theme swirled through his mind, and now the somber orchestra cried out to the beat of vulture wings

All night Philip sat in his room by a little lamp, covering sheets of paper with the swift skeletons of notes

In the early afternoon he awoke and hurried to Marian. The piano—there were things

he must actually hear, not image in his mind; for hours he tried keys and harmonies, and bursts of contrapuntal storm. Finally Philip set himself to grope for the chorale.

In the end love conquers, after a fashion. But the sadder and wiser lovers have learned that love and art don't mix. Philip must compose his music alone. Marian must take care of Paul alone. The story ends with Philip in a railroad car bound for New York listening as "the train wheels beat in his ears the rhythm of the great chorale."

It is heady stuff! Of course, titanic heroism was a popular motif in the Thirties; but it is remarkable how, without belittling that ideal or forfeiting any of its power, Joy Davidman was able to set it in a situation where it can be seen both from within and from without. Nothing comes of this double perspective, but its achievement itself has merit.

The other *Echo* story, "Apostate," appeared in November, 1934, apparently right after Joy had graduated. It is set in a Jewish village in the Ukraine, *ancien régime*. The protagonist, China, the rebellious and disreputable daughter of a *goniff* (thief), suffers various persecutions at the hands of her family and neighbors. One day, to break free from all the unpleasantness, she plights her troth to a local gentile lout. Before she can marry him, however, she must become a Christian. This she is willing to do. But as the baptism is about to take place all the *landsleit* rush in and "rescue" her. The extremity of her purposed outrage has moved them at last to a sense of solidarity with her. This story seems to be the germ of Joy Davidman's first novel, *Anya*.

More importantly from a biographical point of view, it throws light on her early thoughts on Christianity and conversion. "As a Jew," she later said, "I had been taught to feel cold chills at the mention" of the name of Christ. To her ancestors of the Czarist pale, after all, that name had been the badge of a surrounding and menacing barbarity. Though several of her early poems are about the Crucifixion (she had once explained "that Jesus was 'a valuable literary convention'"), and though she had never been a believing Jew, she had always regarded the idea of apostasy "with traditional Jewish horror." A racial loyalty unconnected with creed was to prove one obstacle to her conversion. Another, paradoxically, may have been her awareness of her own froward nature: at times she may have doubted whether what seemed to be the claims of truth were not really only the suggestions of pride and rebelliousness.

But we are getting ahead of our story. With an M.A. in English from Columbia Joy became a New York high school English teacher. In 1936 two of her poems, and the next year four more, were published in *Poetry* magazine. Always in rhyme and in a variety of forms, these treat two themes: "Stark Lines" and "Non Omnis Moriar" are about the question of transmortal existence; they deny personal immortality and affirm, as consolation, not cultural survival (as in Horace), but mere material persistence—"I shall not wholly die/ While death begets a flower." The other four deal with the pangs and revenges of despised love. Like many other of Joy Davidman's poems, these could all bear the

Catullan title she chose for one Elizabethan-sounding lyric in *terza rima*: “Odi et Amo.”

I would have given you this flower or that, ...
This little pleading image of your friend,
This fabric knit and riveted for life,
I would have brought you, careless of the end;
A flare of laughter, and a fancy rife
With spirits to inform the silver breath;
All this for love; for this ungentle strife
I shall find present means to give you death.

More ferociously in “Amulet”:

I am a serpent that will suck your blood,
Sting your bare eyes, or pleurably drain
Sweet fiery thought and honey from your brain ...

No one who has read Joy Davidman’s poetry will be surprised to find that nearly all the love scenes in her novels are violent. Sexual passion in her characters tends to be accompanied by bites and bruises and “rough caresses” or by some form of played at humiliation. Usually, but not always, it is the woman who suffers. In part no doubt this is mere fashionable literary “primitivism,” an attempt to push the imagined life of the sense to an extreme. But there is also more than a hint of perversion about it. What keeps it all relatively wholesome, oddly enough, is its absolute voluptuousness. All is pleasure of the senses: there is no obsession of the mind or enslavement of the will. “Love is lust, and hatred is lust,” says the heroine Anya.

Joy Davidman herself was more concerned about the state of the world. In 1937 (or early 1938?), like many other public-spirited Americans, she joined the Communist Party. It was the Spanish Civil War period, the high water mark of Party membership in America. It was also the years of the Popular Front. Partly in response to the new threat of fascism, and partly because the old, relentlessly radical strategy was not working, the Party was now calling for an alliance of all “progressive forces.” Socialists were no longer to be reviled as “social fascists”; even the New Deal was to be favored with Communist support.

Years later, when she was disenchanted with Marxism, Joy Davidman could still look back with approval on her decision to join the Party. Given her impulsive temperament (she had scarcely read any Marx) and the dimness of the lights she then had, the act seemed on balance to have been a right one. “Pride and rebelliousness” had no doubt been among her motives, but so had the promptings of conscience. “Though I myself was prosperous and secure,” she said, “my friends were not. All I knew was that capitalism wasn’t working very well, war was imminent—and socialism promised to change

all that. And for the first time in my life I was willing to be my brother's keeper."

She reports a curious exchange the day she joined the Party:

I rushed around to a Party acquaintance and said I wanted to join.

"Wait a minute," said she, listening suspiciously to my bubblings. "You mean you want to join for the sake of *other* people?"

Then and there I told my first lie for the Party. Her tone warned me that I was in danger of rejection. "To hell with other people!" I declared. "I want to join the Communists for my own sake, because I know I can't have a decent future without socialism!"

My friend relaxed and smiled. My Marxist education, the process of getting rid of my "bourgeois values," had begun.

With her literary background she was soon taken on the staff of the Party's semi-official magazine, *New Masses*. Though its editorial views were always precisely those of the Comintern, it managed to publish some good work. Indeed a list of its contributors reads almost like a literary Who's Who of the Thirties. As a writer, no less than as a revolutionary, she had now clearly made the big time.

Meanwhile Joy Davidman's work was also appearing in *Poetry*, *The New Republic*, and *Scholastic*. She was chosen to spend a summer at the Edward MacDowell Colony in Peterboro, New Hampshire (then still run by the composer's widow); and in 1938 she won the Yale Series of Younger Poets award for a collection entitled *Letter to a Comrade*. That book also received the 1939 Russell Loines Award, with a prize of \$1,000. Joy Davidman now gave up teaching for a life of full-time writing and Party work.

Despite its title and red covers, only a dozen or so of the forty-five poems in *Letter to a Comrade* are in any obvious sense political. The rest are nature lyrics, dream fantasies, lover's complaints, meditations on mortality, etc. Most or all of these were probably composed before she joined the Party. About half the poems are in free verse, the rest are in a great variety of forms and meters.

The title poem—the first and longest piece in the collection—is a sort of Whitmanesque travelogue.

Leaving New York, leaving the triple rivers
netted in ships; turn again,
wanderer, turn the eyes homeward. Remember the city
settled in the eastward sky stiff with towers ...

"Go," says the poet to her Comrade,

... through the flatlands and the pallid country,

the reeds and marshes and the tar-paper bungalows
... go further,
go a day's journey to the other America,
breasted and milky earth, made of fruits and fat hills,
breeding woodchucks, hearing the bark of foxes. This is a land
divided between the buckwheat and the wheat,
white and green with the flowering, gold with rewards in autumn,
milky with breathing cattle; and the Susquehanna
feeds brown rainwater to the rooted corn.

Then turn north to the “Canadian dark,” and east, past farms “divided by the tide,” to the peninsula where “the spine of the eastern mountains trails to nothing”

This is land's end;
scream on the wind cormorant come cormorant
the sharp beak splitting the fish come seagull
come the small tern wheeling about land's end
and the crane stirring the waters with feet of blue glass.

But how shall the Comrade from New York make herself understood in “the other America”—to men whose “tongues are heavy with an elder language”? Like the apostles, she is not to worry: the force of History will speak through her—even as it speaks through nature. And so the poem ends with the fireweed, “the glory in burnt places”

Remember
with what brave necessity the fireweed
answers birdcry down the desolate beaches
speaks to the aimless wind the heart's red syllable,
blooms on our bones. Let the fireweed answer,
comrade, and so we may lie quiet in our graves.

Here, as elsewhere, Marxism and pessimism threaten to demolish each other. But in some of the more personal lyrics the latter casts the shadow of all its hideous strength. In “This Woman” the poet sees herself, Daphne-like, enwrapped in an “obdurate and fibrous mesh,”

... a living skeleton
like sharp roots pointing downward from the sun;

while “Japanese Print” displays a twilight “trailing upon the endless, blue, predestinate sky,” wherein the moon gleams

fairer than any waters,

delectable; O cool, forgetful, how little light flows over
shivering along a million wings and stars,

“Waltzing Mouse” rushes with a sort of galvanic energy down the grooves of time—

Impaled I was when I was born,
caught upon time’s nether horn,
murdered through and through with birth,
cankered with corrupted earth ...

Slick between my fingers run
sands of time from sun to sun,
grains of hunger and delight,
diapered with dark and bright;
kisses and confusions pass
dribbling through the fat hourglass

and I skip from minute to minute
each one with me buried in it,
and I see my bridges burn
gold behind me as I turn,
and I see my painful track
blotted out behind my back
till I die as I was born,
slain upon time’s other horn.

The themes of love-hate and personal mortality are combined in “Jewess to Aryan,” where the lover is disparaged as “bloodless” and a “clinging fog,” a “coward,” though the speaker declares that in her helpless flesh she still loves him—but, since the soul is also mortal,

... I will not love you
when there is nothing left of me; a gutted carcass
for wind to whistle in; the shell of humanity
outlined in ashes.

Though the political poems (some originally published in *New Masses*) are generally the worst in the collection, a few have merit. The impassioned “Prayer against Indifference convinces us of a real moral situation—

When wars and ruined men shall cease
To vex my body’s house of peace,

And bloody children lying dead
Let me lie softly in my bed
To nurse a whole and sacred skin,
Break roof and let the bomb come in,

Knock music at the templed skull
And say the world is beautiful,
But never let the dweller lock
Its house against another knock;
Never shut out the gun, the scream,
Never lie blind within a dream

Other poems dramatize the temptation to shirk politics. In “Fly in Amber” the lure is comfort and the condemnation merely programmatic, though the *a.b.b.a.*, *In Memoriam*, stanzas have a certain poignancy—

The floor is friendly brown and warm,
The ceiling sharp and clear and high;
The amiable chairs and I
Are softly hiding from a storm.

But in “The Princess in the Ivory Tower” the lure is a vision of beauty and the verdict is less secure. We are left remembering “the magic house, the ivory chamber” where “wind will blow out both the witch’s eyes” (a phrase Oscar Williams admired).

Joy Davidman spent the latter half of 1939 in Hollywood as a junior script writer for M-G-M. She wrote half a dozen scripts, which were never used, and played with the cub that would become the next M-G-M lion. Lewis was particularly struck by how the thought of her “as nursery governess to a lion-cub” sorted so well with her fierceness.

In his preface to *Letter to a Comrade*, Stephen Vincent Benét mentions a novel “recently completed.” Joy Davidman’s first novel, *Anya*, published by Macmillan in July, 1940, tells the life story of an ignorant, strong-willed Jewess of a Ukrainian village in the late nineteenth century. Anya breaks almost every rule to get what she wants, which is mainly pleasure and excitement. Morally, she is not a very admirable character. Her defiance of ritual laws may be defended, but hardly her selfishness towards almost everyone she comes in contact with, including her own children. At the same time we are not invited to judge Anya, only to enjoy the richness of her experience. Narrative momentum, suspense, and the skillful handling of a large cast of characters make the book a lively “read.” It also contains vivid descriptions of landscape—and food! And there runs all through it a rich vein of Jewish folklore. But as individuals, the characters tend to be wooden. When they appear alone

or in groups of two or three, dialogue and description frequently lapse into cliché—Anya’s high mood is inevitably signalled by her “dilated nostrils.” What the novel makes believable is the Jews of the neighboring villages of Tulchin and Shpikov; we see them as a *community* with their customs, prejudices, jealousies, alliances, quarrels—and the amazing solidarity they present to the outside world of the *goyim*. In general, the more people in a scene, the better Joy Davidman depicts it. This, for example, is from Anya’s wedding:

... midway in the noise of the soup came the huge voice of the klesmer, whose function it was to make announcements at weddings. He shoved his brass viol aside and got to his feet.

“Who gives a present of money to the bride and bridegroom?” he boomed,

The lists were handed him

“These are the names of those of the bridegroom’s family and friends who have given money,” intoned the klesmer. “Moishe the son of Froyim the son of Shloime, one rouble. Avrom the cousin of the bridegroom, two and a half roubles. Alter Duvidl from Tulchin, two roubles”

As the list went on Chaia nodded her head, satisfied with herself. So; at least she is generous, thought Faigele. And she does not look too much at the bride. Nor does she look too much at the bridegroom. A good sum she gave, to show she is a friend. How fortunate that I, the aunt, gave five roubles, and Basha three, and the husband of Rifka seven—that woman of ostentation!

The wedding guests danced late

until the musicians were weary, and their befuddled fingers, tricked by schnapps, drew a confused wailing from the music The candles were out, and the guests went off through the streets, the roused klesmer playing wildly before them. Fainter and fainter grew the bittersweet crying of fiddles, receding through Shpikov, until the last man was played homeward to his door In other places ... after seeing the bride and bridegroom, red as beetroot, into their mutual bed, the wedding guests would have danced around the bed. The Jews of Shpikov, however, were enlightened, so they had given up this practice.

A bit of revolutionary socialism is worked into the last chapters of *Anya*. But it provides little more than another opportunity for the protagonist to show her selfishness and incomprehension of the world. An episode in which revolutionists appear could be taken out of the novel without much changing it. Alfred Kazin justified this political indifference by declaring the book a “comedy ... a potpourri of venerable gossip and stale jokes.” But I think the publisher’s advertisement (bating its routine exaggeration) is more to the point: “Glowing, sensuous, alive,” says the blurb writer. It “will recall to your mind D.H. Lawrence at his best. There is poetic artistry ... with all the five senses alert

to warmth, color and feeling.” Indeed we first meet Anya at age twelve, walking along a road, “stopping now and then to press her hands against the stubble and feel it prick her”; presently she is “chewing on a cornflower stem,” then “hugging ... beets”; a dress being made for her, she “quivers” in anticipation of “the velvet on her naked flesh,” it reminds her of cat’s fur, “prickly ... against her lips,” her nails “tingle with desire to scratch it”—her “strong teeth wanted to bite the velvet.” And so on. The atmosphere is Lewis’s deep “South” in *The Pilgrim’s Regress*.

The novel shows little of the pessimism of the poems. Nor, though Anya at the end plans to emigrate to America, does it show much optimism. It is mostly merely sensual—though the best things in it are comic or (so to speak) anthropological. The dedication reads: “To my mother, who told me the story of Anya.”

Six months in Hollywood made Joy Davidman, for all journalistic purposes, an expert on the movie industry. She wrote and spoke of its peculiar injustices (it was the time of the “eight studios” and their captive distribution networks). A *New Masses* weekend at Camp Colebrook in the Berkshires (June, 1941) promised a lecture in which “Joy Davidman will tell what makes Hollywood tick.”

Meanwhile her film reviews became a regular feature of the magazine. They were sharp and perceptive, especially in technical matters. Unfortunately, they all suffered from the necessity to turn everything into grist for the propaganda mill. Her admiring and admirable review of *Citizen Kane* includes the artistically irrelevant complaint that it condemns its protagonist too much for “how he treats his women” and not enough for “how he treats the country.” *So Ends Our Night*, a film about refugees in contemporary Europe, “blandly ignores the political and social reasons for the refugees’ plight.” Two thrillers

remain merely stories of young men framed for murder by circumstance, and they do not rise above this level to become facsimiles or symbols of millions of young men framed on worse things than murder charges—the walled-in life of a small town, poverty, unemployment, and the cramped horizons of twentieth-century capitalism.

This last is fetching from pretty far! One wonders if she wrote it with a straight face. But at times she can make the reader laugh *with* the propaganda. On the Marx Brothers’ *Go West* she writes:

“Marxist Mania” ... The plot as usual doesn’t matter. It suffices to get the three into a desert not without blondes and into the most glorious train ride of screen history Not until you have seen Groucho, Chico, and Harpo madly burning up the train to fuel the engine on their ride to nowhere do you really understand capitalist economy.

Even Republican readers (if there were any) must have smiled at that.

Of course any film from the Soviet Union had to be received with acclaim. A modest one called

The New Teacher is “rather a lovely thing . . . not one of the Soviets’ major movie masterpieces,” but it “dances and leaps with the joy of life.” *Fortress on the Volga*, about Stalin’s defense of Tsaritsin (later Stalingrad) during the Civil War, provokes the arresting if somewhat specious observation that American directors use the camera at best to write “clean efficient prose,” but Soviet directors [use it] to write poetry.”

Walter Hooper—going apparently by what Arthur Greeves told him—rather understates the matter when he speaks of Joy Davidman’s “flirtation with communism.” Her involvement was deeper than that. Nor was she among the disillusioned throngs who left the Party after the Molotov-Ribentrop pact in 1939. While Russian food and war matériel were helping Hitler bomb England Joy was spreading the Party line: American workers should let the German fascists and the British imperialists cut each other to ribbons.

British films shown in America at that time made all sorts of implicit and explicit appeals for aid. “Hooey!” is the gist of Joy’s review of the patriotic *That Hamilton Woman. Proud Valley*, with Paul Robeson, starts out all right but “takes a nosedive” when its Welsh miners volunteer to go back to work in an unsafe mine to help the war effort. Of Bernard Shaw, appearing at the beginning of the Rex Harrison, Wendy Hiller *Major Barbara* to implore aid for Britain, she wrote: “Much may be forgiven a playwright of eighty-five; yet it is sad to hear a socialist and an Irishman talk of England’s governing class as ‘We’.” To which one can only reply that, while much may be forgiven a revolutionary poet of twenty-six, it is sad to hear Joy Davidman talk of the English governing class as though they were the only ones who stood to lose by a Nazi victory.

Yet through all this there was—as she says—some health in her: “I made jokes at the Party’s expense; I continued in the teeth of the Party’s contempt, to read fantasy; and I utterly failed to read the dreary books we called ‘proletarian novels’.”

She did, of course, belong to the left-wing League of American Writers. She took part in meetings and rallies and signed petitions. The Fourth American Writers’ Congress featured a debate between her and Isidor Schneider and Alfred Kreymborg on the topic “The Poet and the People.” At the same congress a thirty-three-year-old veteran of the Spanish Civil War, William Lindsay Gresham, sat as chairman of the Young Writers’ Session and sang ballads along with Leadbelly, Burl Ives and Marc Blitzstein. That was in 1941. The next year he and Joy Davidman were married.

Part II

She may walk among Lions and rattlesnakes: among dinosaurs and nurseries of Lionets. He fills her brim full with immensity of life: he leads her to see the world’s desire.

—*The Great Divorce* (paraphrase of Psalm 91:13,16)

William Gresham once described his family as “flotsam of the Old South.” He was born in Baltimore (August 20, 1909), moved as a child to Fall River, Mass., then to Brooklyn. His parents separated while he was in his teens. After graduating from Erasmus Hall H.S. he worked as a file clerk in an insurance agency, seller of kitchen equipment, newspaper office boy, dishwasher, and writer of advertising copy. He took courses at Brooklyn College and Upsala College. For a while he was in the Civilian Conservation Corps. Here in Greenwich Village he played the guitar and sang folk songs in cafés. In time he became a competent writer of pulp fiction. Photos of him show a rugged face with a pencil-line mustache, looking, as Joy described him, like a cross between Abraham Lincoln and Charles II.

When he went to Spain his deepest motives, he declared, were more romantic than political. All his life he had been obsessed by the ideal figure of Robert E. Lee; now in fancy he identified the invaded Spanish republic with the Confederacy. For fifteen months in Spain he never fired a shot. In January, 1939, he returned, slightly tubercular and seriously mentally ill. His mind was “filled with nightmare.” He attempted suicide, hanging himself with a belt from a hook in a closet; the hook came out of the wall. He was psychoanalyzed “intermittently ... over a period of six years.” A first marriage ended in divorce. He was working as editor of a “true detective” magazine when he married Joy Davidman.

At first they lived in a four-story tenement, 242 E. 22nd St., next to the R.C. Church of the Epiphany (house and church were gutted by fire in December, 1963). Later they took a larger flat in Sunnyside, Queens. Joy continued to write regularly for the *New Masses*—which had, of course, suddenly become interventionist when Hitler invaded Russia and now, after Pearl Harbor, was even patriotic. But there was still agitation to be done. In 1942—together with Maxwell Bodenheim, Langston Hughes and others—she contributed poems to a Popular Front volume entitled *Seven Poets in Search of an Answer*. The fiery preface by Shaemus O’Sheel begins, “This is not pretty poetry”

Other wartime projects followed. In 1943, under the sponsorship of the League of American Writers, she prepared for the Dial Press an anthology of *War Poems of the United Nations*. The red-covered volume contains 300 poems by 150 poets (not all Communists) from twenty countries. Besides editing the collection and providing it with a preface, Joy Davidman did most of the translation (in verse), the French and German directly, the Czech, Danish, Russian, etc. with the help of literal versions. She also contributed three poems of her own; and her husband contributed one.

In 1944 she edited and wrote a preface to *They Look Like Men*, a posthumous collection by the young Communist poet Alexander F. Bergman, published (also between red covers) by Bernard Ackerman. For the last five years of his life Bergman lay in Montefiore hospital, slowly being

consumed by tuberculosis and working (we are assured) assiduously for the Party, writing propaganda, helping the hospital staff to form a union, and mimeographing a clandestine radical paper. His poems—nearly all of them political—lack rhythmic vitality and are “sentimental” in the sense that they seek to evoke feeling by suppressing knowledge. Among his celebrations of strugglers in “the long red dawn of human history” one piece of hagiography on Earl Browder reads almost like a parody! Before Bergman’s death Joy had interviewed him at his hospital bedside. The resulting *New Masses* article, glorifying him and dismissing the politically disloyal poets Millay and MacLeish as “cheap entertainers,” is one of the more depressing examples of her Party hack work. Such things were expected of her.

The Greshams’ first son, David, was born in 1944; their second, Douglas, in 1945. In the latter year they moved to Ossining, N.Y., where they lived, at 173 N. Highland Ave., for three years. In 1946 Bill Gresham published his first novel, *Nightmare Alley*, the “savage, violent, neurotic” (Gresham’s words) story of a carnival huckster. It had a great success and was made into a film with Tyrone Power.

All through her Communist years Joy Davidman not only read fantasy but continued to put it into her poetry: one lyric of utter social irrelevance, based on a dream she had had since childhood, she even included in the *War Poems of the United Nations*. It is called “Fairytale” and it expresses a *Sehnsucht* so unearthly in its object and so diffident in its hopes of attaining it that it is hard to imagine anyone associating it with the struggle for a better world. Nor could anything sound less like a war poem.

At night, when we dreamed,
we went down a street
and turned a corner,
and there, it seemed,
there was the castle.

Always, if you knew,
if you knew how to go,
you could walk down a street
(the daylight street)
that twisted about
and ended in grass;
there it was
always, the castle.

Remote, unshadowed,

childish, immortal,
with two calm giants
guarding the portal,
stiff in the sunset,
strong to defend,
stood castle safety
at the world's end.

O castle safety,
love without crying,
honey without cloying,
death without dying!
Hate and heartbreak
all were forgot there;
we always woke,
we never got there.

It was the dreamer in Joy Davidman that was first drawn to the works of C.S. Lewis. At about the time she moved to Ossining her interest in fantasy led her to *The Great Divorce* and *The Screwtape Letters*. “These books,” she later wrote,

stirred an unused part of my brain to momentary sluggish life Francis Thompson symbolized God as the “Hound of Heaven,” pursuing on relentless feet. With me God was more like a cat. He had been stalking me for a very long time, waiting for his moment....

Meanwhile Bill Gresham had become an alcoholic. In the spring of 1946, after contracting a bone infection of the jaw, he had another mental breakdown. One evening he phoned his wife from his office in New York to say that his mind was going. He could neither stay where he was nor go home. He hung up.

She tried frantically to reach him again, but in vain. She could do nothing. Sometime in the next few hours she had the experience she describes as “a direct perception of God.” It lasted “perhaps half a minute”

Many things happened. I forgave some of my enemies. I understood that God had always been there, and that, since childhood, I had been pouring half my energy into keeping him out. I saw myself as I really was, with dismay and repentance.

As with C.S. Lewis, the initial conversion was to theism only [Note: Lewis's conversion account in *Surprised by Joy* would have been written shortly after he had read Joy Davidman's. He also likened himself to a mouse being pursued by a cat.] Joy Davidman wanted at first “to become a good

Jew”—a Reformed Jew, for she could not see the Orthodox, or even Conservative ritual as anything but superstition. Moreover, she had “the usual delusion that ‘all religions mean the same thing’.” And of course between her and Christianity there stood the stumbling-block of a complex, ingrained attitude toward something she had always been taught to regard as alien and implicitly hostile. It was only after two years of studying religions that she became a Christian.

Oddly, her first religious experience also led to her first serious study of Marxism. Formerly Party activity had been a matter of inclination; now she saw it as a matter of duty. This, she believed, was what God wanted her to do. For though she could henceforth never doubt that Marx was wrong about religion, she still thought him right about economics.

She read the classics of Marxism, and the more she read the more she became disaffected. Soon she had no use for it as economics or metaphysics. Her husband, who in his struggle with drink was also to turn (temporarily) to Christianity, now joined her in gathering around them a circle of “people who were trying to organize a revolutionary Christian socialism.” And yet at the same time both were losing faith in any kind of socialism. And Lewis’s books, which they were both reading, warned against the absurdity of trying to use God as a means. They risked slipping into that state (common, left, right and center, in America) where one values one’s religious belief chiefly for the support it seems to give to one’s politics.

The Greshams’ retreat from ideology was itself typical of the times. Postwar fears and the horror of the recent past were bringing to birth “the cautious Fifties.” Joy’s former *New Masses* editor, Granville Hicks, quietly writing book reviews in Grafton, N.Y., is a characteristic figure. In 1947 the Greshams moved to a farm at Staatsburg, just north of Hyde Park. Four years later Bill Gresham would write:

What matters in life is the relation of the individual soul to God. The species is not my responsibility. The behavior of Bill Gresham is my responsibility I decided to leave the species in God’s hands.

But Gresham’s own life was proving more than he could handle. The sales and filming of *Nightmare Alley* had established his reputation and he was turning out stories regularly for magazines like *The Saturday Evening Post* and *Esquire*, but his alcoholism and “neurotic problems” persisted. Through it, though, there was one form of surroundings that soothed him. All his life he had been interested in the occult—in spiritism, the Tarot, mind reading, He was a friend of the illusionist and exposé of illusionist frauds, Dunninger. One of his later books is a life of Houdini. Many of his stories are set in the world of mountebanks and magicians. “I find myself most at home on a carnival midway,” Bill Gresham said, “especially if I have friends there. I am much more comfortable in a hotel room than in a palace (if anybody ever invited me to a palace, which they never have).”

He tried Yoga, which he said helped and gave him spiritual insights. But his alcoholism hung on and grew worse. Then in the spring of 1948 Gresham turned to God, accepting the Christian revelation and “the help of other people whose alcoholism was arrested” through prayer. He became a Christian and a teetotaler. As his wife and two sons were baptized, he was also received into the Presbyterian church of Pleasant Plains (a wooden Doric temple built in 1837). They chose it chiefly for its proximity to their home. For Screwtape, they remembered, had advised his junior devil trainee that if his “patient,” must attend a church, he should see to it that he looks carefully for “the church that ‘suits’ him.” Make him “a connoisseur of churches.”

Joy Davidman’s second novel, *Weeping Bay*, published by Macmillan in January, 1950, aims to expose the misery and injustice prevailing among the picturesque fishing villages of Quebec’s Gaspé peninsula. A young priest, the Abbé Desrosiers, attempts to organize the workers of a small stove factory into a local of the *Syndicat des Ouvriers Catholiques*. He is idealistic but weak; yet with the help of a courageous factory worker named Hervé Kirouac, his project begins to take shape. But the Bourbonian rulers of Weeping Bay will not tolerate this innovation. By a combination of treachery and intimidation, the factory owner, the Curate and the chief of police (the Curate’s brother) break up the union and ease the disruptive abbé out of town.

The novel is not a great success. As in *Anya*, speech and personal portraiture are weak. Perhaps it was because she knew her limitations in this regard that Joy Davidman chose for both her novels settings where the language spoken is not English, and so the lack of idiomatic vigor can be put down to “translation,” and casts of characters so large that the reader’s disappointment with them as individuals is partly compensated by the delight produced by their orchestration as a mass. But *Weeping Bay* is principally a novel with a message. It is expressed in the epigraph, which quotes Christ’s words to Peter (John 21:17) concluding with the admonition: “Feed my sheep.” And it is borne home by relentlessly exposing the sufferings of the hungry flock. But it proposes no credible solution. And since the cause of the hunger appears to be nothing but the sheer wickedness of the bad, and the fecklessness of the good shepherds, our interest in the long bill of accusation tends to flag and the novel collapses into mere “preaching against sin.” As a reviewer remarked, we were never *for* what the novel is trying to turn us against. It presents a great variety of incidents, but nearly all are pressed into strict service of the message. The villains (unlike most real-life villains) have no plausibility of good about them; so that we have an irresistible force of polemic beating against an immovable object which is simply deaf. In *Anya* moral irresponsibility had left room for liveliness; in *Weeping Bay* the moral seriousness is deadening. Paradoxically, the novel Joy Davidman wrote as a Communist is full of the bliss of taking no thought for the morrow, while the one she wrote as a Christian comes close to resembling “those dreary books we called ‘proletarian novels’.”

At the end of *Weeping Bay* a Protestant lay preacher—“a not altogether credible character,” as

Granville Hicks observed—shows up to suggest to Hervé Kirouac that the powers that be who smashed his union and fired him from his job might somehow be defeated with the help of a purified Christianity. But it is all very unconvincing. Nothing is said about socialism, but the controlling pressure seems to come from ideas Joy Davidman entertained—but never satisfactorily combined—during her Christian-socialist period.

Fortunately this bleak pressure lets up now and then. There are moments when a character shows a little independent life or an injustice is depicted with some subtlety. In one memorable chapter a carnival comes to town and, with scant relevance to the novel's message, gives us a hint of what it was about that degrading, consoling, dreamlike world that the author's husband loved. And though conflicts between persons and classes tend to be flattened into melodrama, conflicts *within* persons sometimes rise into momentary relief. For example, near the end of the book the abbé meets a spiritual crisis. As he is reciting Hail Marys before a statue of the Blessed Virgin, he suddenly sees, in some sort of vision, the face of our Lord—

“Child,” said the Carpenter, “why not pray to Me?”

Desrosiers bent his head silently. “I am afraid of You, Lord You have said what you would have us do. I cannot do it. I am afraid.

The voice spoke again

“No man can serve two masters Choose, therefore.”

“Have I not chosen? Once for all, and long ago?”

“No. Choose now.”

The abbé will not, and therefore he cannot. The crisis occurs on the road as Desrosiers is walking away from Weeping Bay. It is the situation of St. Peter at the *Quo Vadis?*, but Desrosiers does not turn back. We have seen a human will in the article of decision. It is here, rather than in the lay preacher's exhortations, that the evangelical thrust of *Weeping Bay* strikes home.

But the novel's prevailing tone is one of exalted grimness—a mood reminiscent of much of Joy Davidman's poetry. Some of the best passages are descriptions of landscape that mirrors that mood. For example:

Rain on the leaden St. Lawrence Rain on the cliffs, washing loose the precarious roots of the bluebells. A fish crow has settled in a tiny niche in the rocks; rivulets gathered and ran between his talons, in consternation he cocked his head on one side and watched his footing sucked out from under him and spilling toward the river far below. At last he himself began to slip and catapulted into midair, flapping his wet wings and cawing with indignation. Farther along, a young white birch had rooted itself miraculously, as it seemed,

in the very face of the cliff, and jutted ten feet outward over the water. Lightning struck it; the little tree shivered, sighed once inaudibly in the roar of the storm, and fell wheeling in a graceful arc to the St. Lawrence, leaving behind only a jagged stump broken short from which in future summers new shoots would sprout to try again. The birds of the air sought their nests, the foxes their holes, and in the town of Weeping Bay the sons of men sought where to lay their heads.

In 1951 autobiographical essays by Joy Davidman and William Gresham appeared in David Wesley Soper's *These Found the Way: Thirteen Converts to Protestant Christianity*. As the title suggests, this was no ecumenical document. One contributor, a priest, tells of having found the way from the Roman to the Anglican communion and describes the former as "thoroughly incompatible with democracy." Other contributors hint at having formed the same opinion. Since Vatican II this charge has lost most of its resonance; and the book is, I think, unlikely to be reprinted—unfortunately, since there are many good things in it. The Greshams and their friend Chad Walsh all wrote moving testimonies for this collection. Best of all, I would say, is the piece by Hyatt Howe Waggoner.

These Found the Way came out at the height of a much publicized—and politicized—"return to Christianity." The Greshams' conversions were written up in *Newsweek* (Feb. 20, 1950) and *Time* (April 9, 1951). And yet neither Bill nor Joy came within miles of the demonizing of Marxism common among many former-leftist converts. Far from being Satan's secret service, the post-war American Communists, Joy wrote, "were chiefly embittered failures ... a circle of amateur Russian agents ... so clumsy that they antagonize American workers every time they open their mouths." Yet she still considered laissez-faire capitalism to be "a novelty of the last two centuries and a profoundly revolutionary one, somewhat in the spirit of that revolution by which hell hopes to conquer heaven."

One would guess from their *These Found the Way* essays that the Greshams were happily married in 1951, but that can hardly have been the case. By the next year they apparently thought a temporary separation advisable; and in the summer of 1952, leaving the children with her husband and her (female) cousin, Joy Davidman sailed for England. She had been corresponding with C.S. Lewis since 1950. In September, 1952, she visited him for the first time at the Kilns.

She certainly sought his friendship. Whether at this point *philia* was already spawning *eros* in her heart (as Warren Lewis believed), I think it impossible to know. Lewis says he fell in love with Joy after the onset of her illness in the fall of 1956. [Note: See *Letters*, p. 277 (to Dom Bede Griffiths OSB, 24 Aug. 1957.)] About all we can say for sure is that she fell in love with him sometime before that.

In any case, whatever her initial feelings for him, it seems clear that his for her were mainly of

liking and respect. We know how patient and diligent Lewis was in answering the masses of letters he got from strangers seeking comfort and advice. We may therefore imagine with what pleasure, amid the tedium of that correspondence, he now and then read a letter of real wit and imagination. Such no doubt were Joy Davidman's letters, and the envelopes containing them must soon have become a welcome sight among the postman's pile. The liking and respect evidently continued after Lewis met her—though there is evidence that he also sometimes thought her a bit of a pest. We may put down some of Lewis's irritation to his well known misogynic bent, but I think it is also clear that Joy Davidman's attentions (whatever her intentions) were more forthright and persistent than any man of Lewis's habits and background could be expected to receive with equanimity.

Within a few months Joy learned that her husband was living in adultery with her cousin. In January, 1953, she came back to New York, packed up the children and (allowing her husband to divorce her for desertion) sailed with them back to England. She settled in London, at 14 Belsize Park, Hampstead, and enrolled the boys in a prep' school at Pyrford, Surrey.

In the course of her frequent visits to Oxford it soon became apparent that Lewis was much taken with her. Some who knew him were reminded of his partiality for Charles Williams. Many were repelled by her outlandish brashness. It must be remembered that England and America—not to say Oxford and New York—were more different from each other thirty years ago than they are today. Even a demure lady of Joy Davidman's background would have made an uncomfortable fit among Lewis's friends; and Joy Davidman was no shrinking violet. Warren Lewis recalls with mirth how she once startled a group of dons by asking “in the most natural tone in the world, ‘Is there anywhere in this monastic establishment where a lady can relieve herself?’” Such frankness could have been taken in either of two ways: as threatening or as refreshing. Apparently most of those who took it the first way did not do so for long. Of Lewis's friends only Tolkien, I believe, never came to regard Joy Davidman with affection. Warren Lewis, who was certainly not predisposed that way, came to love her deeply.

While still living in London, Joy Davidman helped Lewis review the proofs of his O.H.E.L. volume. His fifth children's book, *The Horse and His Boy*, appeared in 1954 dedicated to her two sons. The next year—living now in Oxford (10 Old High Street, Headington), about a mile from the Kilns—she helped him prepare the manuscript of *Surprised by Joy*, which was published in September, 1955. The new aptness of its title must have struck them both. That year Lewis dedicated to Joy the last of his novels, *Till We Have Faces*, a book remarkably different from the rest of his fiction, and which is said by some to reflect her influence. [Note: The fact that the entire story is told from a woman's point of view certainly suggests this. Those, however, who go so far as to maintain that Orual “is a portrait of Joy Davidman” must mean that in a very qualified and inward sense. In

outward circumstances and appearance they could hardly be more different: Orual was the daughter of a barbarian king, Joy of a metropolitan schoolteacher; Orual was “extremely ugly,” Joy, to judge from photos—before cancer treatments prematurely aged her—was notably good-looking.]

Before she moved to Oxford Joy had been writing a series of homiletic essays on the Ten Commandments. These were published in 1954 as *Smoke on the Mountain*. Though the subject, as Lewis notes in his preface, seems especially appropriate for treatment by a Jewish Christian, there is nothing particularly Jewish about Joy Davidman’s insights into the Law. This is not really surprising, for she had never really known the Jewish religion (as distinct from the mere culture) from the inside. What is Jewish about the book is its fiery eagerness to teach and correct, “that fierceness,” as Lewis said, “whose finer spirit ... is presumably what our fathers called *zeal*.” There is something of the ardor of the prophets in it—a Jewish inheritance (if it is that) which seems to descend to believers and non-believers alike.

For the style of *Smoke on the Mountain* Joy went back to the smart, snappy prose of her *New Masses* articles. If it can boast no Jewish theology, the book at least has some Jewish jokes. At the same time it is written with great care and precision. Joy Davidman said: “I became a Communist because, later on, I was going to become a Christian.” If this is true, here is what Providence sent her to the *New Masses* to learn to write.

The book consists of a chapter on each Commandment and a concluding chapter on the Love which alone fulfils the Law. In applying the first four Commandments to modern conditions, Joy reveals some unexpected relevancies: how the sins of image worship and the taking of God’s name in vain are in essence still ones into which we are liable to fall, and all the more treacherous for the disguises they now hide under; and how the principle of the Fourth Commandment—that we must regularly interrupt our economic life lest we forget that we are spiritual as well as economic beings—is always valid. The other Commandments she takes straightforwardly but with a richness and subtlety of interpretation, at times exhibiting an almost Johnsonian deftness at stripping motives of their masks. Her chapter on the Seventh Commandment is, I think, especially accurate and acute.

The gift for epigram, which she had always possessed, here furnishes happy expression to some shrewd observations:

No one who had once learned to identify happiness with wealth ever felt that he had wealth enough.

The people who tell you, “It wasn’t like that in *my* younger days!” are usually merely finding out rather late in life what it has always been like.

Our world has no more typical false witness than the false expert.

In practice ... male dominance is always tempered by the undoubted fact that the average man is more or less afraid of his wife.

We hear of ... the religious duty of “keeping God alive as a social force”—as if our Lord could not survive a Soviet victory.

Christ never offered us security. He left that to the politicians—Caiaphas probably offered lots of it.

Lewis said that *Smoke on the Mountain* “supplies a corrective” which he especially needed.” Joy Davidman was never a *laudatrix temporis acti*. She reminds the indiscriminately “nostalgic” that “much was accomplished by the belief in progress and much more by the striving for it.” For example, “mothers no longer have to bear ten children in the hope of raising two.” Here one perhaps gets an idea of what Lewis was referring to when he said (in *A Grief Observed*) that his wife was quick to scent “the first whiff of cant or slush”

But “the flaw in us” which Joy Davidman seemed to C.S. Lewis “to expose with most certainty” was “the sin of fear.” One need not agree with everything she says on this topic to acknowledge that she had struck her finger on a spot where the modern world was ailing indeed. “We live,” she writes in the Introduction,

in an age of fear, we have infected our very faith with our paralysis, as certain previous ages infected it with their cruelty

When Sinai flamed and thundered, the children of Israel were ... lusty and lustful men; they heartily enjoyed their hewings and smittings and woman stealings; and if they got killed on their forays—well, if you sat in the tent and worried about *that* you were as good as dead already. A safe life was unthinkable to them Even the love of God which was entering their hearts was no gentle thing, but the fierce love of a strong man for a stronger master....

When civilization caught up with the fierce Israelites, it happened that they got the worst of it; for their settled life, crushed between greater nations, was less fortunate than their savage life had been. A conquering and rejoicing people declined into a conquered and wailing one. The sins of the animal—blind enjoyment of the present moment—were replaced by the sins of the devil: bitterness and pride, with a rejection of the present and a desperate attempt to play God by getting control of the future, in short, the sin of fear.

She then quotes Ecclesiastes 12:1 and 5, and remarks:

“Fears shall be in the way, and desire shall fail.” To the spiritually old, however young and strong their bodies, death seems lurking around every corner, and fear sits by their bedside and grins at them. Any minute now, the atom bomb will drop or the bacterial warfare begin, and we shall go to our long home; and since most of us are at least half materialists, we suspect that it will be a very long and dark home indeed....

Fear is so much our disease that we have forgotten it is a disease; we take it for granted as the normal basis of all human actions. The American UN delegate, with no sense of anything shameful in the confession, declares that fear is the root of Western foreign policy. The Army assumes that vast numbers of its casualties will be fear cases Our advertising men base half their art of money-making upon fear. Our psychiatrists found an entire theory of our misbehavior on it

The rest of Joy Davidman’s life will be familiar to many in this society. How, early in 1955, the Home Office refused to renew her permission to reside in Britain (possibly because of her Communist history); how Lewis was secretly married to her at the Oxford Registry Office on April 23, 1956, regarding the union as no real marriage but a mere formality to allow Joy and her children to remain in England; how, six months later, as she was answering the telephone, her left leg “snapped like a twig,” and it was discovered that what she had thought was rheumatism was cancer and that she was likely to be dead of it in a few weeks; how, in December, 1956, Lewis’s marriage was announced in the *Times* and three months later, on March 21, 1957, a Christian marriage was performed at her bedside by Lewis’s friend, the Rev. Peter Bide of the Diocese of London; how Fr. Bide prayed for Joy’s healing, laying on his hands, while the doctors and nurses present gave her, at most, a few more months to live; and how the remission of her cancer that summer was so extensive that a doctor, in hyperbole, called it “miraculous” and Lewis allowed the possibility, and his brother was certain, that it had been so in actual fact—all this, I take it, is well known.

In September, 1957, Joy Davidman could move about in a wheelchair; by December she was walking with a stick; six months later she was well enough to take a fortnight’s holiday in Ireland with her new husband (it was the first time either had been in an airplane). By the next summer (1959), when they spent another fortnight in Ireland, she could “walk a mile without tiring.” About this time we hear of her spending holidays with her children at Solva, in Pembrokeshire. It almost seemed that she was cured for good.

Then that winter the worst symptoms returned. On March 12, 1960, X-rays revealed the return of cancer “in almost every part of her skeleton.” The Lewises nevertheless made the flying visit to Greece that Joy had been longing for. A journal of the trip was kept by their travelling companion Roger Lancelyn Green and is published in his and Walter Hooper’s biography of Lewis. Three months

later, on July 13, Joy died at the Radcliffe infirmary in Oxford. She was forty-five years old.

Her two sons (along with her Siamese cat) remained in Oxford with their stepfather, who we know was to survive her by a little more than three years. Both of her parents also survived her. Joseph Davidman, still living in the Bronx, a few blocks from where Joy had grown up, died on Sept. 24, 1963; his widow, Jeanette, on May 20, 1965. Bill Gresham, now living in New Rochelle with his third (or fourth?) wife, Renée, developed cataracts and lost the sight of one eye. On Sept. 15, 1962, having been told that he had cancer, the man who was always “much more comfortable in a hotel room than in a palace” checked into the Hotel Dixie, off Times Square, under an assumed name and killed himself with an overdose of sleeping pills.

In a letter to Arthur Greeves (Aug. 3, 1960) Lewis thus describes his wife’s departure:

Joy got away easier than most who die of cancer. There were a couple of hours of atrocious pain on her last morning, but the rest of the day mostly asleep, tho’ rational whenever she was conscious. Two of her last remarks were “you made me happy” and “I am at peace with God.” She died at 10 that evening. I’d seen violent death but never natural death before. There’s really nothing to it, is there? One thing I’m very glad about is that in the Easter Vac she realised her life long dream of seeing Greece. We had a wonderful time there. And many happy moments even after that. That night before she died we had a long, quiet, nourishing, and tranquil talk.

As a poet Joy Davidman seems to have had a natural gift, which she improved by labor and learning. Had she exercised it longer her work might have broken free from the bonds of fashion and politics which are its most characteristic limitation. As a novelist she combined strengths in construction and scene-painting with a weakness in character depiction that often betrayed her into melodrama and cliché. Her expository writing is always vivid and imaginative, and towards the end expresses ripe judgments with great power. There is in all her work a tendency to sacrifice precision to what would seem to be an ideal of spontaneity, as if she sometimes thought it better to use the first words that came than to search for the most accurate or persuasive ones. But Joy Davidman was clearly a writer of considerable talent, and might have gained far more by it than she did had death not struck her down so early.

At the end of her life, Warren Lewis tells us, she was working on a biography of Madame de Maintenon. Had she lived to complete it in a few years, she would have had her debut as a writer of history at an earlier age than Major Lewis had his. Her literary achievement had been precocious, but her literary career for a long time never really found its way. Politics and (I suspect) her first marriage hindered her development as a writer, In sticking it out with both as long as she did she was perhaps (as Lewis said of Sir Walter Scott) obeying her conscience rather than her “artistic conscience.”

Nevertheless, her art suffered. Lewis confirms the impression one has of a personality finally coming into its own in middle age. "Happiness had not come to her early in life," he writes in *A Grief Observed*. "A noble hunger, long unsatisfied, met at last its proper food, and almost instantly the food was snatched away."

As to her character, one gets the impression of a strong will and affections, a productive energy not easily diminished by unhappiness, a keen appetite for knowledge (including self-knowledge), an eye for folly and a sense of the ridiculous. The courage so celebrated in her writings appears to have been really hers, as witness the many accounts of the pluck and cheerfulness with which she bore her long terminal illness.