

A CLAUDEL COKKESPONDENCE

AMONG the promising young writers and critics who, in the early years of the century, rallied round Paul Claudel as the exponent of a new approach to life and to letters, none was more enthusiastic than Jacques Rivière, a youth of nineteen, just completing his year of military service. A complete stranger to Claudel, then acting as French consul at Tien-Tsin, Rivière felt urged, in his intellectual and religious distress, to make a full confession of his mental anguish, and appeal to the distant author to come to his aid. The result was a series of letters, published later in book form,¹ in which, with infinite patience and understanding, the dramatist led his youthful *confrère* through a pilgrimage of several years' duration to a final acceptance of Catholic doctrine. No one can fully appreciate the depth and intensity of Claudel's own spiritual life without reading these letters, so dogmatic in substance and so persuasive in form.

Just how this correspondence arose is, curiously enough, made clear to us from another correspondence, that between Jacques Rivière and his intimate friend, Henri Alain-Fournier, covering the years 1905-14, and published in four volumes, after the death of both letter-writers, by Isabelle Rivière, widow of the one and sister to the other. It must surely be very rare that the letters of two young men, starting when they were little more than school-boys, should retain a real literary value after the death of both writers, neither of whom, from tragic circumstance, attained to the full promise of his early years. Alain-Fournier, gentle, poetic, of rural and provincial upbringing, is remembered by us for a single successful romance, *Le Grand Meaulnes*, rich in almost fantastic imagination. He was reported 'missing' in the first months of the war and nothing was ever ascertained as to the manner of his death. Rivière, more gifted, more brilliant and impetuous, the

¹ *Correspondance 1907-14* (Plon; Paris.)

son of a successful doctor at Bordeaux, had already made a name for himself as a keen and sensitive critic both of music and of letters, when the outbreak of war flung him into a German prison-camp, from which ill-health procured his transference to Switzerland and ultimately back to France. 'There followed years of strenuous literary and journalistic life in Paris, mainly as editor of the *Nouvelle Revue Française*, with the financial anxiety of a wife and children to support. One gathers that his rather fragile health never recovered from the strain and hardship of his long captivity, and his premature death in 1925 was due to an attack of typhoid fever which his enfeebled frame was unable to withstand.

The Fournier-Rivière correspondence starts when both young men are at the Lycée Lakanal, and Alain-Fournier takes a commercial job in London for the long vacation. Later Rivikre is granted a *bourse* at the Bordeaux University and so the friends are separated. The letters from the English standpoint are amazingly serious and intellectual for boys of eighteen, and are mainly concerned with artistic and literary criticism. Even after a quarter of a century they are full of charm and vitality, quite free from foolish sentiment and shewing which writers and artists—Barrès, Jammes, Huysmans, André Gide, the whole Belgian school, Rodin, and among English authors Kipling and Hardy—held sway over the youth of that day. Sport, needless to say, is never once mentioned; the ever-present anxiety of the writers revolves round their approaching exams, the overwhelming need for making a career and the longing to escape from the drudgery of their State-imposed studies. There is no hint of religion in the early letters. Both young men, though belonging to Catholic families, appear entirely destitute, not only of Christian faith, but of any pre-occupation with religious problems.

It is early in 1906 that Claudel's name first appears—to Fournier he is 'superbly incomprehensible' and to Rivière he conveys 'an incomparable impression of strangeness and grandeur.' It is clear that from the first contact

Rivière's imagination is 'terribly stirred'; for him 'C Claudel has come,' and as he reads and re-reads *Tête d'Or* and *La Ville* he realizes that something fundamental has altered in his life. For at least a year Rivière had lived under the enchantment of Barres, of the *Culte du Moi*, of the glamour of pagan ideals, an intoxication on which the more sober-minded Fournier, an ardent disciple of Jammes, had gently dribbled cold water. It was the spiritual void left by his awakening from the Barrès influence that was to be filled by Claudel. Yet it is a shock for him to discover, 'as I feared,' that Claudel is a Catholic. A few months later, while doing his year of military service, Rivière makes the acquaintance of F., an intimate friend of Claudel, who gives him many personal details concerning the poet. 'He is a missionary,' and all his writing is an effort towards conversion. Rivière is at once attracted and terrified by the Christianity of Claudel. But he is suffering under an acute crisis of spiritual depression and intellectual lassitude, augmented no doubt by the hardship of barrack life for a man of his super-sensitiveness. Suddenly he can bear the suspense no longer, and as he relates to Fournier, he dashes off a letter to Tien-Tsin, describing his anguish of soul and imploring the poet to come to his aid. Three months later, when the tremulously-awaited answer arrives, it is too sacred and personal to be shared with his friend.

In spite of a real note of spiritual distress one suspects in these first letters to Claudel a semi-conscious literary effort, a desire at once to shock and impress the great author, a secret pride in the uniqueness of his intellectual difficulties and even a certain childishness in his petulant lamentations. And it is the contrast to all this that appeals to one so forcibly in Claudel's reply, so grave and kind, brushing aside all the specious pleas and complaisant confessions and concentrating on the one thing needful: prayer, the Sacraments, reconciliation with God. Youth, he reminds Rivière, is not a time for pleasure but for heroism, faith will confer courage and a new understanding of life. He closes his letter with the hope that Rivière

will be united with him in Holy Communion at the coming Whitsuntide. In the end it was six long years (Christmas, 1913) before Jacques Rivière knelt at the altar-rails, yet all through that period Claudel's patience never ran out, and his stores of knowledge and spiritual experience were freely expended, for he had felt from the first, 'almost with terror,' that he was the instrument chosen by God to restore this wandering sheep to the fold.

One by one in his replies Claudel meets all the stock arguments of the intellectual unbeliever—it is only fair to Rivière to record that he had no grave moral difficulties—as well as problems of a more philosophic nature. His advice is as practical as that of any priest. 'The reading he recommends is interesting: the Bible—of which Kivièrè confesses complete ignorance—Pascal, St. Teresa and other mystical writers, lives of the Saints 'badly as they are written,' Dante and 'as much Newman as you can find.' Later he sends a beautiful translation of the well-known passage on the Mass from 'Loss and Gain.'

In one of his early letters Claudel writes: 'I realize that you are suffering, but such suffering is only honourable on condition that you emerge as victor. . . . Either you will become a Christian or, as with many others, the pleasures and occupations of life will soon cure you of all metaphysical disquiet. Many people write to me, but very few have the courage to prefer their salvation to their pride.' These words struck home and six months after his first appeal Rivière is asserting that it is *inimaginable* that he should ever be a Christian, and that the true stumbling block lies in his own pride in which he finds infinite satisfaction; and with exaggerated expressions of anguish he assumes that the correspondence must now come to an end. Once more Claudel replies fully but with a tinge of sternness, imploring his young friend not to give way to his 'terrible bourgeois satisfaction' with himself and to continue writing indeed, but to cease from displaying all his little weaknesses with so much complaisance. Later he apologises for his outburst, admits regretfully that his hopes of immediate good results are not likely to be ful-

filled, and the correspondence takes on a less personal and more philosophic and literary character, although Claudel continues to insinuate as much Christian doctrine as he feels his correspondent is likely to assimilate.

In the autumn of 1909, shortly after Rivière's marriage, Claudel returned from the East, and in the intervals between consular posts at Prague and at Hamburg the two men met and came to understand each other better. By this time Rivière was a professor at the Collège Stanislas and was successfully launched on his literary career. In return for the confidence shewn him he was able to write a long critical study of his friend's work, which Claudel himself regarded as one of the most understanding that had then appeared concerning him (republished in the volume *Etudes*). The following quotation seems to convey Rivière's own feeling towards Claudel more truly than can be gathered from the correspondence: 'Claudel is redoutable and cruel; he flings himself upon one with the same impetuosity as upon his God . . . it is not merely our inclination that he hopes to capture; he demands our soul in order that he may offer it to God; he compels our most intimate consent, he snatches us, in spite of ourselves, from the slough of doubt and dilettantism.'

When Rivière had joined the staff of the *Nouvelle Revue Française* Claudel wrote strongly to protest against its Art for Art doctrine. Do you imagine, he asks indignantly, that Shakespeare, or Dostoievski, or Rubens, or Titian, or Wagner worked in order to produce Art? It is a misfortune that Rivière's own letters for this later period have been lost, and it is only from Claudel's replies that we learn of his progress in matters of faith. An article on *La Foi* that he wrote at this time, though not beyond criticism, won Claudel's cordial congratulations. In the spring of 1913, evidently by request, Claudel sent him the address of the Abbé Fontaine at Clichy, the well-known priest who attended Huysmans on his death-bed. Difficulties over confession delayed the final act some months longer, but Claudel was now sure of the happy consummation, and early in January he was able to write of the

‘profound joy’ with which he had heard the news that his friend had made his Communion at Christmas, in spite, apparently, of some remaining scruples.

‘If you persevere courageously,’ wrote Claudel, ‘and if you are completely loyal, you will one day feel the divine seed within you quiver and expand.’

No one could have foreseen the circumstances under which these words were to come true. Nine months later Kiviere was a prisoner at Königsbrück, and Madame Riviere has told us in her preface to the *Correspondance* that ‘it was there, during his three years captivity, that the good seed sown by Claudel finally sprouted and grew and fructified an hundredfold.’ In the prison camp Kiviere, thanks to his attractive personality, gathered round him a group of the more educated prisoners, and to combat the intellectual stagnation from which all were suffering, they planned a series of informal lectures and discussions to which each was to contribute. Kiviere, characteristically, elected to speak on God, and it was the notes and outlines that he prepared for these occasions that were published after his death under the title *A la Trace de Dieu*, with a preface by Claudel. The book, to which it is impossible to do justice in a few lines, reveals how intensely vital his faith had become to him and how deeply he meditated on the wide spiritual reading with which he filled his enforced leisure during what Claudel terms ‘this severe tête-à-tête with God, this period of purgation and pruning.’ That a few of his conclusions are questionable and need qualification is pointed out by his editor, but as spiritual reading these fragments of thought possess the charm of suggesting many a fresh aspect of old truths and new readings of familiar texts. And once again one is amazed—as the English reader always is amazed—at the clarity and precision with which the French mind is able to dissect and analyse its own emotions.

In her pathetic introduction to the *Correspondance*, Isabelle Rivière describes with pride and loyalty her husband’s last years and defends his memory from certain attacks and misrepresentations. It appears that after his

return to active journalistic work in Paris he persistently refused to be regarded as a Catholic author, and for a time held aloof from the exterior practices of religion. His wife tells us how, with shattered nerves and constant financial worries, he had led the exhausting life of a Paris editor and *littérateur* and had deliberately put aside 'higher things' before the exigencies of material needs, always hoping, she asserts, that time would be granted him later on. As a result he was afflicted with constant spiritual aridity and a depressed sense of his own unworthiness, causing him to shut himself up in a reserve that even his wife could rarely penetrate. Unquestionably there was in his nature an element of instability arising perhaps from his unquenchable intellectual curiosity and his capacity for being drawn at one and the same time in many divergent directions: to Gide as to Claudel and even to Proust. Moreover, gifted with unusual intellectual sincerity, he had a horror of mere propaganda and most of all perhaps of religious propaganda. Many bewildering different estimates of him and his attitude towards life appeared in the volume of *Homntage* which the *Nouvelle Revue Française* dedicated to him after his death and to which all his friends contributed. But Claudel was doubtless right in his conviction that this *âme tourmentée* never really lost his faith, and we have Madame Rivière's definite assertion—and who else could know?—that whatever else her husband neglected he remained faithful to morning and evening prayer.

When death came Rivière's reconciliation was complete, and after receiving the last Sacraments he exclaimed with a triumphant expression to those around him: 'Now I know that I am miraculously saved.'

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