

BOOK REVIEWS

LETTERS TO A DOUBTER. By Paul Claudel. Translated from the French by Henry Longan Stuart. (Burns, Oates and Washbourne; 6/-.)

It is not easy to see why the *Correspondance* of Jacques Rivière and Paul Claudel should appear in English as *Letters to a Doubter* by Paul Claudel. In the first place, Rivière's letters are as numerous as Claudel's replies. And then, was Jacques Rivière ever a doubter? Madame Rivière contributes an introduction to the book which gives the lie to its title. True, despite his Christian upbringing, 'the stresses and fervors of youth, disgust for the smugness of bourgeois Christianity, the pride of a great intellect, had conspired to hide God's image from his eyes.' Yet, at heart, Jacques was never able to endure his Godlessness. 'Little by little, insensibly almost, Jacques advanced towards God. . . . He has never left the road of Christianity. For a long time he may have walked along it with closed eyes.'

But what of the silence after his return from captivity? The worldling and the mere moralist have alike interpreted that silence as apostasy. The faith and apostolic fervour of the internment camp—*cette longue retraite, ce sévère tête-à-tête avec Dieu*, as Claudel has called it elsewhere—flickers and then seems extinguished when he returns to France. 'Where was the preacher of the new apologetic of *A la trace de Dieu* in the editor of the *Nouvelle Revue Française*? Looked at impersonally it was inexcusable. But God and Madame Rivière knew the complexity of the man and the enormity of the obstacles with which he was faced. And when the Last Sacraments were administered to him we are told that he cried: '*Maintenant, je suis miraculeusement sauvé.*'

Rivière's was an uncompromising sincerity, a sincerity which was intensified by his introspectiveness, and untempered, it would seem, by the vestige of a sense of humour. He knew well enough that Godlessness was disorder and chaos and nothingness; and his was a soul that thirsted for Order and all the plenitude of Being. The disproportion between his aspirations and the reality was agony to him. Yet such was his honesty that nothing would induce him to accept Catholicism on a pragmatic basis. And such was his complexity that he took a perverse delight in disorder. 'I relish my distress, I am passionately in love with my abjection, I embrace my spectre.'

Blackfriars

. . . . You shall not—you *shall not* destroy the calm of my anguish.' It was, and he knew it, the childish sulking of a wounded pride.

His letters, impassioned contradictory appeals for the humanly impossible, pour forth in abundance, and reflect the terrible conflict within. Letters cross in the post; Jacques has not the patience to wait for an answer. The letter of to-day brushes aside the difficulties of yesterday's, and demands he knows not what to heal he knows not what fresh bruises. Paul Claudel answers all with consummate coolness and sympathy. Now he will be giving an explanation of some point of Catholic teaching or Scriptural exegesis. At another time it will be a question of philosophy. This will be less satisfactory, for Claudel confesses to have neither the taste nor the facility for philosophical discussion; and Rivière's was not the philosophical bent of mind which seeks the meaning of mysteries, but the religious bent of mind which was to find meaning *in* mysteries. So Claudel insists above all on the necessity for the *practice* of religion. Jacques must read the Bible; he must go to Mass, to Confession, to Communion; he must read St. Thomas—'Read him when you can, but not all at once; he is an affair of years'; he must visit the poor—'As soon as possible become a brother of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul.' But first and foremost Jacques must pray. It is not that he is to auto-suggest himself into Catholicism; his sincerity would never permit of systematic self-deception. But Paul Claudel knows that Jacques must go to God if God is to come to Jacques. 'Acquire the habit of speaking to God every day, were it only for a few moments, were it only to tell Him that you do not believe in Him, and that He bores you.'

Rivière's letters—so intimate, so unrestrained, so intense—read a little strangely in English. But the translation is a clever one, in spite of its distracting Americanisms. It is good that there should be translations to bring these treasures under our insular notice.

V.W.

THE ENGLISH MARTYRS. Edited by Dom Bede Camm. (Heffer and Sons; 5/- net).

The English martyrs suffered gloriously for the Catholic Faith, but while we read of their heroic sufferings it may be well to remind ourselves that they were caused by the sins of Catholics. The whole truth about the 'Reformation' when, by God's mercy, it is told and told by Catholics, must necessarily