

CHAPTER 8

GRENIER AND CAMUS: HUMANISM AND INDIFFERENCE

Almost every study of Camus includes a note on the influence of Grenier, often with particular reference to *Les Îles*. A comparison of their expressions of Mediterranean humanism will help to bring out Grenier's distinctive emphasis, and will also clarify the relationship between humanism and indifference in the thought of both writers.¹

Grenier and Camus first met in the autumn of 1930. Grenier had just been nominated to the Lycée d'Alger as *professeur de philosophie*, and Camus was in the *classe de philosophie* of the same school. He was to spend two years in that class, having been forced by tuberculosis to miss much of the first year. It was during one of his bouts of illness that Grenier visited him at his home, as described in *Albert Camus (souvenirs)*, and from that time dates the beginning of their friendship.²

It was probably on a later occasion, when Camus repaid his teacher's visit, that Grenier lent him a novel that had just been published: *La Douleur*, by André de Richaud, a fellow *pensionnaire* of the Fondation de Lourmarin. This book, as Camus was later to write, 'dénouait au fond de moi un nœud de liens obscurs, me délivrait d'entraves dont je sentais la gêne sans pouvoir les nommer'.³ It opened up the way for him to appreciate Gide, and undoubtedly influenced the development of his own lyrical talent. But Grenier's own influence was to become more direct in the following year. Camus felt drawn to both literature and philosophy, but showed no taste for the discipline of literary history, and no 'esprit de système' either. Yet he was encouraged by the example of his teacher, who taught philosophy in a stimulating, open-ended manner,⁴ and who was also becoming known as a talented writer for Jean Paulhan's *Nouvelle Revue française*.⁵ Grenier's case showed that it was possible to combine a certain instinct for philosophy with the practice of creative writing.

By the time Grenier's second major collection of essays, *Santa-Cruz et autres paysages africains*, was published in May 1937 — the same month as *L'Envers et l'endroit* — Camus could have read the following: in *Les Îles* (1933): 'Le Chat' (part of which was published in the *Nouvelle Revue française* in 1929), 'Les Îles Kerguelen' (*NRF*, 1931), 'Les Îles Fortunées' (*NRF*, 1932), 'L'Île de

Pâques' (*Europe*, 1932), 'Sur l'Inde' (*NRF*, 1930); in *Santa-Cruz . . .* (1937): 'Santa-Cruz', 'Casino Bastrana', 'Kasbah d'Alger' (originally 'Dans la Kasbah'), 'Un Soir à Biskra', 'La Nuit à la Medina', and several other pieces not incorporated into *Inspirations méditerranéennes* (1941), some of which had appeared initially in *Alger-Étudiant*;⁶ other essays collected in *Inspirations méditerranéennes*: 'Interiora rerum' (already in *Écrits*, 1927, but now in an expanded form and with a new title: 'Penser à la figure humaine'), 'Cum apparuerit' (*NRF*, 1930, also published separately in the collection 'Les Terrasses de Lourmarin', 1930, and now reprinted as 'Initiation à la Provence'), 'De Vérone à Séville' (*NRF*, 1935), 'La Rose sans épines' (*NRF*, 1935), 'Sagesse de Lourmarin' (*Cahiers du Sud*, 1936, also in the collection 'Terrasses de Lourmarin', 1939, now reprinted as 'L'Herbe des champs'), 'Dans la campagne romaine' (*Mesures*, 1936). Grenier had also published 'Les Grandes Manoeuvres' (*Europe*, 1934: to be reprinted in *A propos de l'humain*, 1955), and several short pieces of lyrical prose in Aldo Capasso's review *Lirica*: 'L'Ivresse des villes', 'Depuis des années' and 'Les Pèlerins d'Emmaüs' (all 1935), 'Ce qui est perdu' and 'Paysages' (both 1937). All these had appeared in reviews or in book form, or both, by May 1937, and there are unmistakable echoes of some of them in *L'Envers et l'endroit* and *Noces*.

One way of assessing the extent of Grenier's influence is to study the use made by both writers of common themes in their lyrical essays.⁷ One such theme is that of the cloister. Grenier finds in the cloister of a convent a refuge from the constant need for action and for the expending of energy. It offers him a renewal of contact with the life of eternity:

Mais quand, l'après-midi écoulée, l'homme a besoin de se recueillir . . . , quand il veut trouver un repos, une solitude, un lieu où renouer d'un fil invisible ses actions dérisoires du jour avec son destin éternel, où pourrait-il se diriger? . . . En ce moment je pense à ces ruines . . . , à ces vieux couvents abandonnés comme on en trouve un peu partout en Italie et où l'herbe croît autour de la fontaine, à Saint-Jean des Ermites à Palerme par exemple . . . ; je sais bien qu'il faut vivre pour agir, tout cela je l'accorde mais laissez un jardin désert, quelque chose d'inutile et d'imprévu, une terrasse surplombant la mer où l'on puisse s'isoler, laissez (mais impossible) un espace où à la rigueur on ne fasse qu'entrer et sortir . . . Cinq minutes de rêve, un moment d'absence. (*SC*, 23–26)

For Grenier, the cloister represents deliverance: from possessions, from the world, from relativity: 'Cloîtres de San Miniato, San Lorenzo, Santa Maria Novella, grêles colonnettes, ombre fraîche, cour où pousse l'herbe, dans votre étroite prison le cœur se sent enfin délivré.' If he looks out from the cloister, he is tempted by a pantheistic desire for union with that very world from which he has been experiencing deliverance: 'Du couvent de Saint-François à Fiesole: je veux êtreindre ce paysage, me confondre en lui, l'anéantir en moi.' But the reality of that outside world is soon dissolved again. 'Et après quelques heures

de contemplation et d'amour, les traits s'effacent, la lumière faiblit, la brume monte jusqu'à moi. Rien n'est plus' (*IM*, 82–83 (83–84)). The temptation of the world, the human world this time, is represented again by the architecture of the cloister:

qu'il est beau cet angle droit que font les cyprès avec le sol! A leur approche et à celle des ruines antiques et des cloîtres romans mon désir de négation, mon dégoût des formes sociales s'apaisent. (*IM*, 91 (94))

But the response is equally found in the cloister:

Inscriptions. Toutes disent la vanité de la gloire et du monde. La plus belle est celle que j'ai lue l'été dernier à Vérone: au cloître de San Zeno. (*IM*, 72 (73))

Camus, for his part, finds inspiration in the cloister of San Francisco in Palma: it is surely significant that Grenier's 'De Vérone à Séville' appeared in the *Nouvelle Revue française* shortly before Camus and his first wife left for the Balearic Islands in the summer of 1935, a trip which inspired the writing of 'Amour de vivre' in the following year. The cloister is beautiful and peaceful. However, it is not 'la douceur de vivre' that Camus learns there: rather, it is the fragility of each moment of beauty, peace or happiness. 'Dans une heure, une minute, une seconde, maintenant peut-être, tout pouvait crouler. Et pourtant le miracle se poursuivait.' He goes on:

si le langage de ces pays s'accordait à ce qui résonnait profondément en moi, ce n'est pas parce qu'il répondait à mes questions, mais parce qu'il les rendait inutiles. Ce n'était pas des actions de grâces qui pouvaient me monter aux lèvres, mais ce *Nada* qui n'a pu naître que devant des paysages écrasés de soleil. Il n'y a pas d'amour de vivre sans désespoir de vivre. (*Essais*, p. 44)

This is close to Grenier's reflection: "Tous mes bonheurs ne sont que des grains dont je n'arrive pas à faire un chapelet. Je puis posséder tout, un instant après il ne me reste rien. *Todo, pues nada*' (*IM*, 82 (83): the paragraph preceding 'Cloîtres de San Miniato . . .'). Yet even at this stage there is for Camus a positive message of 'vivre le plus', live life to the full. These meditations on mortality, fragility, *nada*, reveal an important part of the truth, certainly, but ultimately only a part: 'un moment venait toujours où ma soif renaissait' (*Essais*, p. 45). Camus cannot remain long in a state of suspended activity, whereas Grenier cannot abandon such a state for long.

In 'La Mort dans l'âme', written in 1937 and based on a trip to Central Europe and Italy in June 1936, Camus returns to the theme of the cloister. Alone in a strange, cold city, he tries to escape from his solitude.

Une fois . . . dans un cloître baroque, à l'extrémité de la ville, la douceur de l'heure, les cloches qui tintaient lentement, des grappes de pigeons se détachant de la vieille tour, quelque chose aussi comme un parfum d'herbes et de néant, fit naître en moi un silence tout peuplé de larmes qui me mit à deux doigts de la délivrance. (*Essais*, p. 33)

What *délivrance* is this? The word recalls Grenier's meditation on the 'cloîtres de San Miniato . . .', and indeed it is a deliverance from the world, from 'une vie quotidienne où mon angoisse donne son prix à chaque chose', that Camus is seeking. But he recognizes that the temptation must be resisted. His situation seems impossible: 'L'homme est face à face avec lui-même: je le défie d'être heureux . . . Et c'est pourtant par là que le voyage l'illumine' (*Essais*, p. 34). He is learning to face up to the bad things as well as the good things in life, and that is a step forward. When he returns to the lands of the Mediterranean, he finds he is no longer the same. In the country near Vicenza, he spies an inscription (and once again the influence of Grenier is detectable here) on the front of a villa: 'In magnificentiâ naturae, resurgit spiritus'. But his is an unexpected kind of resurrection. He feels a 'paix sans joie': 'c'était l'angoisse de Prague et ce n'était pas elle'.

A cette extrême point de l'extrême conscience, tout se rejoignait et ma vie m'apparaissait comme un bloc à rejeter ou à recevoir. J'avais besoin d'une grandeur. Je la trouvais dans la confrontation de mon désespoir profond et de l'indifférence secrète d'un des plus beaux paysages du monde. J'y puisais la force d'être courageux et conscient à la fois. (*Essais*, p. 39)

For him the cloister of Palma or of Prague is only a temporary escape. The sun and landscape of the Mediterranean announce not hope but rather indifference and even despair, *and yet* the right response is that of those who 'préfèrent regarder leur destin dans les yeux' and do not try to run away from it.

It is important at this point to distinguish between different senses of the word *indifférence*. In the present instance Camus speaks of the indifference of a landscape. He links it with death, *inhumanité*, despair, and 'plénitude sans joie'. He clarifies his meaning by specifying: 'Pour moi, aucune promesse d'immortalité dans ce pays.' The plain of Vicenza and the ruins of Djémila are indifferent, and provoke indifference in the spectator, in that they offer no hope of escaping from mortality (cf. *LI*, 85 (87)). This kind of indifference is a fact, a reality, and by extension the recognition of that reality; as such it is only a starting-point. For Camus it is part of the essential foundation of lucidity, for it helps to create 'des morts conscientes'. It does not in itself constitute a possible attitude to life, as it does for a Taoist or indeed for Grenier. Indifference in this sense is to be contrasted with that spoken of in the preface to *L'Envers et l'endroit*, 'cette profonde indifférence qui est en moi comme une infirmité de nature', where it is indeed an attitude and not a simple fact that is in question. Such an attitude is pre-lucid, indeed entirely pre-conscious and instinctive. It is trusting, unquestioning. Camus admits the existence within his nature of this instinctive attitude of indifference, but it is no more possible as an attitude to existence than is the simple recognition of the indifference of the world. Both are prior and inferior to the lucid consciousness which for Camus forms the basis of an acceptable response to existence.

Two kinds of indifference: one instinctive, entirely pre-conscious, linked with a sense of belonging, of security; the other marking the beginning of lucidity, linked with the recognition of mortality and of the absurdity of man's confrontation with the inhuman, impersonal world. These two correspond to different levels of choice. When Camus writes: 'je ne veux pas me résoudre à choisir', he is referring to the choice between, on the one hand, 'mon amour de la lumière et de la vie', and on the other, 'mon secret attachement pour l'expérience désespérée que j'ai voulu décrire', that is, the recognition of the harshness and indifference of the world (whether in Prague, or Vicenza, or indeed Djémila). His courageous conclusion is that he will hold both together in a lucid consciousness. He is no idealist, staking all on one side to the exclusion of the other. His refusal to choose is therefore in no sense an adoption of indifference, but on the contrary a manifesto for practical, lucid, realistic action. Camus lives 'devant ce monde' — his house in Algiers was called 'la Maison devant le Monde' — and he boldly proclaims: 'Que m'importe l'éternité'. The last word in 'Le Vent à Djémila' is of the 'visage vivant d'un dieu à cornes au fronton d'un autel' (*Essais*, p. 66: my italics), in stark contrast to that of 'Les Îles Kerguelen': 'la vie y fait totalement défaut' (*LI*, 75 (79)). 'L'Île de Pâques', too, which is built round a confrontation with death in much the same way as 'Le Vent à Djémila', leaves the reader with a picture of human isolation and of an associated indifference. Grenier and Camus have fundamentally different approaches to similar themes.

If it is true for the lyrical essays that indifference operates at a much lower level for Camus than for Grenier, in such a way that it never appears as a viable alternative, what about *Caligula* and *L'Étranger*? In *L'Envers et l'endroit* and *Noces* the 'soif d'idéal' is present but never dominates: in *Caligula* it forms the whole subject of the play.⁸ In *L'Étranger*, on the other hand, 'Meursault ne peut rien concilier puisqu'il ne prend pas conscience de la totalité des tendances de l'homme'⁹: his actions are situated on the level of pre-lucid consciousness. The characters of *Caligula* and *Meursault* therefore each reveal a certain indifference, corresponding to two major types of indifference alluded to in the essays. There is now no longer the perpetual toning down and qualification of these that was a feature of *L'Envers et l'endroit* and *Noces*, but at the same time they are presented on a level that could well be called theoretical rather than practical.

Both *Caligula* and *Meursault* show affinities with Grenier's thought. *Caligula* reveals a dual nature: on the one hand he is not totally indifferent to nature and humanity, and indeed identifies himself with Scipion's poetic reverie:

LE JEUNE SCIPION: J'y parlais d'un certain accord de la terre . . .
 CALIGULA, *l'interrompant, d'un ton absorbé*: . . . de la terre et du pied. (Act II, Scene 14)¹⁰

but then he continues: 'je sais trop la force de ma passion pour la vie, elle ne se satisfera pas de la nature'. His passion is for more than human life, it is for an absolute: absolute freedom, expressed in absolute power. He is in a position to be totally free, and he is going to exercise that freedom independently of all conventional values. He justifies his intention by claiming that 'il n'y a qu'une liberté, celle du condamné à mort. Parce que celui-là, tout lui est indifférent, en dehors du coup qui fera gicler son sang' (Act I, Scene 11). He alone is free, because he alone has faced the reality of death. In attempting to live out an absolute freedom, he is aiming for absolute purity, characterized by Cherea as 'poésie' and as a 'lyrisme inhumain' (Act II, Scene 2). As Grenier was to write in *Le Choix*, 'La contemplation de l'Absolu a pour effet, plus que toute autre, de paralyser l'homme et de lui rendre non seulement inexplicable mais étranger le monde où il est condamné à vivre' (C, 136, n. 29 (71)). Yet at the same time Caligula's case is different from that envisaged by Grenier, since the object of his desire is not a distant Absolute, but rather himself, Caligula, with whom the Absolute is to be identified. The order here is important, for it marks the distinction between an essentially humble attitude and one that is uncompromisingly proud. The two attitudes lead to quite different experiences of freedom. Caligula thinks that he has conquered a total freedom, and Camus certainly has considerable sympathy with him, but even in the earliest versions Caligula's project ultimately fails, and in the later versions he is made to recognize it himself: 'Je n'ai pas pris la voie qu'il fallait, je n'aboutis à rien. Ma liberté n'est pas la bonne' (Act IV, Scene 14). 'Il suffirait que l'impossible soit', but alas, the impossible simply is not. In the conclusion to his thesis, Gélinas quotes Camus as saying that 'tous les possibles réunis ne constituent pas la liberté': there must be a 'soumission intérieure', an 'auto-détermination provoquée par la présence d'une valeur' (op. cit., pp. 170–71). Neither the indifference nor the freedom experienced by Caligula is authentic, despite his hyper-lucid consciousness. That, at least, is Camus's growing conviction. Grenier has a somewhat different attitude. He claims that 'Albert Camus a ajouté au personnage de Caligula, déjà transposé, un côté profondément humain qui lui donne un caractère bouleversant.' His own conception of Caligula, as presented to the pupils of the *classe de première supérieure* in 1932–33, was less human:

Un Nietzsche barbare — voilà quel était pour moi cet empereur (et pas seulement un malade ou un fou).

Je voyais aussi en lui la marque d'une nostalgie de l'absolu — vis-à-vis duquel toutes les choses les plus différentes perdaient leurs différences et toutes choses se ressemblaient. C'était une exaltation panthéistique qui faisait bon marché de la morale. (AC, 59)

In the *Entretiens sur le bon usage de la liberté* Grenier quotes with admiration Flaubert's description of the period in which Caligula lived: 'Les dieux n'étant

plus et le Christ n'étant pas encore, il y a eu, de Cicéron à Marc-Aurèle, un moment unique où l'homme seul a été. Je ne trouve nulle part cette grandeur . . .' (*EBL*, 55). Caligula clearly does not represent Grenier's idea of *le sage*, but he does represent *le héros*, who holds for him an equally strong fascination. He is one of those who live 'au delà du choix'.

Is Meursault then the complement of Caligula, that is to say one who lives 'en deçà du choix'? Certainly he makes few if any decisions. Gélinas describes his life as 'pure potentialité, subordonnée aux impressions venant de l'extérieur' (op. cit., p. 53). Meursault is, however, intensely human, in opposition to the material world, even if society judges him to be inhuman by its own conventional standards. He does notice, in the funeral procession, that 'le soleil débordant qui faisait tressaillir le paysage le rendait inhumain et déprimant' (*Théâtre, récits, . . .*, p. 1135). It is not so much that he is indifferent as that he is purely passive, although he undoubtedly operates at a low level of consciousness. However, there is a change in the closing pages of the novel. Indifference is explicitly mentioned three times, after sentence has been passed on Meursault. He is alternating between the two hypotheses of the success or the failure of his appeal. He teaches himself resignation in the latter case, sober restraint in the former. After one such exercise:

Je venais de rejeter mon pourvoi et je pouvais sentir les ondes de mon sang circuler régulièrement en moi . . . Pour la première fois depuis bien longtemps, j'ai pensé à Marie . . . L'idée m'est venue . . . qu'elle était peut-être malade ou morte. C'est dans l'ordre des choses. Comment l'aurais-je su puisqu'en dehors de nos deux corps maintenant séparés, rien ne nous liait et ne nous rappelait l'un à l'autre. A partir de ce moment, d'ailleurs, le souvenir de Marie m'aurait été indifférent. Morte, elle ne m'intéressait plus. (*Théâtre, récits, . . .*, pp. 1206-07)

Indifference begins where the possibility of a physical relationship ends. Where that possibility survives, Meursault is not indifferent. But it is in the very last paragraph of the book that a more significant indifference appears for the first time. After the abortive visit of the prison chaplain, Meursault retreats from even his low level of humanity, and opens himself up to the essentially *inhuman* material world:

La merveilleuse paix de cet été endormi entrainait en moi comme une marée. A ce moment, et à la limite de la nuit, les sirènes ont hurlé. Elles annonçaient des départs pour un monde qui maintenant m'était à jamais indifférent. Pour la première fois depuis bien longtemps, j'ai pensé à maman . . . Personne, personne n'avait le droit de pleurer sur elle. Et moi aussi, je me suis senti prêt à tout revivre. Comme si cette grande colère m'avait purgé du mal, vidé d'espoir, devant cette nuit chargée de signes et d'étoiles, je m'ouvrais pour la première fois à la tendre indifférence du monde. (*Théâtre, récits, . . .*, p. 1211)

In the lyrical essays, the indifference of the world is hard, forcing man into a consciousness of his own mortality and of his need to rebel, to assert his

humanity. Here, on the contrary, it is gentle and inviting, ready to welcome the refugee from humanity. This is the pre-conscious, womb-orientated indifference that is often connected with the evocation of the mother, but here presented as the culmination of a process of development rather than as something so basic that it is inadmissible as an actual attitude to existence.

Now it may seem that Meursault's final attitude is not far removed from that of the Taoist adept who, according to Maspero, 'a perdu toute activité propre et même toute conscience',¹¹ but there is in fact a fundamental distinction. Meursault has deliberately rejected any form of Absolute. Value has no meaning for him. In terms of the courageous attitude worked out by Camus in *L'Envers et l'endroit* and *Noces*, Meursault is simply a failure: tragic, certainly, and a victim, but a failure none the less. Grenier recognizes the *déchirement* that such a character provokes in the reader; in both *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* and *L'Étranger*, he says,

c'est la même mise en accusation de toutes les 'valeurs' et c'est un parfait manuel d'athéisme. L'impassibilité n'en est pas telle que l'on n'y sente un frémissement sans espoir devant 'la tendre indifférence du monde' et comme un déchirement.

He feels impelled to state, with greater boldness than is typical of him, his conviction that while human life is indeed absurd, 'pour que j'aie conscience de cette absurdité, c'est qu'il existe *un monde par rapport auquel elle est absurde*'.¹² Grenier's reaction is in itself an indication that in *L'Étranger* Camus is in no sense advocating indifference. Meursault slips back, or is driven back, into a pre-conscious attitude that Camus is continually encouraging us to leave behind. Ginestier comments that for Camus 'il n'y a qu'un péché, le renoncement, qu'une faute, l'inaction, qu'une erreur, l'acceptation', and he quotes from *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*: 'Dans le temps du raisonnement absurde, la création suit l'indifférence et la découverte.'¹³

The direct influence of Grenier is less evident in *Caligula* and *L'Étranger* than in *L'Envers et l'endroit* and *Noces*. The theatre was a medium with which Camus was thoroughly familiar, in a way that Grenier was not, and even in his choice of the novel form he was breaking away from the tradition of the Grenierian lyrical essay. There was a certain amount of influence, no doubt: for instance, the subject of *Caligula* was suggested by Grenier's lessons on Suetonius, given in 1932–33, and by his essay 'L'Île de Pâques' (1932) (see *LI*, 109–11 (106–07)). But there is certainly less similarity of tone and image, and therefore the originality of Camus's thought comes out more strongly. In the lyrical essays he sometimes seems to be saying the same thing as Grenier, although closer examination will often reveal that this is not the case. In *Caligula* and *L'Étranger*, and in general in the later works, the differences are much more clearly marked. For Camus, 'l'homme libre est celui qui choisit et le bon choix tient compte des tendances fondamentales de l'homme' (Gélinas,

op. cit., p. 73). For Grenier it is necessary to take into account the Absolute, which is primary; because of this different centre of gravity, the whole balance of his thought is different from that of his pupil's. Camus is concerned to uphold and to enhance the value of man: Grenier is only too conscious of the essential weakness and dependence of man, and of his lack of value in himself. For Grenier it is not a question of either sinking back into a pre-conscious torpor or else resisting that temptation and asserting his humanity. His is a more cerebral, less instinctive approach. If he allows himself to be attracted by the idea of 'le grand Tout' in which all differences are abolished, and in which his life becomes one with that of animals, trees and so on, it is because of his acute awareness of the incompleteness, impermanence and unjustifiable contingency of his human existence. The adoption of such an attitude of indifference suppresses the 'marge de l'humain': 'Je sors aussitôt de l'impermanence pour m'installer dans l'Être' (*IM*, 165 (168)). Grenier recognizes the ambiguity of this Being: in the same passage the 'absolu végétal' is taken as an image of the ineffable Absolute, value-itself, even 'le Dieu de vérité'. Even in his most intensely Indian period he did not see the Upanishadic tradition as primarily pantheistic. He makes it quite clear that despite appearances, despite 'une mélodie . . . discrète et continue qui enveloppe tous les êtres dans la même caresse, qui fait que du végétal à l'homme la gradation soit insensible et que la vie universelle à chaque instant se reflète dans chaque être comme dans un miroir' (*LI*, 126-27 (120)), yet it is the Absolute, *Cela*, not the world but the 'support du monde', that is the sole aim and focus of human existence.

Camus's *prise de conscience* is the realization that his two forms of indifference do not coincide. On the one hand there is the abolition of all distinctions, on the other there is the stark fact of human mortality, reflected by the indifference of the world. Grenier's *prise de conscience*, as described for instance at the beginning of *Le Choix*, is similarly of the contingency of man, but leading precisely to the possibility of what he calls, in 'Sur l'Inde', 'l'illumination' and 'la réalisation'. The abolition of distinctions in a union with the Absolute is the natural goal to which Grenier's 'pente' points him, so that Camus's progression is reversed.