

## CHAPTER 9

### ORTHODOXY OR OPPORTUNITY?

Humanity is beset by the weakness of contingency. There is only a limited margin within which man can operate constructively, believing in his own values. One possibility, explored in an earlier chapter, is to adopt a living tradition, such as that of Mediterranean humanism, and see one's own individual contribution as a continuation of it, as a response rather than as an independent act of creation. In Grenier's case it is the physical elements of the Mediterranean landscape and population, just as much as the general cultural tradition, which provide the *cadre* within which he can be free to respond to an *appel*. Is it not possible, however, to generalize this solution, and to suggest the kind of *cadre* that the artist or the intellectual is justified in adopting? The question was of the greatest importance in the 1930s, and the role of the intellectual in society was debated from every conceivable angle. After the experimentation and the escapism of the 1920s, commitment was now the order of the day, especially in the face of the threat to civilization and culture posed by the rise of Fascism and National Socialism. Did the various systems of thought and belief that were being canvassed provide an acceptable *cadre*? In the essays collected in the *Essai sur l'esprit d'orthodoxie* (1938) Grenier seems to condemn such systems.

It is clearly the *cadre* of thought, of intellectual attitudes, which is under discussion in the *Essai*, not that of the material environment. However, the two cannot be rigorously differentiated, for the material, social and intellectual environments are all to some extent interdependent. They are all important influences on the general framework of existence which the individual subject acquires, and without which his contingent freedom is superfluous and sterile. All creative action involves the sacrifice of possibility, and the realm of thought is no exception. In an essay written in 1936 Grenier outlines his understanding of the exercise of creative thought.

L'intelligence se caractérise, disait un écrivain, par 'un refus indéfini d'être quoi ce soit'. Et en effet la vie de la pensée consiste dans un perpétuel va-et-vient entre des idées dont les unes paraissent vraies, les autres fausses, mais dont aucune ne paraît fixe. L'effort intellectuel ne consiste pas seulement à préciser la relation mouvante des idées entre elles, mais surtout à en consacrer certaines sous le nom de *principes*, dont on ne doutera pas, et dont on usera pour transformer les autres. Ces principes

constituent la *croyance* et sont le ressort de l'action aussi bien chez les peuples que chez les individus.<sup>1</sup>

The *principes*, then, constitute a *cadre* which is recognized to be provisional but which at least helps to see the world in perspective. That is the meaning of what Grenier here terms a *croyance* (cf. *IM*, 93 (96)). In *Le Choix* he actually uses the word *cadre*:

Il est vrai que l'esprit juge d'après certains types, qu'il retombe dans certaines ornières mais ce sont des cadres formels qui n'ont pas plus de signification que les chemins suivis par les caravanes entre deux oasis: simples commodités. (*C*, 25 (29))

Different civilizations possess different traditional frameworks of belief, and none is more self-evidently true than any other. All will be based on reasonable evidence or reasonable suppositions, and all will be satisfactory as far as they go, but none will provide answers to all the questions, and none will be free of errors, distortions and limitations. This applies to both religions and philosophies. Each one will contain some elements which are perceived as evident truth by its adherents — though quite possibly not by others — and some which, while not unreasonable, still have to be invented: 'Toute philosophie se ramène finalement à une hiérarchie: ce qui est essentiel et ce qui est accessoire, ce qui s'impose à l'esprit et ce que l'esprit invente' (*C*, 26 (3)). There is nothing wrong with having a framework of belief which includes elements that cannot be shown to be indisputably true: indeed, Grenier suggests that it is, on the contrary, admirable to make a creative contribution to such a framework.

L'idéal de trop de philosophes est de faire passer ce qu'ils inventent pour ce qu'on leur impose, alors qu'ils devraient être fiers de considérer ce qu'ils inventent comme leur œuvre personnelle. (*C*, 26 (30))

At least Renouvier and Lequier had been bold enough to construct their own systems, without claiming that they were inevitable or infallible.

In the past, man existed within a whole series of *cadres* which provided a structure for his world. The primary sense in which freedom was understood was that of the freedom to discover and to fulfil the role which each individual had received within that structure. Modern man has rejected the different *cadres* one by one. In the chapter of the *Entretiens* entitled 'L'Engagement', Grenier traces the rejection of traditional concepts of God, Society and Nature. In 'L'Existence contingente', in *L'Existence malheureuse*, it is from mechanical determinism, divine predestination, the weight of the past, and the direction of the future, that the liberation of man is traced: 'L'homme sort d'un autre cadre lorsqu'il échappe à la nécessité qu'un Dieu faisait peser sur tous ses actes, et à l'obligation où il était de lui en rendre compte' (*EM*, 149: cf. *EBL*, 48–52). In 'L'Âge des orthodoxies' Grenier shows how the trend of the previous ten years (approximately 1925–35) has been from a 'négation totale

des valeurs', through a period of 'inquiétude', to a search for 'des appuis plus proches' which is translated into an acceptance of 'des orthodoxies'.<sup>2</sup> From the isolation into which he had escaped, man has returned to the herd. But, as he had warned in 'L'Intellectuel dans la société' in 1935,

il est très dangereux de sortir de son isolement pour la seule raison qu'on y étouffe . . . on peut se tromper aussi gravement en se décidant trop rapidement qu'en faisant bande à part. (*EO*, 132 (119))<sup>3</sup>

He makes his protes in the name of the 'droits de l'esprit' (*EO*, 139 (126)), the right of the human mind to operate freely and creatively, whatever the climate of society or opinion may be.

Throughout history, Grenier argues, it has been accepted that artists and men of learning must accommodate themselves in some degree to the 'catéchisme du pays' in order to have the right to think and create:

à cette condition, mais à celle-là seulement, on les honore, on les vénère; et je comprends très bien qu'un romancier ou un musicien accepte ces honneurs conditionnels; car depuis le commencement du monde n'a-t-on pas vu que les artistes vraiment épris de leur art ne cherchaient que le climat moral sous lequel ils pourraient créer sans se préoccuper des idées régnantes; préférant s'il le fallait la Rome de Léon X à la Florence des Médicis ou au Paris de François I<sup>er</sup>. Nul ne leur en a fait grief, et avec raison. (*EO*, 36 (35))

In one sense, of course, he is making a false distinction between past and present, for there is no shortage of examples of intellectual tyranny, particularly in the field of religion, in every era. However, the orthodoxies with which he is concerned demand more than intellectual assent to a particular framework of belief; and at the same time they claim (or at least the Marxist orthodoxy which is his primary target claims) to offer a complete liberation. The demand is simply not acceptable, says Grenier, and the claim is not borne out by the facts.

An orthodoxy, in the sense in which Grenier understands it, is more than a *cadre*. 'Marx n'est pas l'auteur d'une bible, c'est entendu, mais l'auteur d'une méthode; seulement il se trouve que c'est une méthode qui rend compte de tout' (*EO*, 51 (48)). Accepting membership of the Party involves accepting a whole host of 'théories inégalement soutenables' (*EO*, 57 (54)) in the fields of psychology, sociology, etc., and not merely in that of economics. Each theory in itself may form the object of a perfectly legitimate *croyance*, but when they are incorporated into an orthodoxy they are elevated to the level of *connaissance*.

Rien n'est plus naturel et légitime que d'être catholique ou révolutionnaire; rien n'est plus contestable que de vouloir faire concourir tout le savoir humain à la justification de sa foi. (*EO*, 41 (39))

Everything is explained by such a system, nothing is left to the domain of the irrational or the supra-rational. There has been a 'réduction de l'esprit' (*EO*, 136, 123)), whereas 'le socialisme au lieu d'être un rétrécissement de l'esprit devrait en être un élargissement'. Liberation, after all, is one of the claims of Marxism: let it be a true liberation, pleads Grenier, and not a mockery:

je me permets de plaider en faveur de l'ouvrier qui n'a pu acquérir d'instruction ou seulement une demi-instruction, en faveur du paysan, en faveur du pauvre et de vous dire: si vous le libérez, libérez-le complètement. Ne lui enlevez pas ces contraintes matérielles qui l'étouffent pour imposer à son intelligence un autre fardeau. (*EO*, 30–31 (30))

Better than the blind acceptance of such a stifling orthodoxy is the admission that there may, after all, be aspects of existence which are unjustifiable, which resist all attempts to fit them into a system. The conclusion of 'L'Âge des orthodoxies' is reminiscent of Lequier's revolt against the deterministic universe:

Il faudrait pouvoir arracher la page que nous venons de lire, ne pas chercher la suite, mais entrer délibérément dans un domaine où personne n'a de guide. La vie serait belle après une telle rature, et après tant de raisons inutiles, une foi sans système, et non pas sans folie. (*EO*, 42 (40): cf. *EM*, 140–41)

'Folie' is preferable to 'système', for in the sense in which Grenier understands it, madness is only the manward aspect of a passion for the Absolute. However, he recognizes that such an uncompromising passion is given to only a few, and so the *acte divergent* comes into its own. The ideal is not attained, but neither is a relative system exalted as a pseudo-ideal, which is essentially the significance of an orthodoxy.

A *cadre* is acceptable only if it allows for a reference beyond itself. In the novels and lyrical essays Grenier speaks of the need to be ready to respond to an *appel* either from beyond the self or from one's own inner nature: in either case, the *appel* is mediated through the *cadre* of existence and thought but itself transcends it. In 'L'Intellectuel dans la société' Grenier emphasizes the fundamental need of humanity to be open to such a creative *appel*: 'il y a une chose dont l'humanité a certainement plus besoin encore que de confort . . . , c'est d'un élan vers quelque chose qui la dépasse' (*EO*, 138 (125)). History has shown, he argues, that when societies have abandoned their creative spirit and turned to a rational exploitation of their resources, in a spirit of self-satisfaction and self-sufficiency, then their work has perished. The monastic communities of the Middle Ages provide a striking example, and present-day Communism, he fears, may provide another.<sup>4</sup> It is not, however, inevitable. At the very basis of the Russian enterprise there is 'une nouvelle foi, une nouvelle espérance', and Grenier quotes from Malraux, who 'voit dans le communisme beaucoup moins une réforme matérielle portant sur la répartition des richesses, qu'une

réforme spirituelle, un autre sens donné à la vie des individus' (*EO*, 139 (126)). Why stifle these signs of life, then, by imposing an absurd dogmatism?

Georges Friedmann, reviewing 'L'Âge des orthodoxies' in *Europe*, detected 'un refus de prendre parti, une antipathie pour l'action qui procéderait d'un tempérament inapte à la vie pratique',<sup>5</sup> whereas action, for him, was essential against the Fascist threat. As for Étienne, who reacted violently against Grenier's article,

ce qu'il craignait surtout c'est que l'attitude de Jean Grenier, son scepticisme, son refus d'engagement, sa critique virulente de certains marxistes orthodoxes ne favorisent une scission au sein d'une gauche que lui, Étienne, souhaitait fortement uni contre la menace fasciste.<sup>6</sup>

Grenier spells out his own position in reply to Friedmann's criticism, and also in the 'Réponse à un orthodoxe', a lengthy reply to an anonymous critic of his second article, 'L'Orthodoxie contre l'intelligence':

ceux qui possèdent un pareil tempérament sont tout prêts à reconnaître leurs limites s'ils sont de bonne foi; ils sont peut-être les premiers à en souffrir; ils s'engageront peut-être un jour dans l'action, dans la mesure où ils en seront capables, et pas du côté des privilégiés. Mais on ne leur facilite pas les choses en leur proposant pour première condition l'acceptation d'idées qui leur paraissent inacceptables. (*EO*, 62 (58–59))

Je suis convaincu qu'une action ne peut être efficace que dans la mesure où elle correspond à une pensée. C'est un grand malheur de notre société que la pensée soit à ce point séparée de l'action. Ceux qui pensent, les 'intellectuels', n'agissent pas; ceux qui agissent ne pensent pas. Et si l'on essaie de concilier les deux on n'y arrive pas non plus — parce que l'intellectuel occidental, quand il n'a pas une funeste complaisance dans ses idées (ce que vous me reprochez d'avoir) adopte pour agir n'importe quelle idée (ce que je reproche à mes adversaires). Il est fort bien d'agir et de ne penser que pour agir; une idée n'est rien si elle n'est pas vécue. Mais avez-vous jamais pensé qu'on puisse éprouver une répugnance invincible — *parce qu'intellectuelle* — pour certaines idées? (*EO*, 103, (94))

The urgency of the situation is not a sufficient reason, in Grenier's view, for blindly accepting one particular form of faith which has an inflexible orthodoxy attached to it.<sup>7</sup>

In the conclusion to 'L'Orthodoxie contre l'intelligence', Grenier claims that '*on ne peut aimer que ce que l'on croit vrai*' (*EO*, 62 (59)), and on that ground he refuses to accept the Marxist orthodoxy. It is a dangerous claim, for its logical consequence, as spelled out in *Le Choix*, is that the mind goes beyond 'le monde de l'intelligence' and takes refuge in 'la Pensée pure', identified with the Absolute, since 'nulle croyance et nulle évidence, disons nulle proposition, ne nous a paru digne d'être retenue' (*C*, 28 (32)). That does not mean, however, that all *cadres* of thought are rejected.

Assurément il est un moyen de tourner la difficulté: donner son adhésion à une doctrine en spécifiant que par cette doctrine on entend ceci ou cela. On sauvegarde ainsi sa liberté de pensée tout en essayant de se rendre utile. (*EO*, 62–63 (59))

That is to say, a *cadre* of thought and action is accepted as a provisional measure, but is not allowed to exercise any tyrannical control. A margin of error is permitted, and may indeed be fruitful, as Grenier points out in *Le Choix*: 'Il n'y a de fécondes que les erreurs systématiques, à condition qu'on les sache telles' (*C*, 57, n. 20 (33)). In the context of his discussion of contemporary orthodoxies, however, Grenier does not offer any constructive suggestion about how such a programme is to be put into action. Indeed, he almost seems to dismiss it by warning that 'il faut être très fort pour n'être pas la première victime de ces restrictions mentales' (*EO*, 63 (59)). It is this lack of practical application that is criticized by J.-G. Tricot in the *Journal des nations*: 'Une attitude purement métaphysique, si elle suffit à un homme, ne peut valoir pour une communauté sociale.'<sup>8</sup> Tricot and Friedmann both understood that Grenier's objection to Marxism as the only option for those concerned to defend human freedom and culture was not political or even philosophical but metaphysical.<sup>9</sup> The opposition between *croyance* and *raison* which he propounded in 'L'Âge des orthodoxies' and which Paulhan himself found unacceptable<sup>10</sup> is based on a particular view of the relativity of human existence and of the infinite gulf of undetermined possibility which separates it from the Absolute. Human reason itself constitutes a *cadre* which may at times require to be set aside in response to the Absolute, as indeed thinkers like Lequier, Dostoyevsky and Shestov attempted to set it aside by refusing the basic principles of logic.

What is the status, then, of any given political option? Grenier does not repudiate political options: he is perfectly honest when he writes that 'nous ne devrions jamais condamner *a priori* ceux qui adhèrent à un parti dont la discipline nous paraît odieuse' (*EM*, 94). Indeed, he encouraged the young Albert Camus to join the Communist Party.<sup>11</sup> The essential distinction, for him, is between the political (which is relative) and the metaphysical (which is a reflection of the Absolute).

*Discrimination de l'idéal et du parti.*

Peut-on être convaincu de la nécessité et de la bienfaisance de ce qu'on appelle en gros 'le socialisme'? Oui. Est-on forcé pour cela d'être marxiste? Non. — Peut-on admettre une *politique* d'extrême gauche? Oui. Est-on forcé pour cela d'admettre la *métaphysique* de l'extrême gauche? Non. (*EO*, 47 (45))

It is conceivable that Communism might provide a possible *cadre* for the intellectual: but Grenier finds the Marxism of his day unacceptable because the *cadre* is exalted to the level of a metaphysic. His own political commitment went no further than his membership of Mounier's 'Amis d'*Esprit*'. Accepting Louis Foucher's argument that 'l'idéal ne peut se réaliser que par le truchement d'un réel', Grenier indicated that his humanism found expression increasingly within the *cadre* of certain artistic traditions:

Je ne crois pas, comme autrefois, que l'individu puisse et doive s'abstraire de la société. Je crois quand même qu'il a un certain droit à vivre à sa guise, à penser ce qu'il veut. Il peut même rendre service aux autres en approfondissant en lui-même ce fonds qui lui est commun avec tous les autres hommes. Pour ma part, ma reconnaissance la plus vive va à certains artistes qui n'ont cru vivre que pour eux-mêmes. (*ELF*, 58, 60)

Indeed, it is not without significance that the controversy with Friedmann should have been followed a year later by the appearance of Grenier's first writings on art and the artist, and in particular by the paper presented to the second Congrès International d'Esthétique et de Science de l'Art, under the title 'La Dépendance de l'artiste et l'indépendance de l'art'.