

CHAPTER 11

POSSIBILITY AND TRAVEL: *LES GRÈVES AND VOIR NAPLES*

In his youth, Grenier used to spend hours reading Baedeker's guide-books and planning journeys. Later in his life he had a special affection for the books in which Custine, Dumas, Stendhal, Gobineau, Toulet and others recounted their travels.¹ In several of his own writings he pays close attention to travel in all its aspects: its intention, its practice and its achievement.

Although he recognizes several possible intentions where travel is concerned, Grenier is predominantly concerned with two main areas: the desire to *escape from* something, and the desire to *attain* something. The need to escape is fundamental to human existence. It is expressed in terms of different constraints: at the most basic level, geographical or social environment; then, at a higher level, self, or destiny. In Grenier's writings, the typical geographical and social environment from which escape is desired is that of Brittany, with its drab climate and its provincial mentality.

Je désirais voir ces pays de soleil qui me changeraient enfin de ce pays de brume dans lequel j'étais condamné jusqu'ici à vivre . . . Quant à moi, j'aspirais surtout à quitter en même temps que ces gens, ce climat dont je supposais qu'il les engendrait. (*G*, 296–97)

The need to escape from a given physical environment is both a pointer towards, and a reflection of, the need to escape from a certain metaphysical condition. At one level of consciousness, this is seen as a need to escape from oneself: 'Pourquoi voyager? On veut se fuir de cette manière' (*VN*, 346). But wherever that motive is mentioned, Grenier is forced to recognize immediately that it will never be satisfied: '— on n'y arrive pas' (*VN*, 346). 'On peut donc voyager non pour se fuir, chose impossible, mais pour se trouver' (*LI*, 81 (84)). The reason is that this motive of 'se fuir' is in fact not a true representation of the desire that is felt. It is an approximation, which in certain circumstances may appear to be accurate. The desire to escape from destiny is similar in this respect: 'nomade, j'espérais faire perdre ma piste à ce qu'on m'avait dit être inflexible et qui finirait par se lasser' (*VN*, 81). What is sought, however, is something more than is expressed by these concepts. Travel must be understood in terms of a *dépaysement*.

Pourquoi ai-je désiré d'aller en Inde? . . . C'est parce que c'est le pays du dépaysement . . . Ailleurs, on se retrouve toujours quelque part, avec des analogies, avec son chez soi. (*MIX*, 167–68)

J'ai aimé dans le voyage le dépaysement, donc de préférence les voyages à l'étranger et dans des pays lointains . . . L'oubli de soi, la curiosité pour ce qui n'est pas soi (et qui même est très éloigné de soi), voilà ce qui m'attirait. (*ELF*, 31–32)

What is left behind in a *dépaysement* is not, strictly speaking, the self, nor is it one's destiny. Rather, it is the *chez-soi*, the self-as-conditioned-by-its-environment, the encumbered self which gets in the way of a fresh and immediate apprehension of reality. Elsewhere Grenier speaks of 'un dépaysement provocateur de vérité' (*MIX*, 66). The truth that is thus provoked may indeed be greater than the self, as in the case of India where 'tu es cela', and the self is not distinct from the totality of 'la vie universelle', but it may also be the truth of the self. This had been an early revelation to Grenier, although the use of the term *dépaysement* was a later development. In 'Interiora rerum' he recalls the effect on his appreciation of classical sculpture of a visit to the British Museum. By 1941, when the text reappeared in an expanded form as 'Penser à la figure humaine' in *Inspirations méditerranéennes*, the concept of *dépaysement* had been introduced, making London only the representative catalyst for a transformation that might be much more general.

Les marbres du Louvre m'étaient trop familiers pour ne pas m'inspirer une simple admiration de commande. Et puis, je les trouvais trop *polis*, dans tous les sens du mot. Il me fallait un dépaysement. Or Londres excelle à dépayser. Le visage dur de cette ville ne permet pas les faux-fuyants. Vite, on s'y trouve isolé et mis en face de soi-même. (*IM*, 115 (119))

The truth that is provoked by *dépaysement* is first of all a consonance with the self, a reconciliation: it is 'se trouver'.

However, before this area is explored, it is necessary to consider another aspect of *dépaysement*. Travel is not undertaken lightly, and it does not offer a reconciliation with the self with no accompanying hazards. The *Petit Robert* defines *dépayser* as 'mettre mal à l'aise par changement de décor, de milieu, d'habitudes'. Even if *dépaysement* does lead to a new revelation of the self and of the world, it is not without a certain sense, sometimes very pronounced, of being 'mal à l'aise'. The passage quoted above which begins 'J'ai aimé dans le voyage le dépaysement . . .' continues:

. . . voilà ce qui m'attirait. J'éprouvais une sorte de joie à me sentir perdu dans un univers où je ne reconnaissais plus rien, où tout ce que j'avais cru assuré était remis en question. Mais ce n'était pas sans souffrance . . . (*ELF*, 32)

The imagery here is comparable with that of 'L'Attrait du vide' and of *Les Grèves* and *Voir Naples*.² There is a tension between the desire to avoid definition and limitation, to preserve possibility and to shun choice, on the one

hand, and the need for certainty and a sense of belonging on the other. In the early essay 'Childe Harold' (written in 1930 and published in *Le Mail*, 17 (Winter 1931)) Grenier wrote:

Me voici depuis deux mois dans un pays qui me plaît et où j'ai choisi de vivre. Les quinze premiers jours, j'ai senti en moi un renouvellement . . . Qu'importent les occupations, les décors! Ils n'ont de valeur que parce qu'on en peut changer et qu'en en changeant on se renouvelle . . . Voici donc deux mois que je vis en pays étranger, et déjà la différence douloureuse mais féconde qui existait entre le monde et moi s'est atténuée — déjà elle a disparu.

'Douloureuse mais féconde': that phrase points to the creative role of a deliberate *dépaysement*, a cutting of the links that bind one to a too-familiar environment. *Dépaysement* means solitude and the rejection of certainties. It is a figure of death itself: 'Peut-être la vie du voyageur n'est-elle si féconde en émotions que parce que les départs dont elle se compose sont une répétition de la mort (Custine)' (*NL*, art. 'Départ'). The concept accentuates the metaphysical reference of travel, and it is no coincidence that the first paragraph of *Le Choix* closes with the word *dépayser*:

Du sentiment philosophique: celui d'écart. Nous ne sommes pas au monde, telle est la première pensée qui donne le branle à la philosophie . . . C'est . . . un sentiment d'étrangeté. Poussé à bout ce sentiment devient même parfois non seulement le ressort mais le but de la philosophie: dépayser. (C, 3 (7))

It is true that the metaphysical reference of *le voyage* is not always expressed, but there is sufficient evidence to suggest that it should always be recognized in Grenier's writings. He quotes with approval a comment by Camus: 'Ce que nous apporte le voyage c'est le sens de notre éternité' (*ELF*, 33).³ *Eternité* may, of course, have different meanings, and certainly Grenier sometimes thinks in non-transcendent terms, of an eternity co-extensive with the natural world. However, there are indications that he is also looking for something beyond that, some ultimate, transcendent reality, which he knows to be beyond his reach, but the quest for which he cannot abandon. Robert Campbell has pointed out the importance of this aspect.

A quoi bon voyager? Les montagnes succèdent aux montagnes, les plaines aux plaines et les déserts aux déserts. Je n'en aurai jamais fini et ne trouverai jamais ma Dulcinée. (*APH*, 179; *LI* (3), 155)

Posséder ce qui par définition ne peut l'être — voilà un des buts illusoire du voyage. On veut avoir ce qui vous coule entre les doigts. (*MIX*, 156)

FIU. Mot usité à Tahiti: désir irrésistible d'aller ailleurs, n'importe où.

C'est le 'anywhere out of the world'.

Il n'y a donc pas de ports, il n'y a que des escales. (*NL*, art. 'Fiu')

It is this metaphysical ambiguity of the unfulfilled but inescapable quest that underlies the ambiguous response and sense of anguish provoked by actual, concrete journeys.

Anguish is born of the confrontation between an ideal and an obstacle to the attainment of that ideal, between the perfection that is glimpsed and the reality that falls so far short of that perfection.

La perfection, je le sais, n'est pas de ce monde, mais dès qu'on entre dans ce monde, dès qu'on accepte d'y faire figure, on est tenté . . . puisque tu vis, pourquoi ne pas vivre? pourquoi ne pas obtenir le meilleur? Alors ce sont les courses, les voyages . . .

Il n'est pas étrange que l'attrait du vide mène à une course, et que l'on saute pour ainsi dire à cloche-pied d'une chose à une autre. La peur et l'attrait se mêlent — on avance et on fuit à la fois; rester sur place est impossible. (*LI* (2), 15 (28–29))

Perfection is half perceived as a *vide* rather than as *plénitude*, as non-being rather than as being, and also as belonging to the domain of the unknown rather than the known. Its attraction is irresistible, because contingent existence naturally seeks an absolute point of reference, but it also inspires fear: fear of disappointment, fear of the practical inconveniences and obstacles encountered on any kind of journey. There is a wide gulf between the theoretical aim of a journey, the perfection that is glimpsed, on the one hand, and the petty practical details of the actual journey itself on the other (*G*, 211, 274). In this sense any project which aims at an ideal may be described as a journey (*VN*, 146). It is not the practical obstacles, however, that are the most effective counter to the attraction of *le voyage*. Behind all these reasons Grenier discerns an almost morbid fear of exposing the self to the unknown, in the form of new contacts, a new environment, and the accompanying possibilities of rejection and isolation (*G*, 298–99, 321 ff., 378; *ELF*, 32). From the point of view of human contact, travel may at first sight seem to be a way of escape, but it is bound to bring more problems of the same nature; and in addition there is the frightening possibility of achieving too great a measure of isolation. Hence the ambiguity presented by the islands that the traveller discovers in the course of his voyage. An island may offer apparent freedom, with endless possibilities of enjoying the expansiveness of a life lived in close contact with nature. But, as Grenier points out in a footnote to 'L'Île de Pâques', 'on y est "isolé" (n'est-ce pas l'étymologie?). Une île ou un homme seul. Des îles ou des hommes seuls' (*LI*, 112, n. (108, n.): cf. *MIX*, 50, 125). In 'Les Îles Kerguelén' he warns that in that remote, rocky archipelago, 'L'intérieur du pays est absolument désert et la vie y fait totalement défaut' (*LI*, 75 (79)). Travel may offer great rewards to those who are adventurous, but it also holds out the prospect of barrenness. It is no surprise, therefore, that the attraction of *le voyage* does not always lead to an actual *déplacement*.

Yet despite the anguish involved, and the sense that the metaphysical quest underlying all journeys is condemned to remain unsatisfied, there remains an important strand of Grenier's thought which recognizes that travel is both possible and capable of bringing a certain experience of fulfilment. This fulfilment is described as 'se trouver', 'se reconnaître', as a 'révélation', as an 'accord avec (soi)-même'.⁴ When it is achieved, the journey proper is ended, for just as each particular journey is an image of the metaphysical journey of the contingent individual, so each particular fulfilment is an image of the ultimate reconciliation with the absolute ground of all contingent existence.

Le voyage a pour origine et pour fin une annulation. Son accomplissement a pour conséquence sa mort: comme le feu en consumant le bois finit par s'éteindre lui-même, comme le raisonnement de caractère discursif n'a plus de raison d'être lorsque apparaît une intuition. (*VQ*, 13)

The mention of 'une intuition' clearly links this experience of fulfilment with that of the *instant(s)* or *moment(s)* which Grenier describes elsewhere. The closing paragraphs of 'Les Îles Fortunées' provide a commentary on the relationship between the *instants*, *le voyage*, and the final goal.

Après ces moments que j'ai dits, peut-on vivre? On se survit, c'est tout, en attendant un nouveau moment imprévisible. Mais qu'importe, puisqu'il m'est arrivé de *gagner*? Sentez-vous bien la force de ce mot? de zéro vous passez à l'infini. J'ai gagné. Que me parlez-vous d'avenir? Mais après, direz-vous, l'on retombe au néant. — Sans doute, mais il reste ce fil ténu de lumière qui vous poursuit jusque dans votre sommeil et qui vous avertit qu'autrefois . . . Et pourquoi dans un millième de seconde ne serai-je pas précipité de nouveau au fond de cet être qui m'est plus intérieur que moi-même?

Fleurs qui flotez sur la mer et qu'on aperçoit au moment où on y pense le moins, algues, cadavres, mouettes endormies, vous que l'on fend de l'étrave, ah mes îles fortunées! Surprises du matin, espérances du soir — vous reverrai-je encore quelques fois? Vous seules qui me délivrez de moi et en qui je puisse me reconnaître. Miroirs sans tain, cieux sans lumière, amours sans objet . . . (*LI*, 92–93 (92–93))

Earlier in the same essay Grenier has spelled out the tragic intensity of the *instants*:

Le soleil fait le vide et l'être se trouve face à face avec lui-même — sans aucun point d'appui . . . Il me semble que la suprême félicité pour certaines âmes (que je ne puis qu'admirer) ne se sépare pas du tragique: elle en est le sommet. (*LI*, 85–87 (87–88))

There is a profound *dépaysement* in which the individual is both delivered from himself and reconciled with himself, but is also suspended over the *vide* against which his contingent existence stands out. The experience is literally one of ecstasy, supremely blissful and supremely painful at the same time. This

ambiguity is reflected in the nature of *le voyage*, in which 'la peur et l'attrait se mêlent' (*LI* (2), 15 (29)).

Understood in this light, travel is closely connected with the important questions associated with freedom and possibility. Travel speaks of escape, of an attempt at liberation. Yet it also represents the limitation of freedom and not a total liberation, from the moment that the ideal aim begins to be translated into practical reality. The enjoyment of freedom is thus hindered by the very vehicle of freedom. To remain at home is to refuse to take hold of freedom, yet to take hold of it is to destroy it. That is the anguished situation of the contingent being who needs to belong but who shuns definition. Grenier is unwilling to accept the choice as it is presented here. He attempts to retain as much of the fullness of possibility as he can, even after the initial decision to launch out on a journey. Having taken hold of freedom, he will not accept its destruction. Hence the prevalence of the image of drifting, particularly in the novels. Drifting is a means of experiencing a *dépaysement* which may be 'provocateur de vérité', without the destruction of possibility involved in steering a set course or indeed defining the ultimate destination. However, there are two major drawbacks to such an attitude, apart from the *angoisse* that is its inevitable accompaniment. One is that all such experiences, such revelations of 'vérité' for which one remains *disponible*, are fleeting. The second drawback is that possibility, if preserved too long, hardens insensibly into *de facto* choice, in such a way as to limit the continued enjoyment of possibility to a greater degree than if a conscious, deliberate choice had been made earlier. One is the theme of many of the lyrical essays, the other is that of *Voir Naples*.

Possibility is not only a theme, it is also a mode of thinking and of writing. Many of Grenier's writings may be interpreted as voyages, meandering around the subject in the hope of provoking a glimpse of truth. His two novels lend themselves particularly well to such an interpretation.

Grenier admitted freely that both in reading and in writing novels he was interested only in himself. He was not inventive or a good story-teller, like Guilloux. Rather, in his writings as in his childhood reading, 'Les personnages romanesques étaient la projection de mes ambitions et de mes rêves, pas autre chose' (*VN*, 191). What, then, is the particular value of the novel form for Grenier? Does it fulfil a different function from his lyrical essays? Several answers might be given. In the first place, he was trying his hand at novels, or at least at *récits*, long before he discovered the lyrical essay, so that the two published novels are the fruit of a long development.⁵ Secondly, he is free to speak from the authenticity of his own experience which provides him with a *cadre* while not limiting him to a rigorous historical exactitude. He has the freedom to trace developments and fluctuations in his thoughts and attitudes over a period of time, which is difficult in the limited context of an essay, and yet he can still follow the direction he chooses, altering the facts if need be.

Thirdly, and most important, he is able to appear in public, as it were, while at the same time preserving his secrecy. He shows aspects, glimpses, but never fully reveals the person behind the masks. He preserves the possibility of his existence by a partial exposure which is as effective as camouflage. In 'Les Îles Kerguelén' Grenier quotes the claim made by Descartes about his life in Amsterdam: 'Parmi la foule d'un grand peuple . . . j'ai pu vivre aussi solitaire et retiré que dans les déserts les plus écartés' (*LI*, 59 (58)). In his novels, Grenier lives as public and at the same time as private a life as Descartes.

In *Les Grèves* there is a certain chronological order to the narration, but no real development, no clear direction, no plot. It is impressions and meditations that constitute the bulk of the novel. There are frequent digressions, and the narrator will return to the same themes of self-knowledge, curiosity, truth, diversity, etc., time and again, starting perhaps from a different experience on each occasion. This is reminiscent of the pattern of Lequier's thought, in that what is said is not necessarily the most important thing: rather, it is the way the meditation is pursued that is important and revealing. In *Voir Naples* there is more of a plot, but even so the self-questionings and meditations that fill the second half of the novel share the qualities of *Les Grèves*. In both books, the narration is an important means of undermining the stability of existence and of revealing a consciousness that is aware of possibility.

Paradoxically, the world in which the narrator of *Les Grèves* moves is in one sense stable and unchanging. It is the world of 'la petite ville' and 'l'école' (the titles of Chapters 2 and 4), in which society conforms to a fixed pattern. In the first instance it is the natural environment that undermines the apparent stability of human society, by undermining that of the human condition itself. This theme is present in *Les Grèves* from the outset. It is first introduced in terms of the fundamental contradiction between nature and man. On the one hand nature is simply too powerful for mere humans to withstand: the tide may be out at a given moment, so that the water is several kilometres from the shore, making it possible to walk right across the bay of Saint-Brieuc, but soon the sea will sweep in irresistibly, making that trip once again impossible. On the other hand, man does not *belong* in nature. The empty bay is described as 'cet espace désert où je me sentais perdu' (*G*, 15), and on the next page sea and sky are likened to two mirrors reflecting one another, 'entre lesquels l'homme se sent heureusement superflu, éprouve son bonheur dans l'inutilité' (*G*, 16). These two aspects of man's relationship to nature, then, evoke a response which is initially one of *effroi* but then gives way to a kind of pleasure at being weaker and, indeed, useless. Man is *de trop*, but his contingency is expressed in contemplation rather than in existential revolt or action. Indeed, Grenier is tempted to deny his humanity rather than to accept the full implications of his contingent existence. He feels himself involved in the continuous process of dissolution that is taking place in the landscape: 'Voilà ce que j'ai aimé et qui,

aggravant mes incertitudes, m'a dégouté du reste: ce temps étale, cette musique sans instrument, cette harmonie avec rien' (G, 24).

The problems of human existence and artistic creation are regularly linked in this novel by the implied question: is it possible to do justice to the true nature of contingent existence? The fragility and destruction of possibility is often evoked in Grenier's writings by the image of a wild flower which fades and withers almost as soon as it is picked.⁶ Is it then better never to make a start, never to break into the rhythm of existence, but rather to attempt to conform to 'la vie universelle'? That is a path which holds many attractions for Grenier, and he returns to it often. The exercise of freedom involves cutting across the self-sufficient continuity of the world, introducing a discontinuity which cannot but be felt as a wound. But that is not the only consideration. It is the calling of a contingent individual to be creative. 'L'appel de ce qui aspire à l'être est plus fort que l'invitation de ce qui est. L'on ne peut se dérober à la création.' It is this *appel* which gives the narrator of *Les Grèves* the strength to move away from 'un sentiment équitable de l'idée d'indifférence', from 'ce mortel esprit de neutralité qui est la négation de tout', which, however, retains a powerful attraction for him. Breaking out of the vicious circle of possibility and choice in a manner that is reminiscent of the *démarche* of Lequier plagued by the spectre of Necessity, Grenier, through his narrator, treats choice as a fact rather than as a problem, and proceeds from there: 'J'imposerai le choix que j'ai fait à l'intérieur du grand magma, je le rendrai indiscutable parce qu'il sera pour moi indiscuté' (G, 249). He places himself immediately 'au delà du choix': 'A partir de là l'écheveau peut se dérouler' (G, 251). But by deliberately underplaying the idea of a first beginning, Grenier is able to bring his discussion of literary creation round in a circle until he returns to a position according to which possibility is not, after all, sacrificed.⁷

There can be no fixed plan, for the task of the artist is seen as being to represent faithfully, and not to impose a pattern which would fail to respect 'la vie de mes personnages et celle de mes problèmes'. This at once raises the question of elimination necessary to the work of composition: 'Quel membre couper, lorsqu'on ne connaît pas l'ensemble de l'animal? Est-ce que ce ne sera pas un membre nécessaire à la création d'un être harmonieux?' (G, 251). From there it is a short step to the adoption of a deliberate pattern of work. The voluntary acceptance of constraint leads paradoxically to a greater freedom, for possibility is now no longer limited by the initiative of the artist. The narrator's attitude to creation is summed up in these terms:

Je ne puis me mettre à accomplir une action quelconque, il me faut quelque chose qui m'y pousse, quelqu'un qui m'y précipite. Alors je fais par contrainte ce que j'aurais dû faire volontiers. Je n'aurais jamais, de sang froid, pu le faire. (G, 257)⁸

Indeed, by the end of the short section in which these ideas are developed, possibility is fully reinstated, *within* the work whose inception involved its

surrender. The pattern of constraints that is adopted is declared to be, ideally, the pattern of nature itself, and creation is described in terms of a *promenade*, a *flânerie*. 'Pour ma part, j'aimerais prendre avec un compagnon anonyme le chemin des écoliers, me laisser aller à ce penchant de la flânerie qui me conduit d'un endroit à un autre sans aucun guide' (*G*, 258). That is a helpful image of *Les Grèves* and indeed of many of Grenier's other works. Even when he pursues a train of thought to a logical conclusion, he does not allow himself to be bound by that conclusion, but returns to take up the problem again at an earlier stage, taking an alternative turning, and thus leaving the possibilities open.

In the next chapter the same issue is revived, but with a stronger emphasis on the place of freedom. The concept of the *cadre* reappears. In the context of the preoccupations of two young would-be writers, 'Michel' and the narrator, in whom it is not difficult to see Guilloux and Grenier, the difference is pointed out between the case of the 'vrais créateurs', whose work is 'le fruit d'une nécessité intérieure', and 'les autres'.

Les autres, eh bien, mon Dieu, les autres sont libres, tristement et désespérément libres. Ils peuvent faire n'importe quoi, c'est qu'ils n'ont rien de particulier à dire. Suis-je de cette catégorie? Il me semble. (*G*, 300–01)

Complete freedom, undirected possibility, is seen as undesirable. Freedom must be freedom-*for*-something, and more precisely freedom-*to-receive*-something. The narrator describes himself as waiting for a *poussée* or an *appel* from outside. The analysis of the previous chapter is taken one stage further back, for there the *appel* was assumed to have come. Now even the structure or framework within which possibility can be creative is admitted to be lacking. All hope is not lost, however:

Et pourtant dans ce magma, comme dans la grève, il y a des filières — des lits d'eau stagnante dans lesquels le flot, lorsqu'il montera, n'aura qu'à s'engouffrer.

L'une de ces filières, c'est la nostalgie. (*G*, 302)

Nostalgia points either towards a homeland, understood here in Plotinian terms as the Absolute, or towards one's past. In an earlier chapter mention has been made of 'le passé qui vit en nous', our own personal past which is ours to manipulate and enjoy, and which is the source of our possibilities in the present. It provides, in fact, the necessary framework within which possibility can cease to be sterile and can become creative.

Does this past not, however, lead to oppression rather than freedom? Things, relationships, memories, all accumulate around us and threaten to stifle us. Beyond a certain point it becomes necessary to eliminate. The desire for purity supports this. References to the waste-paper basket, the dustbin and the fire suggest that it will be practical considerations that eventually dictate the initiative to be taken: 'Par cette méthode radicale on préserve l'avenir des

atteintes mortelles du passé' (G, 392–95). The theory is admirable: but it is precisely on the practical considerations that it breaks down. The two anecdotes with which the chapter ends illustrate the impossibility of choosing which comes from 'une trop grande capacité de choisir'. There is a genuine desire to preserve possibility for its own sake, and a genuine desire not to betray an absolute standard of value by opting for something that has only relative value, but there is also an acknowledged fear of assuming responsibility for choices that are irreparable and full of consequence. This is attributed to a natural weakness, which is also, in the final chapter, said to explain the quest for privileged moments, 'cette porte de sortie que chacun cherche suivant ses moyens'. Needless to say, the last few pages propound a different view of these *instants*, and the confessional tone of certain passages should not lead us to adopt the explanation of weakness and fear of responsibility as the only or even the most important factor. It is too easy an explanation, for one thing, and over-simplification may be a way of preserving a secret of much greater value. *Faiblesse* might appear to be used as a dismissive value-judgement, and yet it simply begs the question, for Grenier's world is not a world of stable values. Weakness says little more than contingency. If the 'vrai créateur' is one whose work is 'le fruit d'une nécessité intérieure', then is he expressing his contingency as fully as the supposedly 'weaker' brethren who are 'tristement et désespérément libres'? The significance of *Les Grèves* is in part that it presents a picture of the undefined character of contingent human existence, before definitions are imposed by the need to make decisions and choices. The title and setting of the novel correspond to this intention:

Je me vois tel que ces grèves bretonnes de contour indéterminé où l'on ne sait pas si l'on a affaire à du sable, du rocher, de l'eau, de la vase, de la terre ferme, car tous les éléments y sont mêlés et instables. (G, 302)⁹

The sea itself is an image of infinite possibility: as early as 1924 Grenier had written of Lequier: 'le voilà qui se hâte à travers ce milieu mouvant, image de tous les possibles, vers la mort.'¹⁰ However, the image of the sea is itself rich in possibilities, and its use in *Voir Naples* provides an indication of how Grenier develops the meditation on possibility that has been started, with a deliberate lack of definition or conclusive analysis, in *Les Grèves*.¹¹

Despite the interval of sixteen years that elapsed between the publication of *Les Grèves* and that of *Voir Naples*, Grenier's two novels belong to the same period. *Voir Naples* was in fact begun in 1956, the year in which *Les Grèves* was completed. The same sentiments are portrayed, but in a new and wider field. This corresponds not only to a new geographical and social environment, but to a different stage of life. The narrator of *Les Grèves* is shown as a child and as an adolescent, still at school. The first narrator of *Voir Naples* is a young teacher, and Franz is of similar age. The immediate problems they face are therefore

different, although the underlying preoccupations are the same: questions of freedom, possibility and choice.

The concept of sea embraces both the grey, mysterious ocean of Armor and the bright, sharply-defined Mediterranean. The first offers the spectacle of instability, of possibility and constant change, of lack of differentiation. It is an invitation to dream, to contemplate the endless possibilities of existence, to be absorbed into the ebb and flow of the universe. On the other hand, it may also represent sterility, or again, the overwhelming completeness and self-sufficiency of a world which leaves no place for the human. The Mediterranean, similarly, may represent different ideas: it may be the cradle of a humanism which leaves man free to create his own cultural pattern and values, or it may stifle any creative possibility by its sheer inescapable presence. *Voir Naples* has the advantage of offering a wide range of sea-images, for the narrators are able to draw on their experience of both northern and southern coasts. It is not only the sea itself that is important as an image, but the associated concepts of navigation, shipwreck, etc., which speak of man's relationship to the sea.

Voir Naples is divided into four parts. In Part One (pp. 11–130), in which the scene is set and the characters introduced, the group of images associated with the sea is not yet prominent. The first signs of a break-through come in Part Two. The narrator is forced to start a new life after the crumbling of his friendship with Raffaël. Now, he says, 'j'allais me retrouver seul et démuné, comme la barque que le reflux a laissée sur la grève'. He will be free from ties, free to express his own individuality:

Laissons dériver les hommes là où les entraîne leur destin; qu'ils suivent le courant qui les emporte vers le large ou celui qui les fait échouer sur la côte. Moi-même j'irai là où je devrai aller, sans avoir besoin de lier mon sort à celui de quiconque. (VN, 134–35)

At the same time, however, he recognizes that that is an ideal which hardly corresponds to reality. There will also be a continuing experience of *dénue-ment*, 'ce tourment' which results from a double emotion of *attirance* and *appréhension* in response to the presence of realizable possibilities. The particular possibility in view here is that of friendship, and it is precisely in the area of human relationships of friendship and love that *Voir Naples* goes further than *Les Grèves*. The narrator's decision 'd'avoir des relations aussi superficielles que possible, et qui par suite ne pourraient m'attirer de déconvenue' (VN, 137) is seen as a gesture of defiance after the failure of one particular friendship, rather than as an ideal. For some time he succeeds in his intention. Complete lack of involvement, however, is neither feasible nor entirely desirable. A drifting craft may have its attractions, but the navigator on the seas of life must be prepared to take action to keep his craft on an even keel and indeed to steer a course, for he is not alone on the water.

That is not to say that Franz, the young Vaudois encountered on a trip to Sicily, does not attempt to stave off the problem which faces him. Having launched out into the unknown and allowed himself to drift, he finds himself confronted by a hazard that he had not clearly foreseen.

Je n'étais pas résolu à me marier, je me trouvais porté par le courant qui m'entraînait, à envisager la possibilité d'un mariage. Je montrerais dans cette circonstance la même irrésolution que pour le choix d'une carrière précédemment. Seules avaient changé mes conditions d'existence, car j'étais arrivé à une autre étape de mon voyage. J'avais à doubler un nouveau cap sans pouvoir m'aider de la clarté du jour. (VN, 222)

Like the narrator of the first half of the novel, he is no longer satisfied by 'l'attrait du jour'. From his drifting craft he looks for some landmark, while recognizing that 'ce point fixe ne l'est qu'en apparence, que lui aussi s'en va au fil du courant; mais c'est d'un autre courant, plus lent et qui permet de respirer, de voir plus loin, d'échapper au tourbillon'. If there were a clearly-marked channel he would follow it, but there is none.

En réalité, j'aurais voulu ne coopérer qu'à une entreprise qui permît de dominer la vie, qui rendît claire et limpide l'étendue que j'avais à sillonner, qui me traçât une route, comme le sémaphore le fait aux navires. Cette obscurité inséparable du proche avenir, et encore plus du lointain, m'était insupportable . . . De la lumière! Il me fallait choisir en ignorance de cause, et je ne m'y résignais pas. (VN, 224)

The character of Franz, then, is very similar to that of the original narrator, and indeed to that of the narrator of *Les Grèves*. He recoils from the prospect of making choices, but he is not satisfied by an uncommitted existence in which all the possibilities are kept open, even though that holds a strong attraction for him. Indeed there comes a point after which it is no longer possible simply to go on drifting along, hoping that circumstances will solve every problem. The 'ressources inépuisables' of possibility dry up. Even if Franz escapes from the immediacy of the situation by returning to Switzerland, he has been changed by his experiences, and he cannot contemplate a return to his earlier life of drifting. His time in the Mediterranean has given him the desire for a 'point fixe', and he goes instead to Sicily. There the possibility of love recedes from him, and indeed he finds himself drawn away from the hazards and imperfections of human relationships to a certain ideal of perfection which he encounters in classical statues. They represent for him the right combination of eternity and fragility, the balance between the contingent and the absolute that is almost impossible to achieve. They provide a justification after the event, celebrating what has been and not compromised by what might have been, what should have been. Franz, as a contingent human being, finds himself always placed before the event, and his nature does not dictate to him the course he should take. There is no course that is so obviously right that it

silences the other possibilities. 'Si encore je savais où était ma nature. / C'est bien simple, pourtant, me direz-vous. Laissez-vous aller!' But he is either too young or too old for that:

Je ne puis empêcher toutes mes facultés de s'éveiller, d'agir, de se révolter. Il me faudrait réaliser au-dedans de moi un assouplissement qui me permettrait, en faisant taire mes passions, d'obéir à ce qui me pousse — *comme du dehors*. J'attendrais une poussée du vent sur la voile qui inclinerait la barque; alors au lieu de naviguer contre le vent, je me contenterais de seconder son action. (VN, 286)

That is the position at the end of Part Three. Franz's situation becomes less and less tolerable: a decision is urgently needed, and although he cannot bring himself to make it, his indecision increasingly takes on the nature of a decision by default.

The intensification of his anguish is expressed at the beginning of Part Four in the form of a recurrent dream. In it, the familiar image of a boat drifting on the water is strikingly modified. 'Je me promenais en barque, des mains sortaient de l'eau et saisissaient le bord de la barque. Je les frappais avec la rame; elles disparaissaient. / Je me réveillais avec une conscience de criminel' (VN, 303). That is to say, there comes a point where it is necessary, if the boat is to continue to drift, to take positive action to counteract those forces which would hold it or guide it. Indecision, the desire to remain free from the limitations of a definite choice, has in fact led to a decision, for one possibility has now been allowed to lapse.¹²

Franz's attitude now changes. If a decision can no longer be postponed, for it has to all intents and purposes already been made, he wants to get through the unsettled period as soon as possible and out into peaceful waters again.

Je me demandais s'il ne suffisait pas, pour être à l'abri des orages qui secouent la malheureuse humanité, de sortir d'une zone déterminée comme le navire qui sort de l'aire des moussons dans l'océan Indien et qui tout de suite retrouve le calme. Et, si le navigateur découvrait une route qui lui permît d'éviter cette aire, il perdrait jusqu'au souvenir de celle-ci et ses successeurs n'en auraient même pas l'idée s'ils avaient la sagesse de l'incuriosité.

He finds himself envisaging a much more radical solution to the problem of suffering through relationships and decisions than that of drifting with the tide of society and circumstances:

J'avais bien de la chance dans mon cas . . . Et si j'avais été inaccessible au sentiment qui pousse les êtres les uns vers les autres j'aurais échappé à cette cascade de malheurs qui étaient tombés sur moi depuis un an. Là, il m'aurait fallu sortir, non plus d'une zone géographique mais de celle qu'occupait l'espèce humaine. (VN, 326)

The freedom that both Franz and Antoniella, in their different ways, try to preserve, is under constant threat. The radical solution envisaged here is to

escape from that threat completely by moving into a zone beyond that of humanity. It is the zone of the Taoist sages . . . It is not, however, a solution that is followed up in Grenier's novels, although he investigates it at length elsewhere. The characters in his novels are not independent of their Western heritage: they are Europeans, not Indians or Chinese, and they do not find a means of avoiding choice altogether. *Les Grèves* is about the discovery and exploration of possibility, *Voir Naples* about its destruction, but both are deliberately limited in scope. At the same time, they both open up perspectives on to the non-human 'zone'. It is significant in this respect that the rich imagery of the sea and navigation in *Voir Naples* becomes redundant towards the end of the novel. The story of Franz and Antoniella peters out. The storm is over, the sea becomes calm once more.

Right at the end, however, just as in *Les Grèves*, a more unsettled note is reintroduced. The boat on which Franz is a passenger is sailing out from under the protection of the hill of Posilipo (Pausilippe): he is leaving the zone of 'cessation de la peine'¹³ and heading once more for the hazards of the open sea (see also *G*, 443), with which he will cope no better than before.

This last observation helps to link *Voir Naples* and *Les Grèves*. *Les Grèves* describes, for the most part, an earlier state of consciousness than that of the narrator of *Voir Naples*, or, *a fortiori*, than that of Franz. The narrator of *Voir Naples* claims to have come to Naples at the end of his travels. The narrator of *Les Grèves* has hardly begun to travel. But both, or rather all three, are torn between the desire to launch out and the desire to remain in a peaceful haven, or the desire to drift and the desire to have firm bearings. In *Voir Naples* there is no word of an *appel*, or of the possibility of some reconciliation with oneself or with the universe in terms of *instants*, such as is proffered in *Les Grèves*. Possibility has turned sour, unredeemed by the creativity that is glimpsed in *Les Grèves*. In that novel the imagery of the sea is always present but never dominant, for the recurrent theme of the *cadre* necessary for a true expression of contingent existence helps to provide the balance. In *Voir Naples* that theme is almost entirely absent, and the image of a boat drifting with the current dominates the story of a failure to achieve that true expression of contingent existence. The question of responsibility, of little importance for the adolescents of *Les Grèves*, of course plays a greater part in *Voir Naples*, where the decision with which Franz is faced is much weightier than anything in the other novel. The greater realism contributes to the greater sense of *désabusement*. The tone of the comment in the final paragraph on the firework display above the city of Naples is harder than that of other meditations on the withering of flowers found in Grenier's writings:

Ces fleurs éphémères qui allaient mourir pour toujours, je n'en avais jamais senti autant la beauté, je n'avais jamais éprouvé à ce point la cruauté de celui qui ne les avait portées à l'existence que pour les y soustraire. (*VN*, 351)

The failure portrayed in *Voir Naples*, where *faiblesse* is mercilessly exposed, although deliberately not judged,¹⁴ is a powerful incentive to seek a solution elsewhere, in terms either of a radical indifference or of a positive commitment. In both of them Grenier finds a greater faithfulness to the reality of contingent existence, for both attitudes ultimately take root in the Absolute, the only true 'point fixe'.