

CONCLUSION

Grenier's thought cannot be separated from his life and his literary output. All are expressions of what may be described as a lived meditation in constant movement. Various levels of this meditation may be identified. At the deepest level lies the Absolute: intellectually necessary, never clearly perceived, far less apprehended, but influencing every other level by the attraction of its absence. To a second level, nearer the surface, may be assigned the intuitions and apprehensions that constitute Grenier's metaphysics, including the intuition of the contingency of human existence and the sense of overwhelming responsibility in the face of the possibility of conscious choice and creative action. To a third level belong those ready-made systems or traditions which offer a *cadre* for his vulnerable, half-formed thought. Such are the traditions of Mediterranean humanism, on the one hand, and Oriental detachment, on the other, each representing a different form of *sagesse*. Such, too, are the various 'orthodoxies' which seemed to Grenier to stifle the freedom of the human spirit, usurping the place of the Absolute; and the Western heritage of literary and philosophical themes, on which Grenier was constantly attempting to shed new light from unfamiliar sources. The material world, providing a not unimportant stimulus to his meditation, constitutes a fourth level. No level is autonomous, and all Grenier's writings reflect something of the fruitful tension that must exist between them, a tension that Paulhan was ready to call a dialectic.¹

Tension is indeed the main characteristic of Grenier's work up to about 1950. Tension between the Brittany of his upbringing and the Mediterranean where he had chosen to live; between the Graeco-Latin heritage and that of India which appealed so strongly to his metaphysical sense; between the humanity of the Christian Mediator and the inhumanity of the distant, paralysing Absolute; between commitment and detachment; between belonging to society and remaining free to criticize and guide it; between academic scholarship and self-expression. His background, his chosen environment, his literary talent and his metaphysical awareness made these tensions all but inevitable: but at the same time they were freely chosen. His friends perceived the contradictions and tried to persuade him to open up and allow his natural talents to flow freely: 'Je te reproche de fermer trop souvent les portes de ton coeur et celles de ton riche esprit dont tu tires les rideaux comme avec coquetterie' (Max Jacob); 'renoncer à une prudence qui *vous lie*' (Lambert).² But his nature was precisely

not to give himself, not to commit himself irrevocably. In 1926 he wrote to Lambert that he had decided to live a life of 'perpétuel changement'. The tensions were not to be resolved, but that did not mean that they were not to be explored.

Exploration, however, carried with it the proviso that there should be no total commitment, and certainly no attempt to bring others to a commitment. Grenier described one of the reasons for travelling as a desire to 'se trouver', but it is significant that he defined this in terms of 'se reconnaître', something that may be only momentary. In the same way, the experiences of deliverance that he recognized were short-lived and could provide no true solution to the problem of existence. His exploration of Indian metaphysics did not lead him to try to escape permanently from the universal *samsâra*, nor did his study of Lequier lead him to cast himself upon God in a supreme act of freedom. He investigated the Marxist system, and even recommended that his pupil Camus should join the Communist Party, but he himself made a point of emphasizing the drawbacks of such an orthodoxy and indeed upheld the independence of the intellectual and the artist despite their participation in society.

Grenier's most positive discovery in this period was the real value of what he called the human. It is ironical that this should have come at the end of his time in those Mediterranean lands where the human is given such importance. However, it was linked with the end of a period of academic and often 'non-human' study, and also the fact of his exile from the Mediterranean brought home to him, as it did to Camus, the reality of the values that he had found there.

One particular feature of Grenier's thought in this period was its individuality. He was not completely isolated from the main streams of contemporary thinking, and indeed as a teacher of philosophy he had to keep abreast of new developments, but he showed a remarkable eclecticism. In this Bergsonian era he rarely mentioned Bergson, and when he did he pointed out how Lequier had anticipated him. He only had the slightest contact with Lavelle and Le Senne despite many similarities with them in their approach to *l'esprit*, value and the Absolute. Gabriel Marcel he did not meet until 1941. As for Mounier and Personalism, although Grenier was one of the 'Amis d'*Esprit*' as early as 1935 and was with Max-Pol Fouchet responsible for the affiliated group in Algiers, he was never deeply committed to the movement. Of course his frequent absence from Paris and indeed from France was an important factor in this lack of intellectual communion, but once again it must be seen more as a free choice than as an imposition.

He felt strongly that the modern world was in danger of being enslaved to the doctrine of the moment, and he liked to trace these doctrines back to their source, or to point out earlier thinkers who were precursors. In this way he could show how one-sided and often mistaken the present-day versions were. His familiarity with Eastern writers, with the pre-Socratics, with mystics of all

traditions, as well as with the great thinkers of the Western world, gave him the conviction that there were always other ways of viewing a problem, and so encouraged him in his scepticism. No one philosopher or school could count him as a disciple. In the realm of ideas, if not in that of practical daily living, he preserved his freedom by refusing to exercise his right of choice. During the war years and afterwards he sought to investigate the practical implications of his attitude. Two trends in his thought which emerged strongly in this new period were the importance of the aesthetic sense as he tried to understand the expression of freedom in creation, and the interest of the apparently trivial, the everyday, in view of the equivalence of all things.

An important characterization of the tension felt by Grenier at the end of this first period, together with a pointer to the direction that he was going to take, is afforded by the 'Cornélius' correspondence. Lambert objected strongly to the tone of the 'Lettre à Cornélius': he teased Grenier with still being at school, under the thumb of 'le magister Hegel'. He felt that Grenier knew his role, that of the author of *Santa-Cruz*, and that he was allowing himself to get tied up in meaningless words and ideas. He should let out the song that was there inside him, longing to be sung, and *give* himself. Lambert died in 1940, before the 'Réponse de Cornélius' appeared in French. He would have hailed the more positive approach of this supposed Dutch friend of Grenier's, who describes himself as having 'une propension inconsidérée à l'action'. His argument is that a paralysed abstention, which is what the author of the 'Lettre' ends up with, is neither profitable nor necessary. He appeals to the example of Lucretius, and to human achievement and creativity, instancing the building of St Petersburg: 'Si tout est égal, pourquoi pas une œuvre plutôt qu'une contemplation?' Even if the underlying order implied by art, indeed by living at all, is only a convention — which is all that the Grenier of the 'Lettre' could allow — why should that not be acceptable? But he comes up against the objection that 'la création humaine n'est au fond jamais qu'une procréation', dependent on an eternal truth, which in turn is unattainable.

In the 'Fragments d'une deuxième lettre à Cornélius' Grenier provides a synthesis that shows the value and also the limits of such a dialectical approach. He accepts Cornélius's point that 'si tout se vaut, c'est peut-être la meilleure façon de *créer* que de frapper sans scrupule' (*IM*, 184 (186)) (which is what human action seems to be). But he is unhappy about two things: the tyranny associated with creativity, and the equivalence of everything. This last was indeed his own principle: but he cannot get away from the presence of the Absolute, Value-itself. He takes up the suggestion of art as a way out of chaos: 'l'art, c'est la création sans l'arbitraire ni la violence'. It is the art of Greek statues with their hint of a smile:

ce sourire, c'est un entre-deux. J'aime cette reconnaissance courageuse d'une fragilité; cette intelligence d'un obstacle qui permet à l'esprit de saisir quelque

chose qui le dépasse et de transformer un Destin amorphe en une destinée personnelle.

Their eyes are fixed on a goal that is Elsewhere, or so we may think; their attitude amounts to this: 'c'est, par un désespoir raisonnable, approcher le plus qu'il est possible du divin' (*IM*, 188–89 (190)).

But even art and poetry have their limits. What can provide a lasting link with the Absolute? Unity is impossible, mystical union is short-lived; and could there be a union through a mediator?

Alors, la vie humaine devient grave malgré son caractère éphémère; l'homme peut travailler au-dedans du monde comme si ce dernier avait de l'importance et penser qu'il n'en a pas: une action sereine dont il n'escompte pas le fruit. Mais tout cela demande une fidélité . . . (*IM*, 191 (192))

— which he is not prepared to give with his whole self.

The word *liberté* has not been used in these 'Cornelius' passages, but it underlies them. The real question at issue is: In the face of the Absolute, what sort of freedom do I have? Is it a freedom of pure indifference, resulting in abstention? Or leading to an active freedom-to-create? Does the Absolute introduce an element of value, such that one can exercise a freedom-to-accept (the way of 'un désespoir raisonnable')? Or is there some way of mediation between the Absolute and the world such that the world is given value (though its rewards have none in eternal terms), and freedom is not indifferent?

It would be out of character for Grenier to give a straight answer. However, he does here sum up his explorations so far and suggest lines of further investigation. In one sense he returns to the sentiments expressed in 'Interiora rerum' with his admiration of Greek sculpture and the attitude expressed therein. But at the same time he commits himself more positively to the experiment of art, and to an exploration of the concepts of existence and value and their relationship to each other. The question: 'Freedom for what?' points to the *Entretiens sur le bon usage de la liberté*. Grenier's fascination with the everyday is foreshadowed, and despite the references to the possibility of a Mediator, his later interest in Taoism comes as no surprise.

For Jean Grenier, freedom and choice belong to the very tissue of existence. They are indeed philosophical problems to be analysed, but they are also experiences to be lived. His practice of continually oscillating between different metaphysical systems and different approaches to the same problems is an expression of his intuition that the answer one gets depends upon the initial choices of viewpoint and framework of interpretation. Indeed, his whole literary output may be seen as such an expression, for the activity of creation is itself a response to the problems of freedom and choice. In *Le Choix* Grenier hints that his own contribution to the understanding of those areas has been not

to dominate them but to explore them and to express them, through metaphysics and through art.

L'art diffère de la métaphysique en ce qu'il tend à combler ce vide en y ajoutant ses constructions, tandis que la métaphysique tend à l'approfondir: là un chant, ici un silence — mais combien plus proches l'un de l'autre que les termes de la conversation la plus suivie. La connaissance proprement dite est au contraire fondée sur du plein, de là sa certitude et sa marche en avant. Cela est du ressort de *l'esprit conquérant*. Mais *l'esprit réfléchissant* ne sait où s'appuyer, il est seul et l'on peut dire que rien ne le porte. Il est au centre des possibles, et sa réalité consiste dans son ambiguïté. (C, 13–14 (20))

This is the thread that runs through his large and apparently disparate corpus of writings, linking the *Lexiques*, the novels, the essays and the art criticism together. Their value is not primarily as a source for the study of the intellectual and literary history of a generation, nor as background material for the study of Camus, although both of these are possible uses to which they may be put; rather, they are to be seen as the product of a highly individual *esprit réfléchissant*, situated at one and the same time 'au centre des possibles' and yet 'en marge'.