

CHAPTER I

PHILOSOPHICAL INITIATION: RENOUVIER AND LEQUIER

Grenier's dissertation for the *diplôme d'études supérieures*¹ was presented in 1919, when he was 22, and has remained unpublished. Its title 'Le Problème du mal chez Renouvier' (hereafter cited as *R*), indicates clearly what aspect of Renouvier's thought attracted him. He had been preoccupied by the problem of suffering and evil since the age of sixteen, according to his own testimony.² He had soon discovered the pessimistic interpretation offered by Schopenhauer, and now he was undertaking an exploration of a rather different system. In his introduction, Grenier states that these two, Schopenhauer and Renouvier, of all the nineteenth-century philosophers, were those who meditated the most deeply on the problem of evil. He quotes, from the *Derniers Entretiens*, words spoken by Renouvier to a disciple on his death-bed: 'La vie ne peut avoir d'intérêt pour un penseur qu'à la condition de chercher à résoudre le problème du mal' (*R*, 1).³ Renouvier's philosophy, however, was no 'pessimisme pathétique', based on an instinctive reaction to the cruelty of *mâyâ*. His system was already worked out in its main lines long before the problem of evil troubled him. Grounded in logical thought, it could be used to examine and explain that which shocked the intelligence. Pain, or suffering, happened to be a major example of such a feature. Renouvier, the Neocriticist, approached the topic with great prudence. No postulate or hypothesis was to be admitted unless absolutely required by 'la conscience morale', as opposed to 'la sensibilité', and unless it could be rigorously induced from actual or possible experience. He went further than Kant in taking the awfulness of evil and suffering seriously. The body, the flesh, which actually feels pain, had a reality for him. Immortality was not merely a consolation prize claimed in virtue of a cold categorical imperative, but a real revenge on pain and death, 'un établissement dans un bonheur qui ne saurait plus faillir car elle a été trop longtemps et trop injustement refusée'. The shades of the Kantian paradise had no life: Renouvier, increasingly in sympathy with Protestant thinkers, welcomed the doctrine of the resurrection of the body. His sense of the gravity of evil, combined with his desire to arrive at a rational explanation of the world, led him to the adventurous but in many ways admirable hypothesis which involved making the problem of evil the very centre of his philosophical system. He made use not only of moral postulates but also of a historical

explanation of the origin of evil and of the process by which it would ultimately be resolved.

All this may seem far removed from the concerns of the postwar generation of young intellectuals. However, there were good reasons why Renouvier's project should have appealed to Grenier both in its content and in its approach, and indeed should have exercised an influence on him that was to persist throughout his life. There is an interesting sentence in Grenier's introduction which, although it refers to Renouvier, could apply with almost equal force to Grenier himself:

Et ainsi jusqu'au bout il aura concilié ce qui semblait inconciliable: le sentiment de la gravité du mal et son explication rationnelle; à la façon d'un philosophe grec qui interprète une religion orientale. (R, 5)

Although Renouvier belonged so firmly to the nineteenth century with his 'hypothèse suprême en théodicée', Grenier evidently felt a bond of sympathy with him in his attempt to reconcile the seemingly irreconcilable. Furthermore, Grenier's nascent poetic instinct was aroused by the sheer grandeur of Renouvier's enterprise. He was to find a similar appeal in the 'suprême acte de liberté' of Jules Lequier, expressive of his 'élan intérieur',⁴ and in the antics of those 'saints du désespoir' of whom he speaks in the *Entretiens sur le bon usage de la liberté* (EBL, 64). This kind of noble folly evokes from Grenier, even in such a formal, academic piece of work as the dissertation in question, a response that is essentially poetic, foreshadowing the development of his own highly individual style.

Renouvier ranged widely in his investigation of the solutions that had been suggested to the problem of evil. Grenier found himself obliged to refer not only to Leibnitz, Kant and Schopenhauer, but also to the Book of Genesis, the Vedânta, and Secrétan's *Philosophie de la liberté*. The question of the relationship between human freedom and the existence of evil was clearly primary. In particular, it is the idea of the use to which freedom is put that Grenier has isolated from Renouvier's account. He will later develop it in *L'Existence malheureuse* and extend it beyond the immediate context of the problem of good and evil in the *Entretiens sur le bon usage de la liberté*. He will propose attitudes varying from 'le meilleur usage que l'homme puisse faire de la liberté, c'est de n'en faire aucun' to the Mediterranean ideal of *construire*.

In the second and third parts of his study, Grenier moves on from a general survey of Renouvier's approach to the problem of evil and focusses on the content of the 'hypothèse suprême' itself, and then on the subsequent development of Renouvier's thought which led to the formulation of his philosophy of Personalism. There is less in the actual subject-matter to attract or influence Grenier. He is sensitive above all to the 'effort d'une extrême audace':

Mais déjà la pensée du philosophe que hante le spectacle du mal irréductible va s'élaner au-dessus des postulats et des inductions pour lui chercher au delà de notre monde une origine absolument première, dans un effort d'une extrême audace. (*R*, conclusion to Part 1)

Having quoted the judgement of Séailles that it was nothing but 'un roman d'aventures cosmiques écrit par un polytechnicien pour des pasteurs protestants', Grenier comments that, nevertheless,

elle commande le respect par l'effort désespéré qu'elle représente pour expliquer le presque inexplicable: semblable au coureur de Marathon, elle meurt, mais c'est en croyant annoncer la victoire.

'L'effort désespéré': this aspect of Renouvier's project has already been touched upon, but the key to the attraction it held for Grenier is to be found in a later piece of writing, the 'Fragments d'une deuxième lettre à Cornélius':

Laisse-moi vivre et mourir les yeux fixés sur ces Victoires qui, dans leur course, n'ont pas désappris que leur but final était Ailleurs.

Peut-être ne croient-elles pas qu'il soit Ailleurs, mais elles ne nous empêchent pas de le penser. Elles poursuivent la gloire. Aimer la gloire, c'est vouloir rendre impérissable ce qu'on sait d'avance devoir être vaincu. C'est bannir le fol espoir de bâtir une Tour de Babel, c'est, par un désespoir raisonnable, approcher le plus qu'il est possible du divin. (*IM*, 189 (190))⁵

This is the significance of Renouvier's vast undertaking, of Lequier's life and death, of the lives of those mystics of all traditions whom Grenier in the *Entretiens* calls 'ces saints du désespoir', indeed of the flower that fades once it is picked and of all that reveals the contingency of existence. This is the source of Grenier's continuing poetical meditation, which will find expression in his large and varied literary output. 'Expliquer le presque inexplicable': Grenier's interpretation of Renouvier is already a charter for his own exploration of the *presque*. What the nineteenth-century philosopher tackled by means of an all-embracing system, comprising both historical explanation and moral justification, the twentieth-century philosopher-poet was to approach through suggestion, through the *entre-deux*, through the exploitation of possibility.

In his study of Renouvier, then, Grenier has found both materials and a method. The problem of evil has led to the underlying problem of freedom. Renouvier has raised the questions of the right use of freedom, and of its status. He has pointed to the particular problem involved in choosing between the good and the better. Grenier has also learned from him the value of exploring a number of possible solutions to a problem: that, combined with his growing awareness of the importance of possibility as a value in itself, will encourage him in his antipathy to systems that demand full allegiance. All these areas will be explored in Grenier's work. A more immediate effect of his study of

Renouvier, however, was the awakening of an active interest in Lequier, friend of Renouvier and native of the part of Brittany where Grenier grew up.

Jules Lequier or Lécuyer lived from 1814 to 1862.⁶ For most of that time he remained in his native Brittany. He devoted his life to philosophical meditation, particularly on the problem of freedom. Although he made extensive notes for a book which would set out his method of investigation and the conclusions he hoped to establish, Lequier himself published nothing. A few fragments were circulated to friends. Charles Renouvier, with whom he kept up a friendship from the time of their first acquaintance at the École Polytechnique, collected some of the more finished fragments under Lequier's own title *La Recherche d'une première vérité* and had 120 copies printed privately after Lequier's death,⁷ but the Breton philosopher remained almost unknown except through the acknowledgements and quotations in Renouvier's own work.

In 1914, 1920 and 1922, L. Dugas published several fragments both from *La Recherche* and from the notebooks which had been left to the University library at Rennes.⁸ In 1924, a new edition of *La Recherche* appeared, with a biographical introduction by Dugas. It was this that aroused Grenier's latent interest in his fellow-countryman. Brought up in Saint-Brieuc, Grenier already knew the little graveyard at Plérin with its statue of the solitary philosopher, erected in 1868, six years after his death by drowning. It may have been Georges Palante, philosopher and eccentric himself, who showed him the house where Lequier lived and meditated.⁹ Grenier had certainly come across the references to Lequier in Renouvier's writings while working on his dissertation for the *diplôme d'études supérieures* in 1918–19. But it was the publication of Dugas's edition of *La Recherche* in 1924 that inspired Grenier to write his first article on Lequier in the local review *La Bretagne touristique* in that same year (issue dated 15 October 1924, pp. 226–27).

There was as yet no suggestion that he should attempt any detailed study of Lequier. In 1922 he had become an *agrégé de philosophie* and begun his teaching career, but apart from a monograph on Schopenhauer and Indian thought¹⁰ his output was to be non-academic for several years. He was associated with a group of literary-minded young intellectuals, and his mentor Edmond Lambert was encouraging him to shake off the dry, stultifying atmosphere of the University and give expression to his lyrical talents.¹¹ However, the enigmatic figure of Lequier remained with him, and he eventually resolved to devote his doctoral thesis to him, in preference to undertaking research into aspects of Indian metaphysics.¹²

In his 1924 article Grenier wrote of Lequier:

Ce qu'il faut que nous admirions en cet homme, ce n'est pas tant sa doctrine qui n'est qu'une doctrine entre bien d'autres, aussi forte, aussi discutable que d'autres, ce n'est pas tant cette doctrine que l'élan intérieur qui la soutient et lui donne une signification tragique.

He responded to Lequier in much the same way as he had to Renouvier: both spoke to him of an 'effort désespéré' which impressed him far more than the actual content of their system, interesting though that undoubtedly was. It is true that in 1924 Grenier still lacked a close acquaintance with Lequier's thought, but the parallel with his response to Renouvier, which had avoided being completely stifled by the demands of an academic approach, is to be noted. It helps to correct a possible false impression that might be given by a reading of *La Philosophie de Jules Lequier*. For the purposes of his doctoral thesis Grenier was obliged to concentrate on the philosophical system more than on the man himself, and he could no longer permit himself even the few flights of lyrical prose that found their way into his dissertation on Renouvier. Even so, as A. Lazareff recognized,¹³ the result is less of a betrayal of such a complex personality than might have been expected. By espousing the contours of Lequier's thought, with all its hesitations and repetitions, just as he had tried to do with Renouvier, Grenier manages to convey an impression of his subject that Lazareff terms 'polyrealism':

L'ouvrage de M. Grenier est complexe lui aussi, pareil en quelque sorte à un cristal à multiples facettes, comme l'être extraordinaire qu'il étudie. Et l'on y distingue une image de Lequier qui diffère par certains de ses traits de celle que fixent les conclusions de l'ouvrage, et de la part de l'auteur, d'autres intuitions que celles que finalement il nous propose. Ce 'polyréalisme', si l'on peut s'exprimer ainsi, dans la description de l'être spirituel de Lequier confère au livre une valeur toute particulière. M. Grenier ne se met pas en avant, il ne nous cache pas Jules Lequier et nous laisse toute latitude de l'atteindre directement.¹⁴

As in his study of Renouvier, Grenier is concerned in *La Philosophie de Jules Lequier* to present a faithful picture of one man's system and of his intentions in elaborating it, rather than to pursue points that may interest him personally. The plan of the thesis follows that drawn up by Lequier for his own work. Lequier had projected a work in eight books, of which only the first and the last ever came anywhere near completion. It was the first, 'Le Problème de la science', that Renouvier hailed as his friend's great achievement, despite its unfinished state. He considered it superior to, or at least more successful than, the last book, 'Indications de l'idée du libre arbitre'. Grenier disagrees strongly with this view. In proving his point he devotes 36,000 words, half the total length of the thesis, to a study of Lequier's 'philosophie chrétienne', and only a quarter of that amount to an exposition of 'Le Problème de la science'. He characterizes this Book I as:

Une sorte de 'discours sur la méthode', où Lequier après avoir montré toutes les difficultés de la recherche de la vérité, l'attrait du scepticisme et du déterminisme, l'impossibilité d'y adhérer, finit par trouver la première vérité dans l'affirmation de la liberté. (*PL*, 17)

It is, however, precisely this kind of exercise that provides Grenier with the substance of much of his own writing. *Le Choix* and *L'Existence malheureuse* are two examples of books in which he adopts a similarly hesitant, exploratory, at times almost self-contradictory approach. On the other hand, the firmness of Lequier's conclusion in 'Le Problème de la science' finds no echo in Grenier's works, convinced though he may be of the primacy and importance of freedom; and the theological framework of Book VIII is also more sharply defined than the looser metaphysical context within which Grenier prefers to conduct his meditations. If it is the grandeur of Lequier's project of basing a complete 'philosophie chrétienne' on the idea of freedom as a 'première vérité' that evokes Grenier's admiration, it is the detail of his method and of the possible solutions envisaged, rather than any conclusion which Lequier reached, that provides him with fuel for his own thought.

Recherche d'une première vérité, ce titre indique suffisamment qu'il ne s'agit pas d'un système à exposer mais d'une doctrine à trouver. La marche de Lequier ne sera pas didactique mais heuristique. (*PL*, 41)

The last sentence could equally well describe Grenier's own *œuvre*, and it is possible to see here an implicit tribute to the importance of Lequier's example in the development of his own thought.

It is in exploring the subtle twists and turns of such a mind, so similar in many ways to his own, that Grenier excels. He is not concerned to give a careful historical analysis of the arguments employed by Lequier. He considers the relationship of Lequier's meditation on necessity and the affirmation of freedom to that of Fichte (*PL*, 55–60), but it will be up to Tilliette to provide a satisfactory survey of that aspect.¹⁵ He does not chart, as does Wahl, the position occupied by Lequier in the development of a theory of the active self from Maine de Biran to Bergson.¹⁶ His contribution to the study of possibility is more in terms of a portrait of one man's consciousness at grips with the problem than of an actual analysis of the problem itself. The interest of the *double dilemme* for him is not its place in the nineteenth-century debate on free-will and determinism,¹⁷ but its meaning for Lequier in the context of his own search.

His study of Lequier acted above all as a stimulus on Grenier. The issues raised by Lequier are not always pursued by Grenier in the same terms. The incident related by Lequier in the fragment entitled 'La Feuille de charmille', for instance, is interpreted by Grenier in the *Entretiens sur le bon usage de la liberté* in a way that accords with his own preoccupations (*EBL*, 17–18). The *ivresse* felt by Lequier at the possibility of making a free choice between two mutually exclusive courses of action, and of making it by an act that would be a 'premier commencement', is seen by Grenier more in the context of the fragility of freedom as possibility is translated into reality. He is concerned to

preserve possibility against the destructive force, not of necessity, but of choice. For him that is achieved by the recognition of contingency, not by the perspective of any 'premier commencement'.

Bréhier described Lequier's work as

une méditation constamment tendue, où viennent se confronter, avec la liberté, les dogmes de la création, de la toute-puissance de Dieu et surtout de la prédestination; cette méditation n'arrive nulle part à une doctrine précise: il reprend tous les thèmes de la théologie sans voir le point où ils coïncident; d'une part notre liberté est comme la création de nous-même . . . ; mais comment y accorder la puissance de Dieu. (op. cit., p. 841)

Grenier displays the same kind of tension in his own work, and despite Lambert's criticism that 'vous êtes comme Lecuyer (*sic*): quel douloureux destin et quel attristant spectacle: tant de belle intelligence qu'étouffent les mots' (31 January 1937), there is surely a sense in which both Lequier and Grenier by-pass words and convey their meaning through the very pattern which their meditation takes. It is not to the formal conclusions of Grenier's study of Lequier, or indeed of Renouvier, that one must look in order to trace some supposed influence in the realm of ideas. The hesitant, circular approach of *L'Existence malheureuse*, for instance, betrays this influence.

Grenier's theses were defended in 1936, by which time he had already published one book and numerous articles and essays. It is hardly surprising that his own philosophical preoccupations should on occasion have caused him to pursue points in Lequier's thought that were less developed in their original fragmentary form, or to give to other points less attention than they perhaps deserved; but the shadow of his fellow-countryman's anguished exploration of the dimensions of freedom in the face of the overwhelming proofs of determinism is always discernible in the background. Lequier remained within the Roman Catholic Church, and his thought always has God as a point of reference, although the idea of the freedom of God caused him endless difficulties. Grenier's thought has a similar point of reference. He prefers to avoid the historical and religious associations of the word 'God' and call it the 'Absolute' instead, but his constant struggle to understand the relationship between finite, imperfect man and the infinite, perfect Absolute, which will be explored in the next few chapters, bears a close similarity to Lequier's 'Problème de la science' and 'Problème de la prescience'. In 1968 Grenier commented to Louis Foucher that Lequier (whose last page he had just republished, showing his continuing interest in him)¹⁸ was 'hanté par la perfection de la forme, par la perfection tout court' (*ELF*, 47): he might have been speaking of himself.