

CHAPTER 3

ENTRETIENS SUR LE BON USAGE DE LA LIBERTÉ

Le problème de la liberté a été posé et résolu sur bien des plans différents, le plan psychologique, le plan moral, le plan théologique, le plan scientifique. Nous le posons ici sur le plan ontologique en partant de l'idée d'Absolu qui, selon nous, constitue le fondement même de toute pensée. (C, v (6), 'Avertissement')

That approach, adopted in *Le Choix*, led to the conclusion that human freedom is to be understood essentially in terms of contingency, but not of possibility. Contingency points inescapably to the Absolute, and in comparison with the Absolute all other existence is completely devalued. 'Il n'y a pas de valeurs, il n'y a pas de libertés car un seul être vaut et un seul être existe' (C, 113 (93)). However, man finds it impossible to live by such implacable reasoning, and most theological and philosophical systems, even those which apparently preach a rigorous monism, are attempts to establish some kind of scale of values which will provide a link between the Absolute and the relative world. In the third part of *Le Choix*, 'Le Choix et l'initiative', Grenier places himself firmly within the domain of relative existence, and tries to approach the practical problem of choosing from that angle. He finds that he is faced with two questions that are closely related: 'celle du *pouvoir* de choisir, celle de la *valeur* de l'objet choisi' (ibid.), or the object of choice and its possibility. The possibility of making a free choice, although accepted intuitively, is demonstrably limited and conceivably non-existent. The important thing, in any case, is to choose oneself, 'se choisir', by expressing one's 'dynamisme intérieur'. Grenier notes that 'on pourrait dire que le bon acteur invente son rôle à mesure qu'il le récite' (C, 124 (103)): this will be important later on for his understanding of creation.

Although he claims to recognize that 'le choix a une immense importance par suite des conséquences qu'il comporte dans le temps et pour l'individu', Grenier adds that 'il n'a qu'une valeur de second plan par rapport à ce qui est véritablement' (C, 127 (108)). He admires the attitude of those who respect the distance between 'ce qui est évalué' and 'l'Inévaluable', but he hardly does justice to the problems of choice in daily life. There is no sense here of the experience of possibility in the context of normal human existence. The intellectual cast of the argument in *Le Choix* is such as to suppress the intermediate zone of human values. It was to correct the balance after this

uncompromising treatment of the subject of choice that Grenier undertook a more popular but no less significant work, which he called 'Conversations' (*Entretiens sur le bon usage de la liberté*) and in which the emphasis is strongly on possibility.

The prefatory paragraph entitled 'Dessein' takes up the same themes of the object and the possibility of choice that had been treated in the third part of *Le Choix*. Grenier emphasizes that 'nous nous poserons un problème éthique, non théorique, et qui importe par conséquent à la plupart des hommes, non aux seuls philosophes' (*EBL*, 7); it is not only an ethical question, however, for there is also 'le problème fondamental de nos possibilités' which must not be minimized. In *Le Choix* he had dismissed this latter problem as being not of major importance, but now he promises to give greater attention to it. He begins, in fact, by giving full recognition to the sense of *ivresse* at the discovery of possibility, without arguing immediately from the fact of contingency to the fact of the Absolute.

The first part of the *Entretiens* is entitled 'Existence et liberté'. Grenier provides the following plan:

L'auteur suppose qu'il est libre. En possession de sa liberté, que va-t-il faire? Suivant quel principe agira-t-il? Et, dans chaque cas, de quels sentiments sera-t-il animé? (*EBL*, 9) (final sentence not in 1946 version)

In the first chapter, 'Le Choix'¹ he examines what is essentially an intellectual approach to the problem. He begins by illustrating the reaction of the individual to the revelation of possibility. Whether possibility is infinite, as for Mallarmé, faced with a blank sheet of paper, or limited to a certain number of clear options, as with the traveller at an international railway station, it is both intoxicating and frightening, inspiring both *ivresse* and *angoisse*. The child described by Lequier in 'La Feuille de charmillé' marvels at the power he has to initiate something, to change the course of the world by his decision to grasp, or not to grasp, a simple leaf. The responsibility involved in even the smallest decision is brought home to him when, by finally grasping the leaf, he disturbs a bird which flies away and falls prey to a sparrow-hawk. The child's apparently insignificant action has indeed had grave consequences: and any choice may turn out to be equally weighty. Grenier anticipates the objection that there will always be factors — circumstances of personal temperament — which *situate* a choice and influence it, so that it would be misleading to speak of a 'choix indifférencié *a priori*'. He makes it clear that he is here considering a *cas limite*, that of 'disponibilité totale', in which a choice is to be made purely by the exercise of the intellect (*EBL*, 19–20). Just as Lequier with his *dilemme* had provisionally adopted an interpretation of determinism with which he himself was not fully in agreement, in order the better to win his argument against those philosophers who did propound such an interpretation, so Grenier examines

an extreme position in order the better to demonstrate the need to adopt one that is more subtle. It is true that in the 1946 version of the plan of 'Existence et liberté' he concludes his examination of the fourth and last possible approach to the problem of the right use of freedom with the statement that 'Cette attitude ambiguë ne peut être tenue longtemps, et il faut en revenir à la réflexion pour choisir, réflexion que nous avons déclarée au début être insuffisante, quoique nécessaire': but this is an example of the circularity or 'polyrealism' of Grenier's method, in which an apparent conclusion carries no more weight than other, even contradictory, arguments put forward in the course of a discussion. The attitude of *dégagement* is no less strongly recommended for being apparently overruled in the 1946 text, and no more strongly recommended for being left 'en guise de conclusion' in the definitive text of 1948.

In this first chapter, then, Grenier is concerned with a severely rational approach to choice. His initial presentation of the *ivresse* caused by the spectacle of the multiplicity of possibilities is to be understood in terms of the awakening of consciousness. The 'être spontané', whose consciousness is not awakened, experiences no interval between himself and the world, and so is not paralysed by this sense of *ivresse*. He is not faced with the prospect of making a first beginning, of initiating a creative act. The awakening of consciousness, however, widens the field of perception from the immediate act to its consequences, in the future, and to the possibilities which will be eliminated by it, in the present. Indeed, the perspective may become infinite, in which case the practical question of how to act gives way to what Grenier calls an ethical question, but which is more truly metaphysical: why act at all? The motive of the preservation of possibility for its own sake is not considered explicitly here by Grenier, although it is implicit in the opening pages of the chapter, and will be discussed elsewhere. His formal argument is restricted to purely intellectual considerations. He envisages a rational approach which will rule out any definitive option if the reasons in its favour are not entirely convincing. Such an approach, he warns, can provide no firm guidance in the practical decisions of human existence. He adduces two reasons for this. It is impossible to determine what is best, and at the same time, only the best will satisfy the kind of rational intellect that he has posited (*EBL*, 20 ff.).

It is not only a question of selecting the best from a greater or smaller number of possibilities. As Grenier indicated in the 'Dessein', the so-called possibilities 'ne sont peut-être pas définissables *a priori*'. Time and place will affect the issue, as will the individual's personality and indeed the aim that he has set himself. One option can never embrace all the advantages of those options which have to be sacrificed to it. Again, a wider perspective may reveal that 'the best' includes options which in themselves appear less good, or even positively bad. Faced with all these complications, and yet compelled by his intellect,

which is ‘tyrannisé par l’idée de perfection’, to reject any course which would involve the abdication of responsibility, what is Grenier’s character to do? Grenier is able to make some progress by limiting the discussion to those situations in which two options are both perceived equally as being the best. Elsewhere, in *L’Existence malheureuse*, he will argue that ‘le mieux risque de faire manquer le meilleur’ (*EM*, 81), and that indeed ‘le mieux est l’ennemi du bien’ (*EM*, 87, 88, 94), so that the desire for absolute perfection must not be allowed to influence practical choices: for ‘Tout ce dont l’homme est capable c’est de rectifier’ (*EM*, 95). An ambitious attitude is therefore to be discouraged: for the moment, however, he is still concerned with examining just such an ambitious attitude, to see if it can be reconciled with practical action. If man occupies the centre of Grenier’s thought, he can allow some value to the task of ‘rectifying’: but as soon as he thinks in terms of ‘the best’, of perfection, then human values fade. The tension between absolute ambition and relative action is a constant one for him.

Grenier envisages three possible solutions, which he labels *ambiguïté*, *alternance* and *acte divergent*. The solution of *ambiguïté* involves taking both options simultaneously: two jobs, or flowers *and* biscuits. However, circumstances do not always allow of this. If they did, the problem of choice would hardly be posed in any acute form. If both of two jewels could be afforded, there would be no agonizing decision to make between the two. Yet the solution is not to be dismissed, and the ten lines that Grenier gives to it (*EBL*, 24–25) are not proportionate to the place it occupies in his own life and thought. In the *Mémoires intimes de X*, he records examples of his own practice of *ambiguïté*:

Un signe de croix double est plus sûr: un à gauche comme dans l’Eglise d’Occident, un à droite comme dans celle d’Orient. (*MIX*, 123)

Dans le train, il m’arrive de garder deux places dans deux compartiments différents — ne sachant encore dans lequel je serai le mieux. Dans l’un il n’y a personne mais, étant à l’extrémité du wagon, il doit être plus secoué, dans l’autre, on doit être mieux porté mais il y a déjà deux voyageurs qui parlent et qui fument. (*MIX*, 144)

His personal philosophy is essentially pluralistic, with apparently contradictory strands representing, for him, different aspects of one truth. However, there is one domain in which an attitude of *ambiguïté*, in the sense of choosing two options at the same time, is, by his own demonstration, impracticable. He gives a clue to its identity, and to the personal grief caused to him by this impracticability, in what is at first sight a rather curious addition to the illustration he provides of the two jewels. ‘Une femme séduite par deux bijoux très chers à la fois ne les obtiendra pas facilement tous deux, à moins que l’un des deux ne soit faux — ou les deux’ (*EBL*, 25). It is scarcely necessary to refer to the parable of the pearl of great price (Matthew 13, 45–46) to see here an allusion to the

ultimate worth of the Absolute. A jewel is cheap only if it is paste. If two jewels, two precious things, are to be enjoyed together, one or both of them must be paste, and will therefore not give true satisfaction. If one of them is paste, then only the other, the genuine, precious jewel, is worth having. If both are paste, then it is surely better to forego them both and seek after that what is truly precious. *Ambiguïté* may be an attitude that is adopted for practical reasons, but it is fundamentally unsatisfactory, for only the Absolute can satisfy the need of a contingent being. To draw out the implications of his brief illustration, however, would be to force Grenier to by-pass other areas of exploration and arrive prematurely at the attitude of the 'saints du désespoir', for whom 'rien ne compte à leurs yeux que cet Être si infiniment éloigné d'eux que rien ne leur permette de l'atteindre' (*EBL*, 64).

He moves on to a second suggestion, which he again discusses very briefly, in only eight lines (*EBL*, 25), but which again plays a disproportionately large part in his own life and thought. The theory of *alternance*, as elaborated by Montherlant, has undeniable attractions. Montherlant began from a sense of the transience of physical pleasure.² The tragic paradox of pleasure is that to obtain something is to destroy it. This is a major issue for Grenier too, as witness the frequency in his writings of the image of a flower withering and fading as soon as it has been picked, and of the theme of *le voyage* as a continual repudiation of what has been obtained. Montherlant's solution was to live both terms of the paradox in alternation, and so to negate its tragic effects. Self-indulgence and self-discipline succeed one another: as Grenier interprets it, 'six mois d'ascétisme et six mois de débauche; l'eau claire et puis le vin'. The capacity for enjoyment, blunted by indulgence, is as it were recharged by the period of abstinence. Grenier was strongly attracted by Montherlant's writings, devoting more reviews to them than to those of any other author in the 1920s and 1930s.³ Further examples of *alternance* may be found in Grenier's own works.⁴ India and Greece, for instance, represent the two terms of a couple in constant alternation. In this chapter, however, Grenier is concerned with the attitude to be adopted to two alternatives in the present, rather than with a global attitude to life, and he must therefore recognize that there may be obstacles to the solution of *alternance*. He does not specify what these may be, but time is an obvious candidate.⁵ If *ambiguïté* and *alternance* are alike ruled out, what course of action remains? Grenier turns to a solution of compromise, which he calls the *acte divergent*.

It is to this solution that he devotes most space: a hundred lines, more than five times as much as to the other two together (*EBL*, 25–28). *Ambiguïté* and *alternance* are rarely possible, but the *acte divergent* has a much wider application, and Grenier himself is no stranger to it. It partakes of the nature of the first two solutions, but is clearly distinct from them. It is not *ambiguïté*, because there is a final option in favour of one term rather than the other — or rather,

not so much a 'choix final' as an 'arrêt final sur un des termes', which suggests a certain reservation, a refusal to exclude the other term totally, a preference more than a choice; it is not *alternance*, because the two terms do not alternate indefinitely: 'un terme doit l'emporter sur l'autre'. Although he recognizes that such a solution is still less satisfactory than a complete avoidance of choice, Grenier takes issue with those who dismiss it as an 'acte manqué'. It may be seen as an achievement rather than as a failure. The meaning of the *acte divergent* is that unattainable perfection is not left totally out of sight, but the 'safe' course of action is eventually chosen as a second-best: a second-best that is deprived of value only if the sights are kept fixed on perfection. If the desire for absolute perfection is not abandoned, however, a relative perfection will not only not satisfy, it will be a positive obstacle to satisfaction. In his discussion of the *acte divergent* Grenier sees only one combination of circumstances that will allow for a relative satisfaction: it is when the individual is conscious of having done his best to achieve one term, representing perfection, but has eventually had to bow to the inevitability of the other. He has, in fact, avoided making a deliberate act of choice, and has the sense of having espoused a necessary course of action. That is the point of the story which Grenier relates of the tourist and the two carpets. He wanted to buy both, but one type could not officially be exported. He succeeded in persuading the local official, but at the time of the crucial transaction he took the initiative in supporting the official's deliberately weak arguments: 'ainsi le voyageur put acquérir le second tapis . . . avec la conscience qu'il avait presque tout fait pour avoir les deux en même temps et que l'option lui avait été imposée' (*EBL*, 27). Grenier's tourist first makes sure of his freedom by deliberately opening up the field of possibility, then submits himself to a semi-imposed decision. But this is anticipating the argument of the next chapter, entitled 'L'Abandon'.

Although Grenier does not refer explicitly to the Absolute in this section, his argument presupposes an absolute reference. The *acte divergent* in the context of two options that are on the same level, such as two carpets, is only a pale reflection of the supreme *acte divergent* in which the two terms are the Absolute and, on the other hand, some relative system of values. The detail in the story about the restriction on the exporting of one type of carpet is a hint at the unattainability of the Absolute. The value of the *acte divergent* is precisely that, while the Absolute is not achieved, the value of the second term on which the 'arrêt final' falls is undermined.

The case of Franz in *Voir Naples* is of particular interest in the context of Grenier's presentation of the *acte divergent*. In some respects Franz resembles the man who finds an excuse for returning time after time to the bookshop, exchanging his reserved book for another (*EBL*, 26). After the breakdown of his friendship with Raffaël, the first narrator also follows a similar pattern, moving from one transitory acquaintanceship to another, and remaining

uncommitted. Franz, however, retains just too great a measure of idealism. Whereas the man in the bookshop contents himself with reserving 'un livre qui ne l'intéresse pas', Franz has 'un désir de s'élever au-dessus de ce qui était commun' (VN, 329). His desire for a certain perfection will not allow him to adopt the course of the *acte divergent* and settle for the acceptance of a life based, like that of the man in the bookshop, on a system of relative values. In the context of the single issue of his marriage, however, Franz has indeed performed an *acte divergent*, and his case is not unlike that of the tourist with his two carpets. In such particular instances the absolute reference is of less immediate importance, although it underlies Grenier's whole discussion. There are many examples of this propensity for the *acte divergent* in Grenier's own life, making it natural to see the cases of the tourist, of the man in the bookshop and of Franz as reflections of his own experience. Étienne provides this testimony:

Une année qu'il devait se rendre aux Rencontres internationales de Genève, Grenier me téléphone: il poussera jusqu'à mon chalet savoyard; le 5 septembre. Peu avant le jour préfixé, il se décommande. J'en conclus qu'il viendra *donc* le 5. Car je me souviens de l'Égypte: de ses fuites vers Le Caire, comme à la cloche de bois, quelques instants avant l'heure du train précisément qu'il avait décidé de ne pas prendre; de ces déjeuners au restaurant, où longuement, douloureusement, il finissait par choisir sur la carte un plat que Mme Grenier sait déjà qu'il refusera au garçon, ce qui lui conseille, à elle, de feindre de se choisir le plat qu'elle devine qu'il eût aimé pouvoir se commander et qu'il mangera de bon gré venant d'elle comme par surprise, puisque alors ce poisson, cette viande n'auront pas été imposés par le choix qu'il faut pourtant faire si l'on veut tenter de se démontrer qu'on est libre, mais qui, à peine décidé, annule toute liberté, etc. Il viendra *donc*, me dis-je, pour déjeuner. Après avoir préparé de quoi le fêter un peu, et avant de filer de grand matin pour ma promenade en montagne, je crayonne un mot sur une fiche que je fixe à la porte: 'Pour Jean Grenier. De retour vers 11 heures. A tout à l'heure??' Rentré un peu en retard, ne serait-ce que pour brouiller la chance, à midi cinq ou dix, ce fut pour lire à l'encre, sous mon crayonnage: 'Mercredi 5. Arrivés à onze heures. Nous repartons à midi, ne vous voyant pas, et regrettant beaucoup. J'ai essayé de téléphoner. Saint-Nicolas était coupé.' Une fois de plus, son angoisse avait joué devant le choix; l'avait joué; nous avait joués. Étonnez-vous que ses livres sur le choix, ou sur la liberté, soient proprement *irréfutables*.⁶

In the compass of the first chapter, only thirteen pages long, Grenier has covered a considerable amount of ground. Although he seems at times to be dealing only with 'des cas extrêmes', far removed from normal experience by the lack of situation and the improbably cerebral approach that is envisaged, he asks at the end: 'qu'avons-nous essayé de faire sinon une phénoménologie du vertige mental, de l'homme au bord de l'action?' (EBL, 28) This is the area explored in his two novels: the richness of possibility, together with the anguish involved in ever trying to appropriate it. The solutions that he offers are only provisional, allowing the whole area to be called into question time and again.

In contrast, the more radical solutions of abstention and of commitment, once arrived at, allow of little discussion. As Grenier found in *Le Choix*, a ruthlessly logical argument leads all too quickly from the fact of contingency to the fact of the Absolute, and the result is stalemate, with no room for the mental manoeuvring and anguish that is so much a feature of the human condition. He found an expression of this latter aspect in the circular thought of Lequier, and he himself tries to do justice to the *entre-deux* of which he is conscious. At the same time, he is conscious of the strong attraction exercised upon him by a number of different solutions, which he cannot ignore. He more than once quotes Gide's cry of frustration: 'Choisir me fut toujours intolérable, et préservant en moi le meilleur et le pire, c'est en écartelé que j'ai vécu' (*EBL*, 27–28).⁷

The first chapter, or 'entretien', contains the seeds of the remaining three. Grenier has already contrasted the awakened consciousness, all too strongly aware of the multiplicity of possibilities and the gravity of the consequences of adopting any one, with the 'être spontané', who experiences no 'hiatus' because he 'se meut à la surface des choses'. Now, in the second 'entretien', entitled 'L'Abandon', he examines that position, for 'Si l'intelligence est incapable de me guider, je ferais mieux de me laisser aller complètement à ma nature' (*EBL*, 10). The opening 'méditation' once again portrays the sense of infinite possibility; at the hour of the dusk before dawn, when the events of yesterday count no more, and today has not yet come into existence,

je suis sur le fléau d'une balance, ne penchant ni d'un côté ni de l'autre, parfaitement impartial dans la plénitude des possibilités qui effleurent (*sic*) en moi, mais d'avance déchiré par la nécessité de m'incliner, au moment où le jour s'annoncera par un rais de lumière sous la porte. (*EBL* 30)

This time, however, the mind will not be used at all to consider the relative merits of different courses of action. Circumstances will be allowed to dictate the course to follow. In practice, though, this involves some kind of decision-making, however arbitrary. Pure chance must be reduced to some observable principle: hence the recourse to casting lots and other forms of divination. Hence, too, the various caste systems which imprison men in the role to which chance has assigned them at birth. Is this not the answer?

Ne serait-il pas reposant pour l'esprit autant que salulaire pour la société, que chaque homme ne sortît du magma initial de l'indifférence que pour suivre la direction à lui imposée par sa situation personnelle? (*EBL*, 36)⁸

Before proceeding with his analysis of this position, Grenier indicates that everything depends on the point of view: there is a difference between the justification of what is experienced as a problem, and the purely aesthetic justification of what is merely seen as a spectacle. This is a point to which he will return later.

Men, in their diversity, are not simply like flowers in a garden. Grenier recognizes that the point of view is all-important. To extend the image of the theatre used by Epictetus: 'Sans doute, vues des coulisses, les situations des êtres sont quelque peu ridicules ou absurdes, mais vues de loin et d'en haut, le coup d'œil est magnifique' (*EBL*, 38–39). From the point of view of the individual it is a serious limitation of freedom to be like a flower in the garden or a pot in the hands of the potter, fulfilling a predetermined role; and the harmony of the whole is upset by the individual who exercises his power of conscious reflection.

Nous le sentons bien; et une gêne nous envahit à chaque fois qu'un individu *veut* être libre; car sa liberté est néfaste à son existence, par l'usage qu'elle fait de la réflexion . . . Un phénomène nouveau surgit en effet, avec la conscience. (*EBL*, 39, 41)

Man, as a conscious being, is not content to be what he is. He wants to arrogate to himself the right to dominate the pattern of existence, placing himself at the 'point de vue particulier au spectateur et au créateur'. Insensibly, Grenier has moved away from his consideration of the 'être spontané', in that he now recognizes the importance of the factor of consciousness; but yet man now claims, consciously, the right to be spontaneous, to enjoy 'l'incohérence des jets d'eau, des vasques, de tout ce qui est imprévu et imprévisible'. This is the area of what Lequier called 'l'arbitraire', and, like Lequier, Grenier connects it with God himself. 'Peut-être le propre de l'homme est-il la *surabondance*, et non pas seulement le propre de Dieu' (*EBL*, 42). Is this *surabondance*, then, the principle of human freedom? Grenier is not convinced. If it 'fait la joie de quelques-uns très rares', it also causes 'le malheur irrémédiable du plus grand nombre'. Elsewhere he will take up the theme of the hero who displays the absolute freedom implied by *surabondance*, 'le type de l'homme d'action, qui lui se place *au delà du choix* proprement dit, parce qu'il saute dans son élan par-dessus la délibération' (*C*, 129 (110)). Grenier cannot deny this element, and the logical conclusion of the second 'entretien' is that the attitude of 'l'abandon' is therefore impracticable. Grenier does, however, devote a certain amount of space to the theme of the Divin Jardinier and the Divin Potier, images of God which offer a guarantee and a justification of the order of the world, even if it is purely aesthetic (*EBL*, 40–41); and in the fourth 'entretien' he will distinguish between this 'abandon passif' and what he calls a 'fatalisme . . . actif', involving the Taoist concept of 'une domination sur la Nature qui suit la domination sur soi' (*EBL*, 75). He has not, then, ruled out 'l'abandon' as a possible solution, and, as with his thesis on Lequier, 'l'on y distingue . . . de la part de l'auteur, d'autres intuitions que celles que finalement il nous propose' (Lazareff, loc. cit.).

In the third 'entretien', 'L'Engagement', or 'L'Engagement arbitraire', Grenier recalls again that the modern understanding of freedom is quite

different from that which has prevailed during most of history: to free oneself meant to recognize one's vocation and then obey it. 'Connaître sa nature dans ce qu'elle avait d'original et la suivre dans ce qu'elle avait de nécessaire, telle paraissait être la mission de l'homme intelligent' (*EBL*, 45). Now the concepts of Nature, God, Society and even Man have been discarded, in favour of a 'métaphysique du pur devenir'. 'L'existentialisme . . . fait de l'homme, comme dans la Genèse, une sorte de pro-créateur ou de vice-dieu, ou plutôt il en fait un créateur et un dieu' (*EBL*, 53).⁹ Man is endowed with a 'puissance illimitée': what is he to do with it? If his radical nihilism is totally consistent, he risks achieving no more than a 'révolte . . . dans le vide', which will take the form either of a highly individualistic anarchism or else of 'le conformisme le plus écœurant' (*EBL*, 56). At least the concept of *karma*, to which Grenier refers at this point and which he discusses in more detail elsewhere,¹⁰ takes account of the past, and so 'intègre ce qu'il y a de juste dans la théorie existentialiste' (*EBL*, 56). Other traditions also emphasize the need for continuity even in revolution: Christianity and Marxism both involve definite notions of man and society.¹¹ But Grenier's main objections are still to come. The first is a simple matter of common sense. Why is it so imperative to change accepted patterns of belief and conduct and rush into an untried commitment? 'Il est sans doute odieux que l'individu soit sacrifié à un ordre; c'est une sottise qu'il le soit à un désordre. Jamais, pour ma part, je n'appellerai cela liberté' (*EBL*, 57). This is the theme of his *Essai sur l'esprit d'orthodoxie*. In response to any orthodox system which demands the loyalty of its members, he objects, first, that the individual should be set free and not enslaved, and second, that the system is in any case not free from error, bias, limitation and so on. But in the *Entretiens* he adds a further, more damning objection, based on the concept of value. It may be that the modern age has been right to discard the traditional concepts and values which provided man with something on which to build, and with some idea of the direction to follow:

Il n'en reste pas moins que la considération de la pure existence, si elle nous révèle un manque, et par conséquent nous met sur le chemin de la valeur, ne peut absolument pas nous dire en quoi consiste cette valeur. (*EBL*, 57)

A radical nihilism can only set up values that are properly quixotic. Their only justification would be an implicit denial of the professed radical nihilism by an appeal to some transcendent value. It is with such a procedure that Grenier reproaches the Sartre of *L'Être et le néant*. Although Sartre appears to reject the hypothesis of the definition of freedom 'par rapport à une valeur transcendante qui la hante', he nevertheless maintains that 'la liberté ne peut échapper à la situation et elle ne doit pas lui échapper; et elle se situera d'autant plus qu'elle revendiquera davantage sa responsabilité' (*EBL*, 58). There must be values in a given situation, and yet freedom is said to be an autonomous value

and itself the source of all value. What is the link, asks Grenier, between freedom and the system of values that is adopted in the given situation? He suspects that the system of values is in fact derived from 'la force des événements ou la ruse des instincts . . . Ou encore par une soi-disante dialectique de l'histoire', and not from freedom at all. The consequence is that freedom, supposedly the supreme value, is in fact crushed 'sous le poids de l'inintelligence' (*EBL*, 59). The call for commitment, however, is addressed to the intellect. This supreme contradiction is too much for Grenier to swallow. It is one thing to admit that the intellect is being deliberately by-passed, in an attitude of *abandon*: it is quite another to trick the intellect into betraying its own *raison d'être*.

Grenier is not content with pointing out the contradiction that he discerns in the popular brand of existentialism. He suggests that it may be possible to avoid the contradiction by dissociating the three terms of freedom, value and situation. This suggestion leads him into the fourth and last 'entretien', entitled 'Le Dégagement'. It is of particular interest, in that there exist three distinct versions of it: the 'plan' of 1946, the 'plan' and text of the *Entretiens* as published in 1948, and the 'argument' and text as published in the *Cahiers de la Pléiade*, 5, also in 1948, under the title 'La Liberté contre les valeurs' (pp. 89–102).

The 'Plan' of 1946 reads as follows:

Il est impossible de s'engager sans savoir à quoi l'on s'engage et en vertu d'une décision arbitraire. Aussi le désespoir peut-il succéder à la frénésie. Il se peut qu'aucune valeur humaine ne compte parce que trop éloignée de la Valeur suprême. Il se peut aussi qu'aucune valeur ne compte et ne puisse être remplacée par aucune autre. Or il est impossible d'échapper à la reconnaissance ou à la création d'une valeur. Je ne suis libre que lorsque j'ai fini de me dégager et n'ai pas encore commencé de m'engager. Cette attitude ambiguë ne peut être tenue longtemps, et il faut en revenir à la réflexion pour choisir, réflexion que nous avons déclarée au début être insuffisante, quoique nécessaire.

Grenier is tempted to abandon value altogether, either out of respect for a supreme but unattainable value, or simply because value can be attributed to nothing within or transcending the confines of human existence. These are extreme positions, and both involve an element of belief which contradicts the natural recognition of some kind of immanent value. Just as in the second 'entretien' Grenier was obliged to admit the *surabondance* of human existence, and so to discard the solution of *abandon* which clearly attracted him, so here he is prevented by a similar recognition of one aspect of human consciousness from adopting a radical solution that would ignore it. He is forced to the conclusion that man is only free in the brief interval between the ending of commitment to one value and the beginning of commitment to another.

In the versions of 1948 the discussion is filled out by a number of considerations which tip the balance in favour of a radical solution. The two reasons for

abandonning value altogether are supplemented by two reasons for refusing to commit oneself to a system of relative values. The 'argument' of the *Cahiers de la Pléiade* text presents the four reasons:

Un homme refuse de s'engager:

- A — ou parce qu'il ne veut pas adopter les valeurs arbitraires, par souci de la vérité,
- B — ou parce qu'il considère toute valeur accessible à l'homme comme nulle vis-à-vis d'une valeur suprême,
- C — ou parce qu'il ne veut pas aliéner sa liberté en l'enchaînant à une valeur, fût-elle neuve,
- D — ou parce qu'il ne croit à l'existence d'aucune valeur.

There is also an introductory section on the natural 'désir de *sursis*', the longing not to be irrevocably committed to one's actions and their consequences, and on the *grandeur* and *angoisse* of man's total freedom to do and to become anything at all. It is surely this apprehension, more than the intellectual demand for truth, which prepares man's refusal to commit himself, even if the argument which finally decides him is indeed that demand. Certainly in Grenier's work as a whole the affective element seems to play as important a part as the intellectual, although the intellectual often serves to justify the affective, as it did for Lequier. Be that as it may, Grenier has here introduced a new factor into the discussion, namely truth: 'Or rien, absolument rien ne permet à la liberté de s'exercer en se passant de la vérité' (art. cit., p. 93; *EBL*, 63). There is, then, another value alongside freedom which limits its exercise. But Grenier has not argued for the existence of this value, indeed he has accepted the case for the discarding of traditional values. It simply appears, unheralded, as an obstacle to any doctrine of action which 'presse l'homme de s'engager sans lui dire en quoi ni pourquoi' (ibid.; *EBL*, 62 ('... en quoi, pourquoi')). Truth is, however, presupposed by Grenier's use of the word *pourquoi*. He is demanding an evaluation of the course of action proposed. Elsewhere he demonstrates that the faculty of evaluation points to, though some would say it begs the question of, an absolute standard of value, indeed an absolute value, an Absolute *tout court*. His appeal to truth, then, is an appeal to that Absolute, and points A and B are not essentially distinct, but merely two ways of formulating the same attitude. It is that of the 'saints du désespoir' of many religious traditions, whose 'nostalgie de l'Infini' causes them to adopt a life-style that appears demented. Their prayer is:

Perfection . . .

J'espérais approcher de toi lorsque je ne savais pas que, par définition, tu es inaccessible.

Dès lors je veux m'éloigner de toi, non pour renoncer à toi, mais pour te rendre hommage . . .

Je ne veux plus être un homme ni une bête, ni quoi que ce soit au monde, mais un néant pour mieux refléter ton être . . .

A quoi peut me servir ma liberté? je ne puis atteindre qu'un but dérisoire, eu égard à toi.

La révélation d'un seul soir m'a rendu inutile le labeur de tous les matins. (*EBL*, 66)¹²

It is an attitude which could be classed as a supreme *acte divergent*, in which the second term is 'un néant'. It also has affinities with the attitude of the *héros*, whose *surabondance* is expressed not in immediate action but in a deliberate exhibition of wastefulness in which the divine attributes of man are squandered in order the better to show up those of Divinity. Of this attitude Grenier says: 'nous ne la faisons pas nôtre, mais nous la comprenons, nous l'admettons comme le privilège de quelques-uns' (*ibid.*).¹³ It involves the use of freedom in conscious opposition to reason. The ordinary mortal, however, cannot adopt such a course. At least, Grenier does not say outright that he cannot, but he poses the question in four different ways, each time expecting the answer 'No':

l'homme ordinaire, au nombre desquels bien entendu je me range, peut-il user de sa liberté contre sa raison? Peut-il, n'ayant pas un idéal de perfection divine ou humaine inaccessible, prendre un engagement qui repose sur son seul vouloir? Puis-je, moi, homme mortel, décréter ce qui est le vrai et le faux, le bien et le mal? Autrement dit, puis-je créer la valeur? (*EBL*, 67)

Instead of giving a clear answer to this series of questions, Grenier leaves them as rhetorical. The continuation of his argument shows that he does not even entertain the possibility of creating value, even in the absence of 'un idéal de perfection divine ou humaine inaccessible'. He bases his argument on the universal acceptance of some kind of values, even in cases where they are supposedly rejected. To prove his point, he analyses the content of the term *libération*.

Man chooses to cultivate certain values. That is, his freedom is a means to recognize and to obey — voluntarily — a law. By deliberately exercising choice, and by exercising it in different directions, he continually sacrifices the freedom which he possesses only for the duration of the interval between his commitment to one value and his commitment to the next. That style of existence, therefore, leads to a loss of freedom in the sense of contingency, but to the acquisition of a different kind of freedom, moral freedom or the 'liberté du sage', otherwise known as *sagesse*. Grenier maintains, however, that it is misleading to use the term 'freedom' at all in this sense, since what is involved is an abdication of freedom. He denies any intention to discuss the concept at this point, but adds the comment: 'Abdication que l'on peut juger nécessaire et qui, en tout cas, conduit au bonheur' (*EBL*, 67–68). The implication is that freedom, after all, may not be regarded as the supreme value: and certainly

there is a strand of Grenier's thought which emphasizes *sagesse* in contrast to 'cette agitation qui est la stérilité même', which is the expression of a total freedom of contingency (*IM*, 104) (106)). The sacrifice of freedom may be seen as creative. The point of the present discussion, however, is not to indicate, far less to recommend, a course which involves the sacrifice of freedom. Rather, Grenier is concerned to draw attention to the inevitable opposition between freedom and value, with the aim of then proposing that it should be the latter, and not the former, which is abandoned. This opposition between freedom and value is generally obscured, Grenier argues, by the equivocal use of the term *libération*. It should mean 'freeing', 'setting free', 'removing the obstacles to the enjoyment of freedom'. However, it is frequently used in the sense of 'changement d'idéal'. Revolt against one law is quickly followed by submission to another. Liberation, in this sense, has nothing to do with the aspects of free-will and of contingency which are present in the wider concept of freedom. It has the sense of 'affranchissement du déterminisme physique, pour obtenir une abdication totale vis-à-vis d'un autre déterminisme qui est censé lui être supérieur' (*EBL*, 71). Liberation, then, involves renunciation and resignation. The freedom that is envisaged is to be obtained by disciplined obedience to the law, for it is freedom in the Oriental sense of accomplishment of the law. Any contingent freedom that is obtained through the rejection of a previous law is immediately annihilated in the complete acceptance of a new law.

Grenier regards it as impossible, or at least inconceivable, to create value authentically; he maintains that most attempts at liberation, even those of Nietzsche and other apparently radical thinkers, in fact involve the replacement of one set of values by another to which an equal submission is required; and he is therefore led to investigate the possibility of jettisoning values completely.¹⁴ In the attitude of certain Oriental sages, particularly those of the Taoist tradition, Grenier finds an *inexistentialisme* in which 'les termes de l'équation du monde finalement s'annulent' (*EBL*, 73). It is an attitude which may be expressed in this prayer:

Nature qui ne fais aucune différence entre les êtres et pour qui le jour et la nuit sont équivalents.

Fais en sorte que je considère les hommes comme des insectes, les insectes comme des hommes et le Tout ensemble comme un Rien.

Délivre-moi du mal, c'est-à-dire de la croyance que quelque chose soit à éviter et par conséquent de la peur et du scrupule; délivre-moi du bien, c'est-à-dire de la croyance que quelque chose puisse être désiré, et par conséquent de l'envie, de la jalousie, de la cupidité et de l'orgueil.

Donne-moi la liberté du vent. (*EBL*, 73)

Complete freedom is enjoyed because the sage experiences no pull towards any doctrine, opinion or course of action. On the other hand, 'l'indifférence à

l'égard de fins idéologiques s'accompagne de différences produites par les situations données et acceptées telles quelles', so that 'Finalement l'homme n'échappe à la contrainte de la valeur qu'en recherchant la nécessité de la nature' (*EBL*, 74).¹⁵

Grenier arrives, then, at the following statement of a position of 'dégagement de toute valeur': (the underlined words are present in the *Cahiers de la Pléiade* text but absent from that of the *Entretiens*)

Nous nous arrêtons donc à cette solution provisoire, qui offre le mérite de ne rien préjuger de la vérité et de l'idéal et de donner une règle de conduite qui n'engage en rien celui qui l'adopte, ne lui donne aucune responsabilité sociale, et, par l'abstention difficile qu'elle impose à chacun, assure, en même temps que le bonheur des autres, le sien propre. L'idéal change, la Nature demeure; et le meilleur usage que l'homme puisse faire de la liberté, c'est de n'en faire aucun. (*EBL*, 75)

The increasing firmness with which this solution is presented is to be seen, along with the use of the term *inexistentialisme*, as a protest against the rising tide of Sartrean Existentialism, rather than as an indication of any greater dogmatism on Grenier's part. He saw in existentialism a disguised and less honest form of the 'positivisme médiocre' into which he accused Western thought of falling all too easily (*ELF*, 74). It claimed to respect the freedom of the individual: on the contrary, says Grenier, the only doctrine which truly respects the freedom of the individual is one such as that preached by the school of Lao Tzu. In the *Entretiens avec Louis Foucher* he admits: 'Je ne la [cette sagesse] prêche pas parce que je la crois inaccessible. Elle me paraît être un beau rêve et je ne vois pas pourquoi l'on ne rêverait pas' (*ELF*, 75-76). The way of indifference certainly held a considerable attraction for him, and that aspect of his thought will be examined later: but in the context of the *Entretiens sur le bon usage de la liberté* it is important to note that Grenier points to a wide range of possible solutions in passing, and that the extreme solution with which he appears to conclude is by no means the only one that is considered in a favourable light. He indicates, for instance, that truth and happiness are values which may seem more desirable in a given situation than freedom: but he insists that in that case the facts should be admitted for what they are, and subjection to a particular value or set of values should not be dissimulated under the name of freedom.

What, then, does Grenier understand by 'freedom' in this first part of the *Entretiens*? By stating at the outset that 'l'auteur suppose qu'il est libre' (*EBL*, 9), and by adopting Sartre's maxim that 'la condition première de l'action, c'est la liberté' (*EBL*, 7), he is clearly indicating that he will be concerned with a freedom-to-act, a freedom which may be defined as a lack of constraint on the brink of action. However, that kind of freedom may already appear limited by the need to make a choice which bounds it, and which emerges together with the phenomenon of consciousness. There is an area of freedom which is

unlimited, and it is that freedom which is experienced in terms of possibility or of contingency. It is an area of semi-consciousness, for while the consciousness needs to be awakened in order to perceive it, yet the exercise of the consciousness will lead to a perception of the Absolute which underlies all contingent existence, and that perception will strike all possibility sterile. The question is, can that kind of freedom be preserved, in all its fragility, in such a way that it succumbs neither to the Absolute nor to the tyranny of some system of merely relative values? That question underlies Grenier's two novels, *Les Grèves* and *Voir Naples*. Then a third type of freedom is envisaged, a freedom which is not original but which is achieved, through the deliberate acceptance of a pattern of existence that is to some extent imposed. The freedom that is supposedly gained through liberation is shown to be a false freedom, because it does not involve deliverance from value, but a radical freedom is proposed which does involve precisely that.

Underlying all this discussion of the various types of freedom is an agonizing tension. On the one hand there is the *surabondance* of contingent existence, the freedom to be what one is not, to be creative,¹⁶ to initiate; on the other, there is the desire for harmony, for coincidence with the rest of the universe, for a sense of completeness. Grenier tries to hold these two terms together, and it is not inconceivable to attempt to do so, for both are ultimately dependent on some idea of the Absolute, whether understood as a transcendent being, or as the totality of the universe, or as Nature. What he is unable to accept is an overemphasis on the first term, without a compensating regard for the second. The attraction of the Taoist way is that it seems to open up a new region in which the ambition for the Absolute can after all be realized, by the identification of the sage with the Tao itself, the Absolute Principle of existence. The tension will then be resolved, for the Principle displays both the arbitrary *surabondance* proper to divinity and humanity alike, and the regular harmony against which contingent existence always stands out. It is that solution that Grenier goes on to explore in the final part of the *Entretiens*, 'le non-agir d'après le Tao'.

Just as important as the content of the four 'entretiens' is the method adopted by Grenier to investigate freedom and the use to which it is to be put. He devotes a considerable proportion of the space to passages that are evocative rather than analytical or conclusive. Thus each 'entretien' includes two passages of a deliberately different tone which are indented on the page and also given a distinctive label: in the first 'entretien' there are two 'anecdotes' (*EBL*, 17–18, 18–19), in the second, two 'méditations' (*EBL*, 29–30, 37–38), in the third, two 'fables' (*EBL*, 47–48, 56–57), and in the fourth, two 'prières' (*EBL*, 66, 73). In addition to these, the 'entretiens' contain introductions and digressions which, while not advancing the argument, allow the affective element its place alongside the intellectual. It is in the place given to

this intensely personal aspect of existence, even more than in the more complete survey of the possible options, that the *Entretiens* mark an advance on *Le Choix*. The important shift of emphasis may have come between 1946 and 1948, for not only is all indication of the 'anecdotes', etc., missing from the 'plan' of 1946, but, in the opening paragraph of the 'plan', the sentence that is underlined here appears only in 1948:

L'auteur suppose qu'il est libre. En possession de sa liberté, que va-t-il faire? Suivant quel principe agira-t-il? Et, dans chaque cas, de quels sentiments sera-t-il animé?

The period 1946–48, then, may be said to be of significance in preparing the way for a new human concern which is a more sober development of the lyrical Mediterranean humanism of the mid-1930s. The following ten years were to see the genesis of Grenier's two novels and the publication of one of them, the appearance of the essays entitled *A propos de l'humain* (1955), *L'Existence malheureuse* (1957) and *Sur la mort d'un chien* (1957), and the beginning of the series of *Lexiques*.

The second part of the *Entretiens*, entitled 'Existence et destinée', similarly displays concern with human reality and not only with intellectual argument. Indeed Grenier somewhat teasingly disparages his achievement in the first part, introducing a brief summary of its scope and conclusions with the remark that 'On a souvent beau jeu de parler de la liberté comme s'il s'agissait d'une chose abstraite' (*EBL*, 79). The types of people whose attitude he has analysed are rarely found, he claims, in the pure state. Man finds himself in a given situation, he tries to move to another situation. He is an actor, not a spectator: 'Ce n'est pas un esprit pur qui décide en l'air de choses intemporelles.' His existence is provided with a framework. Grenier therefore proposes to ask, 'quelle est la part du cadre dans l'existence, après nous être demandé quelle est celle du tableau' (*EBL*, 80). *Les Grèves* and *Voir Naples* bear the traces of this meditation.

Grenier distinguishes between *le Destin*, Fate, which is impersonal and external to man, and quite inflexible, and the modern understanding of *la destinée*, destiny, which is personal, internal, and, within limits, governable. 'J'appellerai donc *destinée* la direction que prend l'existence d'un individu lorsqu'il est entraîné à faire quelque chose par suite d'une force intérieure, lorsqu'il est dominé par elle au point d'en être le prisonnier' (*EBL*, 81). Something may be learned about the direction of this destiny through characterology and psycho-analysis; in any case, it must be understood if any control is to be exerted over it. The existentialist claim to be free, at any moment, 'non seulement de faire, mais encore de me faire' (*EBL*, 85), simply does not take account of the facts. Grenier does not appeal here, as he does in the first part of the *Entretiens*, to the doctrine of *karma* to supply what is lacking in the existentialist system, but he does speak of the importance of having a 'point

d'appui stable en moi-même', in relation to which the desire to change can have some meaning. He quotes with approval from *La Nouvelle Héloïse* (v, ii): 'Chacun apporte en naissant un tempérament particulier qui détermine son génie et son caractère, et qu'il s'agit ni de changer ni de contraindre, mais de former et de perfectionner' (*EBL*, 88). This is similar to the point of view put forward in the second 'méditation' of the second 'entretien'. In this sense, 'Être libre, c'est ne dépendre que de soi, c'est-à-dire de sa nécessité native.' However, while the theory is perfectly respectable, Grenier is evidently not a practitioner of it. The verb *devoir* plays a large part in this section, and the inclusion of two 'examens de conscience' indicates still more clearly that he is aware of having failed to live up to his own precepts:

1^{er} examen de conscience.

Or je puis me demander si j'ai tout mis en œuvre pour parvenir à cette connaissance indispensable de moi-même. N'ai-je pas traîné trop longtemps dans le marécage du quotidien, donc de l'éphémère? J'ai lu des journaux au lieu de livres, j'ai rendu des visites à des hommes au lieu d'en attendre des dieux. J'ai éparpillé ma vie en tâches inutiles et me suis informé de toutes sortes de choses qui ne me concernaient pas. Je n'ai pas cherché à connaître ma nature intime, j'ignore ce que je possède et je vis sans savoir pourquoi, à l'aveugle. Encore un jour inutile, un matin sans travail, un soir sans fruit. J'ai été porté par la vague, je ne me suis pas fait irremplaçable . . . (*EBL*, 85–86)

2^e examen de conscience.

Ai-je fait tout ce que j'ai pu pour permettre à ceux qui m'entourent ce libre élan vers leur destinée personnelle qui leur donne le bonheur? . . . (*EBL*, 89–91)

If Grenier can claim with some justice that he has

essayé d'orienter ceux que j'ai approchés vers l'action qui me paraissait la plus propre à la fois à satisfaire leurs penchants originels et leurs ambitions les plus secrètes — vers les églises les mieux établies ou les partis les plus extrémistes

he has, by his own admission, failed to build decisively on his own 'point d'appui'. Like Franz in *Voir Naples*, he has allowed himself to be 'emporté par le courant' (*VN*, 223); or like the narrator of *Les Grèves*, he has appreciated the *cadre* of his existence but has not been open to the *appel* that will evoke a truly creative impulse from him. The problem, although Grenier does not admit it explicitly in this chapter, is that he is not convinced that a personal *destinée* is an adequate replacement for the older concept of an external *Destin*. As he says,

La pensée de l'éternité, qu'il s'agisse du retour éternel ou d'un Dieu éternel, ne cadre pas bien avec la croyance au progrès infini sur une même ligne. Il faudrait opter, parier carrément pour l'homme ou pour Dieu, pour les possibilités ou l'arrêt implacable (*EBL*, 92)

but he himself is unable to sacrifice either term. He seeks the *solitude* of individuality, but shuns the complete *isolement* of the perfectly responsible

contingent being.¹⁷ A partial solution may be found in a new concept that is more flexible than that of *Destin* but also more tolerable than that of *destinée* with its stern demand for full responsibility. That concept is of *la destination* (the title of the second chapter of 'Existence et destinée'). A god can take pleasure in the spectacle of pure existence, and indeed some men seem to have been able to adopt something of the same attitude: Augustus, Goethe, Gide's Thésée, 'les poètes de l'instantané et les mystiques de la quiétude'. But human existence is not an *instant*, it is 'plongée dans le temps' (*EBL*, 102), and man expects his existence to have a direction and a destination, even when he sees them being frustrated. Indeed, he sees the realization of his *destinée* in terms of reaching the *destination* in which he believes. This last is based on values that are ultimately subjective, for while they may be universally accepted in a particular culture, they will be contradicted by others outside that culture. However, the transcendent act involved in setting up these values implies the possibility of evaluation: and that in turn implies that it is not purely subjective but is dependent upon some higher reality:

Autrement dit, l'homme crée, mais il ne crée pas volontairement. S'il *fait* sa destinée, c'est en se *laissant faire* par cet être intérieur qui le contraint à des actes qui dépassent sa nature. La destination de l'homme en général est de s'accomplir en tant qu'homme et puis de se nier en tant que tel. L'humanité n'a pas sa fin en elle-même; à force d'évaluer, elle voit bien que tout vaut relativement et donc que rien ne vaut absolument. C'est ce relatif qui nous instruit de l'absolu. (*EBL*, 114-15)¹⁸

Grenier is correcting the existentialists' use of Lequier's motto: 'Faire, et en faisant, se faire', by returning to Lequier's own understanding of a transcendent reality whose role is 'Faire faire'. For Lequier that reality was the Christian God: Grenier is only prepared, for the moment, to speak in terms of the Absolute.

The place of the *cadre* of human existence, then, is to provide a framework within which man can 'se laisser faire' towards the fulfilment of his *destinée* and the attainment of his *destination* (*EBL*, 114). The appeal to the Absolute, however, is far from solving the problem, for it begs the whole question of human existence. Grenier's attitude to the concept of a *destination* is two-sided. On the one hand he considers that his humanity prevents him from adopting attitudes based on a rejection of any such *destination*, and he pursues his acceptance of it to a conclusion which points to the Absolute: but on the other hand he finds himself confronted with an absence:

Mais l'existence de l'absolu se cache et bouge derrière la tapisserie du monde. On ne la voit pas, elle se manifeste par une absence qui est plus active que les présences, comme à une soirée à laquelle manque le maître de maison. (*EBL*, 115)

The importance of the part played by man is severely reduced by the appeal to the Absolute, but at the same time the guarantee of any reality beyond man is

withheld, so that he is in danger of being abandoned to a sterile, drifting existence. He is 'in-between', neither one thing nor the other. The tension inherent in human existence is a constant of Grenier's thought, and it is significant that he returns to it at the end of 'Existence et destinée', which marks the end of the *Entretiens* proper. He concludes by suggesting that 'l'homme était surtout (je ne dis pas uniquement) fait pour se donner parce que, tout compte fait, il n'avait presque rien (je ne dis pas rien) à perdre' (ibid.). All the reservations here are designed to preserve the complexity and ambiguity of Grenier's understanding of man as both a free creative agent and also a finite being dependent on an Absolute Being. The exquisite agony of this metaphysical gamble prevents Grenier from settling for any solution that would definitively put an end to it. Indeed, he was later to claim that what attracted him above all in Taoism was that while the most advanced quietistic and mystical doctrines of the West always held out the ultimate certainty that 'il y a quelqu'un derrière la porte . . . et qu'on va trouver quelqu'un', in Taoism, on the contrary, 'il me semble justement, et c'est ce qui d'ailleurs m'attire et m'effraie beaucoup dans le taoïsme, c'est que derrière la porte il n'y a rien'.¹⁹

The value of 'Existence et destinée' lies not so much in the actual arguments concerning *Destin*, *destinée* and *destination*, but in the conviction that the isolated *destinée* of the contingent individual must be founded on the pursuit of a *destination* underwritten by the Absolute, whose absence, however, makes the isolation more intense than ever. In the two parts of the *Entretiens* Grenier has done much more than speak about 'le bon usage de la liberté'. By illustration, evocation and demonstration he has presented the impossible situation of the human being who is aware not only of his own contingency but of the conflicting ambitions to which that contingency gives rise. In a more thorough way than is possible in the lyrical essays and novels, and in a more intensely human way than in *Le Choix*, Grenier has laid bare his own acute metaphysical preoccupations, without sacrificing the elusiveness that characterizes the other writings. His method itself represents a 'bon usage de la liberté', quite apart from his exploration of the dimensions of freedom and possibility.