

CHAPTER 4

INDIFFERENCE AND THE TAOIST EXPERIENCE

In Chapters 2 and 3 it has been shown how Grenier's thought hovers around the twin problems of freedom and choice, reluctant either to make an irrevocable decision or to exclude decisions altogether. Abstention and indifference have inevitably come within the bounds of his meditation, but so far the attraction they hold for him has not been analysed in detail.

It is possible to analyse Grenier's treatment of indifference by means of a study of his imagery, in particular the imagery of the sea. Georges Sebbag, in an article entitled 'L'Indifférence',¹ makes good use of Grenier's images in what is essentially a phenomenological survey. Grenier himself, while quite capable of adopting a phenomenological approach when that suits his purpose,² prefers increasingly to study the theme of indifference from another perspective. He is careful to emphasize its close links with the concept of the Absolute, or rather to show that if it does not have those close links then it is not true indifference.

Grenier, in fact, moves towards a limited interpretation of indifference which excludes many of the attitudes and states that are popularly considered to be indifferent. The imagery with which Sebbag is concerned, and which he considers under the headings 'Paysages' and 'La Nature morte', is by no means always consonant with indifference as Grenier understands it. The sustained image of the sea, and of a boat drifting on the sea, such as is found in *Voir Naples*, is for Grenier a representation of something other than what he wants to call indifference: it is more an image of possibility. In his writings which precede *Le Choix* (1941), however, there is a certain amount of overlap, and these must be examined first. They will provide the background against which to see Grenier's increasing preoccupation with a particular type of indifference, deliberate, studied and radical.

There is no mention of indifference in the three major lyrical essays published in the period up to 1930: 'Interiora rerum' (1927), 'Portrait de Mouloud' (1929) and 'Cum apparuerit' (1930). The first and the third already announce the contrasting theme of Mediterranean humanism. The second draws much of its inspiration from the pantheism of the Upanishads, but the emphasis is on the abolition of 'cette distance qui, à chaque réveil, renaît entre le monde et moi' (*LI*, 16 (36)),³ rather than on the abolition of difference

within an indifferent universe. It is a positive message: 'sa présence me redonnait confiance (une présence qui contenait tout)'. Not surprisingly, however, it is the same India of the Upanishads that also stimulates Grenier's meditation on indifference. The contemplation of 'Cela' inevitably gives rise to an attitude of indifference. The positive, vital presence of Mouloud is eclipsed. In the *Nouvelle Revue française* in 1930 Grenier writes: 'Le monde me dit absent au seul moment où je suis éveillé . . . Si je dors je me rapproche de Cela, si je meurs, je tends à me confondre avec lui.' That is indeed what constitutes the fascination of India. 'Ce qui fait à nos yeux le génie de l'Inde (et pour nous le mot Inde est bien entendu un symbole) c'est son adoration de l'unité et son indifférence à l'homme.'⁴ In 1933, for the first edition of *Les Îles*, Grenier was to add further references to indifference in his essay entitled 'L'Inde (l'Homme et l'Absolu)': 'Toute pensée est sans valeur et par conséquent égale en indifférence à son contraire: +0 = -0' (*LI*, 144 (133)) (this in a section entitled 'L'Inde d'après les psychiatres', which foreshadows the later essay on indifference); and, underlining the symbolic value of India, 'Il ne comprenait pas qu'il me fût indifférent de connaître la terre de l'indifférence' (*LI*, 148 (136)). Indifference, then, at this stage in Grenier's thinking, is closely connected with India and in particular with Indian metaphysics, but is nevertheless not confined geographically to the East. It is already linked to the concepts of 'l'Absolu' and 'l'Unité', which will continue to be important. In the section which closes the essay, consisting of a conversation between 'Cornélius' and 'Moi' entitled 'La Réalisation', the following exchange takes place: 'CORNÉLIUS — Cet Absolu dont nous parlons, qui fait la gloire de l'Inde à tes yeux, crois-tu que nous ne l'avons pas recherché en Europe? . . . MOI — Mais eux l'ont réalisé' (*LI*, 150 (138)). Indifference as an attitude, while not necessarily desirable in itself, is the corollary of an exclusive cult of the Absolute, a cult which abolishes distance and leads to a practical understanding of what to the West are still mysteries: 'la communion, l'incarnation, la rédemption'.

It seems, then, that Grenier's understanding of indifference fluctuates during the 1930s. From an initial fascination with its Indian expression he moves to a wider awareness of similar experiences of indifference in other cultural contexts, and indeed in his own. However, there is almost always a strong link with the Absolute. The exceptions which prove the rule are those essays⁵ in which Grenier deliberately ignores the call of the Absolute in order to establish a relative and provisional system of values — something which, as he is only too well aware, is invalidated by the exclusive claims of the Absolute — in the tradition of a Mediterranean humanism. The inevitable tension between these two positions is best expressed in the 'Cornélius' writings of 1939–41.

The first edition of *Les Îles* in 1933 had already presented Cornélius in two short exchanges with 'Moi' in the final essay, 'L'Inde'. 'Moi' represents that part of Grenier that is attracted by the uncompromising cult of the Absolute

that is found in India, while Cornélius, evidently a Dutchman,⁶ stands for the traditional Western *via media* between exclusive devotion and total *laisser-aller*. In the second exchange, already quoted, Cornélius claims that the Absolute has been the goal of Europe just as much as of India. The reply is that only India has managed to suppress the *écart* between man and the Absolute. The third exchange is much fuller, and takes the form of a long letter to Cornélius and the reply to it, both published in 1939, together with fragments of a second letter, published in 1941.⁷ The problem is now no longer posed exclusively, or even mainly, in terms of India, given the development of Grenier's thought in the 1930s. It is seen as much more immediate. Cornélius complains that no sooner has his correspondent extricated himself from the 'sables mouvants' (a reference to the passage from 'Un Soir à Biskra' quoted above) than he dreams of sinking back again: 'toi tu veux du premier coup te précipiter dans l'éternité', whereas the right course is to act and so to create one's own order: 'toi-même penses-tu te connaître si tu n'as commencé par agir et par te faire ce que tu es?' (*IM*, 179–82) (181–84)).

This is the problem in a nutshell, and the lyrical essays of the 1930s have been approaching it from different angles. In 'Santa-Cruz' and 'La Villa d'Hadrien' the 'sables mouvants' have been an initial state from which Grenier has indeed extricated himself, but then the question of the exact nature and significance of the *bonheur* or *félicité* that is said to be obtained is bound to lead on to that of ultimate value. If an answer is given, as Grenier is always tempted to give it, in terms of the Absolute, then of course he will plunge back into indifference. That indifference will then be final rather than initial, and the adoption of it will have been dependent, if not on an actual choice, at least on a confrontation with the Absolute which can occur only at a stage beyond that of an initial pre-conscious state. Even so, however, the recognition of the Absolute is not the end of the matter, as Grenier accepts in the 'Lettre à Cornélius': 'Mon ami, je devrais avec tout cela être parfaitement indifférent. Il n'en est rien.' He recognizes that life, 'ce spectacle dont je perce à chaque instant la vanité', is of no ultimate value, and yet he remains irresistibly attracted by it. He is torn between 'un être inaccessible et un amour que je ne puis dissimuler' (in 1939: 'un songe que je ne puis dissiper') (*IM*, 167–69 (171–72): the later version gives more weight to the human *entre-deux*).

A similar tension is expressed, but with a significantly different emphasis, in 'L'Attrait du vide' (1946): 'Comment se fait-il qu'avec un pareil tempérament je n'aie pas été indifférent à tout? Or tout me blessait . . .' This time it is the other pan of the scales that is more heavily weighted. It is not the positive value of life that touches him despite its transience, as in the 1930s, but a more complex sentiment, that of annoyance caused by the 'mille petits accidents de la vie' which, while infinitely inferior to 'ce qui seul comptait pour moi', at the same time refuse to be assimilated to the 'vacuité du monde'. Existence then

ceases to be indifferent. 'Je passe malgré moi de l'instant de *l'indifférence* à celui du *choix*. Je me prends au jeu, je cherche dans un éphémère un absolu qui n'y est pas; au lieu du silence et du dédain, j'entretiens en moi un tumulte' (*LI* (2), 14–15 (27–28)). The tension here has a different quality. Whereas the 'Cornélius' letters are concerned with creation (and the alternative to a tyrannical and unjustifiable creation *ex nihilo* is seen as a metamorphosis rather than as total inactivity), with the attempt to 'percer les abîmes d'oubli et d'indifférence' (*IM*, 160 (164)) even if that same indifference proves to exercise too strong an attraction, 'L'Attrait du vide' reveals a nostalgia for childhood states of 'une quasi parfaite indifférence, une apathie sereine — l'état du dormeur éveillé'. It being impossible to return to those states, the goal of 'les courses, les voyages' is perfection, which is an avatar of the Absolute (*LI* (2), 13, 15 (26, 29)). In 'Les Îles Borromées' (also 1946), although the conclusion is different, there is the same idea of an unending quest: 'A quoi bon voyager? . . . Je n'en aurai jamais fini et ne trouverai jamais ma *Dulcinée*' (*APH*, 179; *LI* (3), 155). The fact of the quest precludes an attitude of total indifference, of course: but then the very need for it is seen as a disruption of the ideal state of a perfectly indifferent contemplation of the Absolute. 'L'Humain' (1950) states explicitly: 'Une métaphysique de l'Absolu, celle à laquelle j'adhère, tourne le dos à l'humain et cherche la délivrance dans la rupture des liens qui attachent à la vie' (*APH*, 198).

These later texts⁸ seem to indicate that between 1939 and 1946 Grenier's understanding of indifference narrowed again, excluding the open-ended sense of creative possibility and returning to the close association with the Absolute which had been present as a theme all the time but which had had to compete with the other. This is the period when Grenier published two important pieces of work which deal with indifference. One is the book *Le Choix* (1941), the other an essay called simply 'L'Indifférence' in *L'Existence* (1945) (reprinted in *A propos de l'humain* (1955) as 'Les Tentatives d'indifférence'). Having looked, during the 1930s, both at cults of the Absolute which lead to an attitude of indifference and at states of indifference in common experience, he now examines particular historical and social instances of indifference in order to discover whether or not a truly radical indifference is possible, and what the connection is with the Absolute.

Grenier's discussion of indifference in *Le Choix* depends on the concept of the Absolute to which he has come in the course of the preceding pages. The experience of contingency, that is, the sense that the conscious individual has of 'le vide, le manque — en général l'intervalle qui sépare l'être nécessaire — que l'intelligence conçoit — du sensible toujours mouvant et contingent que les sens appréhendent', leads him to pose the problem of how to 'situer ce vide qui est au centre de la pensée' (*C*, 15 (23)). By considering whether or not thought exists as a thing in the sense that other things exist, Grenier is brought to the

conclusion that 'la pensée ne s'ajoute pas au monde; elle s'en retranche'. He continues: 'De même s'il doit y avoir un Lien et un Soutien de toutes les pensées individuelles, un Absolu, si l'on veut, il ne s'obtiendra pas par l'addition des parties du monde; ou encore par sa superposition au Relatif, mais par sa soustraction au monde manifesté' (C, 32 (36)). This Absolute, then, partakes of the nature of non-being, of *vide*, or *néant*, while at the same time underlying the being of the world. For the mind to reach the Absolute by a sudden intuition, or by a mystical union, or by any other means, 'ne signifie pas que l'esprit nous ait paru s'attacher au Néant d'abord, puis à l'Être; mais que la même réalité se soit manifestée à lui sous ses deux faces'. It is beyond the categories of being, which are relative. 'Il a un nom négatif: ce qui est délié, ce qui est délivré', for it is Ab-solu, 'un être libéré de tout lien'. It cannot therefore be named, and indeed, as the Vedântists recognized, 'nous ne pouvons le connaître que par une négation' (C, 40-42 (43-44)). At the same time, however, this ineffable Absolute is a reality to which the human spirit is irresistibly drawn. What is more, the contemplation of the Absolute 'a pour effet, plus que tout autre, de paralyser l'homme et de lui rendre non seulement inexplicable mais étranger le monde où il est condamné à vivre'. Man oscillates between 'une ivresse mystique qui le rend incapable d'agir' and 'un fatalisme qui l'en dégoûte d'avance'. Action is sterilized by the 'pensée de l'Absolu', or else it becomes entirely indiscriminate. In either case, the corollary is 'un sentiment de *totale indifférence*' (C, 88-89, 135-37, n. 29 (71-73)).

That, at least, is the theory. Grenier has been showing all through this second part of the book, entitled 'L'Absolu et le monde', that it is impossible to argue from the Absolute to the world. He asked at the outset: 'comment la pensée peut-elle se délivrer de l'Un?' (C, 63 (47)), and now he is replying that it cannot, or not justifiably. That is the only answer that does justice to the complete otherness of the Absolute over against the relative world. It is at this point that historical examples must be considered. What forms of indifference have been advocated, and to what extent has the practice in fact corresponded to the theory?

Grenier makes no claim to conduct an exhaustive survey. He takes a handful of examples from different ages and cultures: Vedântists, Stoics, Scholastics, and certain contemporary French writers (Gide, Valéry, Montherlant, Malraux, Morand). All these propound theories of indifference. In the case of both Stoics and Scholastics it is reason that destroys indifference in practice. For the Stoics it is 'la raison du sage', for the Scholastics, the reason of the Creator God. In both cases, the concept of reason as an accessible value, and therefore constitutive of a moral system, serves to outlaw indifference.

In his search for a historical example of true indifference, Grenier therefore turns to the other two traditions he has found which advocate indifference as an attitude. They fall into a separate category, opposed to that which comprises

the Stoics and the Scholastics in that they do not respect the concept of accessible value. However, the rigorous non-dualism of the Vedânta degenerates into an incarnationalism in which the all-important distinction is entirely lost. As for the modern Nihilists, the emphasis has been increasingly placed on action, on creation, on success, which all too easily leads to the establishment of a system of values, an 'ordre humain'. What began with an uncompromising absolute, seen either as *the* Absolute, the sole value, or conversely as a negative absolute, the absolute absence of value, finishes in the domain of the relative.

Just as the Vedântists prefer to speak of Brahman only in the negative, Grenier has so far been defining indifference in negative terms, by disqualifying those expressions of it which fail to correspond to a pure conception of the Absolute. In 'Les Tentatives d'indifférence' he undertakes a more systematic analysis of types of indifference, building up to what he terms 'l'indifférence par désintéret', which, he claims, 'n'implique pas une méthode mais un système, elle n'est ni provisoire ni partielle mais totale et définitive' (*APH*, 108). The other types which he considers are all, in some way, either provisional or partial or both.

It would be a mistake, however, to see indifference 'par désintéret' as the only form that exercises any fascination over Grenier. Examples of several forms of indifference may be found in his own writings: but the point is that they do not satisfy his need for an absolute ideal. In the case of 'l'indifférence par apathie', for instance, Grenier would find it more appropriate to speak in terms of possibility than in terms of indifference. Where apathy really does seem to turn into indifference is in the morbid state. 'Les déments précoces' are truly indifferent in that they construct for themselves a separate existence, hiding from the external world behind a barrier. Grenier hints at a connection with the religious mystic: 'c'est une image déformée de l'ermite pour qui le monde n'existe plus et qui s'est réfugié en lui-même' (*APH*, 102). There is an important distinction, however, which is brought out both in this passage and in a similar passage in *Le Choix* headed 'L'Indifférence du point de vue pathologique' (*C*, 92–93 (75–76)). Dementia, melancholia, constitutional depression and schizophrenia may all at times give rise to states of indifference, but such states are never seen as an ideal. 'L'indifférence par apathie est un cas-limite de l'existence: je ne puis pas dire qu'elle soit du domaine idéal de l'Être (ou de la surexistence), car le sujet ne fait pas d'effort conscient pour dépasser le plan de son existence.' The ideal, the absolute, must be recognized and aimed at consciously. True indifference, then, is not to be equated with some kind of preconscious natural pantheism, or with the desire to return to the womb. The definition is becoming clearer.

Grenier's demand for lucidity is seen again in his discussion of the next type of indifference, that which is 'par égoïsme' (*APH*, 103–04). The egoist is lucid enough, indeed he is hyperconscious of particular areas of existence: however,

such indifference as he displays is partial. It is not the world as a whole that is scorned. Even the Epicurean so-called sage is selective in his attitudes: his is 'un égoïsme plus raffiné, à base de résignation et de fierté', given his claim to possess 'les moyens de ne pas souffrir et de jouir'. Grenier is not only refusing to accept common definitions of indifference, he is also rejecting the popular understanding of the sage as one who somehow rises above the world and attains a degree of serenity. Once again he demands a much greater stress on the conscious pursuit of an ideal that lies beyond the world.

Another reason for what is generally called indifference is the inability or unwillingness to commit oneself to a firm judgement. Grenier devotes only a few lines to 'l'indifférence par impartialité', but it bulks large in his thinking in other places, particularly in the *Entretiens sur le bon usage de la liberté* and in *L'Existence malheureuse* (APH, 104–05).⁹ Every course of action, every opinion, has arguments both for and against it. In the case of the judge, his indifference is bound to be provisional, and indeed is significant only in so far as it is so, at any rate in theory. In practice Grenier's reasoning anticipates what he will say in *L'Existence malheureuse* about explanations of the problem of evil. His contention there is that the particular explanation given by any individual will depend on the metaphysical framework which he has already chosen to accept (EM, 139–40). In the present passage, he continues: 'De toute façon, l'homme n'a pas les éléments pour juger en dernier ressort; il faut qu'il s'en rapporte à une autorité supérieure à lui . . . Que s'il ne le fait pas, il est condamné à ne pas aboutir' (APH, 105). Once again the question of value, and hence of the Absolute, is seen to be basic to Grenier's understanding of indifference. In any case, indifference through impartiality can be only a temporary state: either it will lead to an actual judgement, or else the impossibility of arriving at a satisfactory judgement will raise the whole question of value, which in turn may lead to a much more radical indifference.

It is at this point that Grenier considers the attitude of the sceptic, one who would like to reach a conclusion but finds himself unable to. Surely here is someone who has arrived at a state of true indifference through the full exercise of his conscious intelligence? 'Attiré et repoussé par des forces venant de toutes directions, il ne peut juger parce qu'il n'a pas de critérium interne qui puisse faire pencher la balance' (APH, 105). His indifference, though provisional in theory, is in practice definitive. Has Grenier then discovered an expression of true indifference in the attitude of the sceptic, even before he reaches his final category of 'l'indifférence par désintéressé'? In order to answer that question it is necessary to anticipate a little and refer to his investigation of Taoism.

The view of the sceptic that emerges from passages in *Le Choix* (1941), *L'Existence malheureuse* (1957), *Absolu et choix* (1961) and *Mémoires intimes de X.* (1971), as well as from 'Les Tentatives d'indifférence' (1945/1955), is interesting both for the obvious attraction that Grenier finds in Pyrrhonian

scepticism and for the sense of incompleteness which it gives him when measured against the doctrine of the Taoist masters. Before 1941, that is before he became deeply interested in Taoism, Grenier had written in general terms of Greek attitudes to life and death (e.g. in 'Interiora rerum', 1927), and had commented on the 'désespoir stoïque' which is to be regarded as a 'résignation' but not as 'indifférence' ('Dans la campagne romaine', 1936) (*IM*, 64 (65)), but he had not turned his attention specifically to the Sceptics. His interest in Scepticism and in Taoism grew side by side, and the year 1948 saw the publication both of the *Entretiens sur le bon usage de la liberté*, with its long section on 'Le Non-agir d'après le Tao', and of a volume of the writings of Sextus Empiricus, translated by Grenier and J. Goron, and with a preface by Grenier. Already in 1941 he gave some attention to the Sceptics in *Le Choix* (*C*, 96 (79–80)): according to him, they considered the things of this world as 'découlant d'archétypes', and as having no value in themselves. The only criterion of value was the ideal world of 'les Êtres et les Formes'. That world being inaccessible, their attitude was one of nostalgia. At the same time, 'tout ce qui ne gardait pas un reflet de l'Absolu était entaché de nullité', and therefore the real world could hardly be taken seriously. So far the indifference of the Sceptics would seem to answer perfectly to Grenier's criteria: total concentration on the Absolute, total scorn for the world. However, after 1941, as Grenier became better acquainted with both Scepticism and Taoism, the limitations of the former began to emerge. Scepticism is neither one thing nor the other. The Taoist is superior to the Sceptic in that 'il ne s'attarde pas à des réfutations, il ne suppose pas que la vérité soit à trouver par l'intelligence ni même à chercher, ni qu'il faille, pour arriver au but, suivre une longue route' (1948) (*EBL*, 127). Again, the Taoist 'tire du scepticisme les conséquences que Pyrrhon et ses disciples n'ont jamais osé appliquer à l'action puisqu'ils s'accommodent d'un état de choses social qu'il ne valait pas la peine, selon eux, de changer, abdiquant en pratique ce qu'ils avaient revendiqué en théorie'. The Taoist goes further, scorning all values and therefore having no scruples about transgressing the laws (*EBL*, 135–36). In 1957 Grenier recommends an attitude of systematic annihilation of the world through doubt, thus going far beyond a mere philosophical criticism like that of the Sceptics who found in the world 'une foule de contradictions internes' (*EM*, 48).¹⁰ In 1961 he notes that 'le Sceptique ne pouvant atteindre la vérité (tout en la cherchant) ne peut déterminer une valeur; mais il est forcé par les exigences de la vie quotidienne d'agir' (*C* (2), 109 (113)). In all these passages, the emphasis is on the intellectual aspect of Scepticism. The concept of value, in the form of truth, is retained, even if it is regarded as inaccessible. The merit of the Taoist, according to Grenier, is to discard that concept altogether. In the first part of the *Entretiens* he does not even use Scepticism as an intermediate doctrine on the way to what he calls a 'dégagement de toute valeur', but goes straight to Taoism.

In *Le Choix* it seemed as though value was going to be the important factor in distinguishing those historical traditions which have achieved an attitude of true indifference from those which have failed to do so; and indeed, although there may have been a failure at the point of translating theory into consistent practice, the distinction is not thereby invalidated. The quest for an actual historical example of a consistent, radical indifference is still to be pursued. Perhaps in *Le Choix* the preparation for the empirical examination of historical instances was too theoretical, and the procedure itself too summary. In 'Les Tentatives d'indifférence' Grenier has been building up to his final category of 'l'indifférence par désintérêt' more carefully, with closer attention given to actual experience. Does the rejection of value now seem any more feasible?

Grenier proceeds in two stages. First of all he considers what he calls 'le sentiment d'équivalence'. In comparison with the other attitudes examined so far, equivalence may qualify for consideration as an attitude of radical indifference. However, it is too unstable and impure to satisfy him. He traces its cause to 'un mélange de désespoir raffiné et d'épicurisme vulgaire', and suggests that it leads to dilettantism. In *Le Choix* the passage in which it is discussed is part of a section in which the indifference born of nihilism is shown to lead to violent action, and then action leads to the establishment of an 'ordre humain'. The only way to prevent this is to go further than a mere 'sentiment d'équivalence' and anchor the 'désintérêt' in a 'sentiment d'inadéquation' (*APH*, 109).

Here Grenier rejoins the argument of the first two parts of *Le Choix*: 'aucune existence ne vaut par rapport à l'Existence; aucune ne compte par rapport à ce qui seul doit compter . . . Vis-à-vis d'un Absolu les choses les plus différentes perdent leur différence; elles deviennent non-différentes (je ne dis pas identiques).' The whole of contingent existence, the human spirit as well as the outside world, becomes non-different, losing its diversity and its value, in the full moral sense, at the same time. The attitude of indifference is a conscious acceptance and embracing of this non-difference, 'au nom de l'Être'. 'L'indifférence peut être un idéal positif (c'est le cas du Tao) ou le signe négatif d'un attachement supérieur' (as in the Christian, or indeed the Stoic or the Sceptic tradition) (*EBL*, 152, 142).

'Sortir de l'humanité' (*APH*, 111): 'Voilà bien le grand mot sur le point d'être lâché: *inhumanité*', as Grenier had written as early as 1930 in his essay on India (art. cit., p. 351, *LI*, 131 (123)). It explains why the concept, and therefore the practice, of total indifference is foreign to the Greek tradition: La clarté qui baigne Endymion n'est pas froide, le rêve de Pygmalion n'est pas stérile, et Orphée ne peut s'empêcher de se détourner pour regarder Eurydice. Ce dernier mythe est typique du génie grec qui aspire à l'indifférence métaphysique, et ne peut pas et ne veut pas se détacher de l'humanité. (*APH*, 113)

It is to the *Bhagavad Gitâ*, and, farther East, to the Taoist tradition of China, that Grenier finds himself drawn for examples of a truly radical indifference.

And although he does not at this point undertake an exhaustive investigation of the actual practice of the Taoists, he devotes two pages to quotations from three of the sages, and then deliberately omits them from his predictable demonstration that claims to an attitude of total indifference are almost inevitably compromised in practice. He underlines the unsatisfactoriness of any such compromise once the Absolute has been glimpsed and its complete otherness even so much as suspected. ‘L’essentiel est de *ne pas confondre les plans* . . . le mélange des genres est inadmissible, et l’action qui devrait se fonder sur la pensée ne peut pas le faire’ (*APH*, 121). The logical sequel is a study of Taoism, and indeed this essay is at least as good an introduction to ‘Le Non-agir d’après le Tao’ as are ‘Existence et liberté’ and ‘Existence et destinée’, the first two parts of the *Entretiens sur le bon usage de la liberté*. Indeed, the word *indifférence* as such is hardly ever used in these first two parts, but occurs frequently in ‘Le Non-agir d’après le Tao’. Moreover, the argument of the fourth and final section of ‘Existence et liberté’, ‘Le Dégagement’, is much more ambiguous than the comparatively direct line taken in ‘Les Tentatives d’indifférence’, since, as has been indicated, one text is about freedom and the preservation of possibility, while the other is about indifference as a conscious and consistent attitude.

Grenier’s interest in Taoism was aroused in the late 1930s. It was in 1936 that Étiennele lent Paulhan a copy of the *Tao-tê-ching* of Lao Tzu, and Paulhan must have communicated his enthusiasm to Grenier, the two being in close contact through the *Nouvelle Revue française*.¹¹ The earliest reference to the Taoist sages in his published works is in 1941, in *Le Choix* (128 (108–09)), where Grenier quotes a passage from Lie Tzu taken from L. Wiegier’s *Textes philosophiques* (2nd edition, 1930), as an illustration of an attitude which he characterizes as being ‘en deçà du choix’, an attitude of complete indifference in the face of life and death, fortune and misfortune. A text published in 1945, but developing the substance of a paper given at the end of 1941,¹² gives further examples from Taoist literature of this same ‘radicale indifférence’. Grenier does not distinguish clearly between this Taoist position and that of the Indian yogi: indeed, in both passages referred to he juxtaposes the quotations from the Taoist writers with the same passage from the *Bhagavad Gîtâ*: ‘Le yogi, uni avec Dieu, tient pour égaux le caillou, la terre et l’or — il aime également ennemis, amis, indifférents; seul et sans espoir il ressemble à une lumière dans un lieu où il ne souffle pas de vent.’ He even states explicitly, after the quotation from Lao Tzu illustrating the attitude of the sage: ‘Portrait, on le voit, tout pareil à celui du yogi’ (*C*, 128 (109); *APH*, 113, 114). The reason is that Grenier has no need at this stage to distinguish between Indian and Chinese versions of indifference: he is using them simply as an extreme example of human claims, and he recognizes that ‘une pareille attitude ne peut malheureusement être que celle d’individus d’exception, et encore n’est-elle

possible qu'à des moments exceptionnels' (C, 128–29, (109)). However, it is also clear that Grenier is fascinated by the idea of something even more radical than this, total indifference, the more so because his own meditation on the Absolute leads him to the conclusion that 'l'Absolu . . . engendre en effet une totale indifférence' (C, 108–09 (91–92)). Hence, although he has to admit reluctantly the very exceptional character of such an experience, he finds himself drawn to investigate more fully what the Taoist sages have to say about it.

The first result of his researches is the long section in the *Entretiens sur le bon usage de la liberté* (1948) entitled 'Le Non-agir d'après le Tao'. For this he acknowledges having made extensive use of Marcel Granet's notes for a course of lectures given at the Collège de France (*EBL*, 126 n.). He also quotes from four translations of the *Tao-tê-ching*, and from published works by the Orientalists Wilhelm, Wieger, and Maspero, as well as from Granet's *La Religion des Chinois*.

Grenier's declared purpose in this essay is to demonstrate that there is an actual historical example of the extreme attitude of 'absence d'engagement' and 'négation de toutes les valeurs', that it is not only possible but has indeed been held in the highest esteem by millions of people for centuries, and that useful lessons can be learned from it. The historical details which he gives are necessary for a first approach to a system of thought so alien to anyone formed in the Western tradition, but he in no way sets out to provide a scholarly interpretation of Taoism in general or of the *Tao-tê-ching* in particular.¹³ He does not take sides with either Granet or Maspero in the argument over whether Lao Tzu, Chuang Tzu and their school were primarily mystics or primarily philosophers.¹⁴ He ignores or quickly passes over many of the more obvious external features of Taoism, such as the complex dietary or respiratory techniques, and focusses his attention on the concept of *wu wei*, for which he adopts the standard translation *non-agir*.¹⁵ At the same time he attempts to understand the Taoist attitude in terms of the concept of freedom, which has no exact parallel in ancient China: later on, in *L'Esprit du Tao* (1957), he quotes a modern Chinese scholar as saying that 'dans le vocabulaire chinois actuel . . . le mot "freedom" est rendu par un mot composé qui semble avoir été forgé au début du XIXe siècle' (*ET*, 189). Grenier is well aware that he is approaching Chinese thought from the point of view of a European, seeking not to become a Chinese Taoist himself but to assimilate what he can while remaining a Westerner. That concern dictates his whole approach, leading him not only to sketch in the historical background (which to the Chinese way of thinking is irrelevant: the historicity of most of the early Taoist sages is to say the least doubtful) but to attempt comparisons between Taoism and other, more familiar doctrines, with the intention of pointing up fruitful lessons from both the similarities and the differences.

The Taoism of the 'masters', the school associated with the names of Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu, is to be distinguished from the popular religious system known as Taoism. It is characterized by a concentration on the inner life, although external observances are not ruled out. Scholars disagree over whether the inner life of the sage is primarily concerned with philosophical meditation or with mystical experience, but Grenier is more interested in the attitude adopted, be it considered as a means or as a consequence, than in the actual intention, although this is by no means neglected.

In his exposition of the attitude known as *wu wei*, Grenier restricts himself to the *Tao-tê-ching*, the book traditionally attributed to Lao Tzu. He interprets the title as meaning 'Livres de la raison suprême et de la vertu', but claims that the exact meaning of the title and the often cryptic text is less important than is usually believed.

Ce qui importe, ce n'est pas ce qu'il dit, mais ce qu'il suggère; non ce qu'il suggère de penser, mais ce qu'il suggère de faire; non ce qu'il suggère de faire, mais ce qu'il suggère de réaliser. Il a pour but de mettre le lecteur dans un certain état, ou plutôt de le pousser sur une certaine pente qu'il n'aurait plus qu'à descendre. (*EBL*, 122-23)

Now Granet certainly makes more of the connection of Taoism with earlier shamanistic practices than does Maspero, although both follow Masson-Oursel in recognizing the link with the *Yi-ching*, the book of divination.¹⁶ Grenier, however, goes beyond any of them in his insistence that the *Tao-tê-ching* is a 'livre initiatique'. He adopts the explanation that best suits his own purpose, using the Taoist writings, as he had used those of the Vedânta, as a springboard for his own meditation. Nor is he consistent in his interpretation: while recognizing, with Granet, that the aim of the Taoist sage is to obtain and preserve a quality of life that is characterized by *puissance*,¹⁷ he leaves on one side the explanation of this in terms of the shamanistic emphasis on prolonging life in an attempt to obtain immortality, and interprets it instead in Spinozist metaphysical terms more comprehensible to European readers: 'Il ne s'agit rien moins que de participer au Premier Principe pour jouer un rôle actif (*natura naturans*) au lieu de se contenter de lui servir d'instrument (*natura naturata*)' (*EBL*, 128). This is taking liberties with the material, but is in line with his declared intention; and he is to go further still.

How does one participate in the Tao, the First Principle? The Taoist tradition emphasizes breathing exercises, alchemical recipes and many other means. But Grenier is interested not so much in the means as in the quality of participation. What does participating in the Tao involve? The Principle itself can be expressed in terms of 'une harmonie de contraires', of Yang and Yin, and Tao and Tê (the 'efficace concentré'¹⁸ and 'efficace particularisé' respectively), and the Taoist ideal is to conform to this perfect harmony, this

alternation of opposites. *Puissance* is understood as potential energy, possessed in the highest degree by, for instance, water: 'sans rien faire, par le seul fait qu'elle se repose, elle possède le monde entier' (*EBL*, 130).¹⁹ Grenier interprets this as true freedom: 'La liberté, c'est donc d'abord l'acquisition de la puissance; puis, plus précisément, d'une puissance qui ne s'exerce pas' (*EBL*, 129). He has not explained this sudden introduction of the concept of freedom, but he is evidently drawing a parallel between the Western 'liberté d'indifférence' and the Taoist *wu wei*. 'Moins on agit, plus on domine. Voilà le principe qu'il ne faut pas perdre de vue' (*EBL*, 131). Nothing but bad can come from interfering with the course of Nature in any way. On the contrary, since Nature is simply an expression of the Principle, entirely determined by it, the more one is conformed to Nature, and so to the Principle, the more potential energy one will possess, and the more one will dominate. This may be related to magical ideas of the universe as being based on continuity rather than contiguity, but the magic of the Tao is not 'une vulgaire sorcellerie'.

Elle consiste à méditer sur la nécessité naturelle, et particulièrement sur notre propre nécessité intérieure, et à nous y conformer de toutes nos forces; pareils à l'oiseau dont tout l'effort tend à se laisser porter par l'air.

Grenier sums up the attitude of the Taoist in the terms he has used in an earlier section of the book: it is 'la méthode la plus radicale qui ait jamais été conçue de fusion de la destinée individuelle avec le Destin cosmique' (*EBL*, 132).

One significant consequence of such an attitude is in the realm of value. Grenier has a four-page section entitled 'Libération par rapport aux valeurs', which is to be compared with the title 'La Liberté contre les valeurs' given to the chapter on 'le dégagement' when it was published separately in the *Cahiers de la Pléiade*. In the West there have been revolutionaries who have overthrown the accepted values, but it has always been in the name of something better. 'Or il n'y a de liberté totale que s'il y a affranchissement de tout, c'est-à-dire liberté d'indifférence.' It is in this sense that Grenier can speak of the Taoist attitude as exemplifying the highest degree of 'liberté d'indifférence' (*EBL*, 133). There is no value-distinction between people and things for the Taoist. Indeed, 'le sage n'a qu'une ambition: c'est de passer de l'état d'homme à celui de brute et de celui d'organisme à celui d'élément'. He is free, not to submit himself to some moral or religious ideal, as in the case of the 'liberté rationnelle des Stoïciens, de Spinoza et de beaucoup de moralistes', but to go beyond all ideas of morality and of value, and indeed beyond his own desires. He is totally liberated (*EBL*, 134 ff.). This is the 'attitude radicale' proposed in the chapter 'Le Dégagement': 'se délivrer entièrement des valeurs, les jeter par-dessus bord' (*EBL*, 72).

It is clearly a very different idea of freedom from that of the Western tradition, which, despite its many and varied expressions, is always essentially a freedom *for* something. It is from this very 'for-something' that the Taoist sage

is liberated. But is Grenier not idealizing the actual situation? Granet, whose notes he used extensively in preparing the essay, maintains that in fact there is a definite goal: the Taoist strips himself of misleading ideas of value and participates in the Tao in order to obtain long life and vitality. 'Il s'agit non de se mortifier, mais de se vivifier . . . Pour se sanctifier, il faut d'abord s'abêtir — entendez: apprendre des enfants, des bêtes, des plantes, l'art simple et joyeux de ne vivre qu'en vue de la vie' (*La Pensée chinoise*, pp. 572–73). Maspero, while holding a totally different view, is no less convinced that there is a real aim: for him it is mystical union with the Tao. This is closer to the position Grenier adopts in *Le Choix*, and to that of the *malamâtiyya* described in the first part of the *Entretiens*: in the face of the Absolute, which alone had value, indeed is itself Value, everything else is unimportant, indifferent. But in the present essay it is another interpretation that Grenier offers. His point of reference here is freedom, not the Absolute, and he speaks of freedom as having been 'conquise par l'indifférence' (*EBL*, 136). It seems then, that he is seeing freedom as being itself the supreme value.²⁰ Granet in fact uses similar language, claiming that the Taoist response to Confucianism is 'un plaidoyer mystique en faveur de la liberté pure, qui, pour eux, se confond avec la pleine puissance et la Sainteté' (*La Pensée chinoise*, p. 507), and that, 'arrivé à n'être plus qu'une puissance pure . . . le Saint va jouant en toute liberté, à travers les éléments, dont aucun ne le peut heurter' (p. 516), and Grenier has been influenced by his interpretation of the evidence. For both of them, Taoism ultimately professes a humanism that transcends indifference. 'Si puissante qu'ait été l'inspiration *naturiste* qui les animait, ils restaient, tout autant que leurs adversaires, sous l'empire de préoccupations *humanistes*' (p. 525). In claiming that the best use to be made of freedom is 'aucun', Grenier adds: 'L'homme n'en est que plus puissant et heureux' (*EBL*, 136).

Does this not mean that values, so firmly excluded, are now creeping in again by the back door? Grenier does not deal with this point explicitly, but he recognizes that for the Taoist, Nature is fundamentally good.²¹ This is not Nature in its organized expression in society, as it is for the Confucian school. 'Le Tao considère que cette organisation n'est même pas nécessaire; qu'aucune différence de plan n'est à envisager entre la Nature brute, celle des éléments, et la Nature civilisée, celle de l'homme.' Expressing himself in Western terms, Grenier maintains that

un optimisme est *acquis* par le sage, acquis en passant à travers l'indifférence et un état qui pour nous serait le désespoir. En aucune manière cet optimisme ne suppose une Providence corrigeant les arrêts du Destin. Au contraire, c'est plutôt le Destin qui prend pour le sage figure de Providence. (*EBL*, 144–46)

Fate and Nature are in fact expressions of the eternal Tao itself, although Grenier does not say so explicitly. It would be legitimate to continue his

explanation by pointing out that what the sage has done in effect is to reject all values in order to transcend the resulting state of indifference and adhere to the Tao, which alone is value, embracing it in all its manifestations. But Grenier is deliberately avoiding any mention of the Absolute.²² He is concentrating at this point on the Taoist attitude of embracing the world, and he finds it impossible to include the Absolute and the relative in the same perspective. For him, the Absolute is indissociable from the concept of value, and he can preserve the vital distinction between the Taoist approach and that of Western mystics only by refusing to label as 'l'Absolu' what he here calls 'le bloc compact qui constitue non pas l'homme même, mais l'être indifférencié et équivalent de toutes choses'. He avoids any suggestion of a mystical union, speaking rather in terms of a 'sympathie', a 'connivence avec les choses, non pour les assujettir, mais pour parvenir au but en même temps qu'elles, avec elles'. This involves the exercise of a 'volonté de dépossession' (*EBL*, 146–47).

Grenier frequently fails to define his terms, and the result is that a single word will often acquire a wide-ranging content, drawn from different Oriental traditions as well as from those of the West. What is this 'être indifférencié et équivalent de toutes choses'? Is it the Absolute? Is it the Tao? Is it the One of Plotinus, or the That of the Upanishads? Grenier is evidently escaping from the constraints imposed by a particular world-view, even one as apparently indeterminate and flexible as that of Taoism. The position he is developing is one that has been familiar to him for a long time. After his attempt to define more closely the particular emphasis of Taoism, Grenier is returning to his earlier approach in which he did not distinguish between the attitude of the Taoist sage and that of the Indian yogi. Indeed, his concluding remarks on Taoism are now followed by two lines from a Christian mystic, St John of the Cross, with the presumable intention of showing their essential agreement. However, this is not Grenier's last word. He appends an extended note on 'Quiétude et Wou-wei' (148–56), in which, after examining briefly the doctrine of two seventeenth-century Frenchmen, Piny and Fénelon, and also Bossuet's objections, he comes to the conclusion that there is 'une très grande différence entre la quiétude chrétienne (hérétique) et le non-agir taoïste'. His main reason is that Christian 'indifference' does not exclude desire of the right kind, being in reality nothing but 'le désintéressement de l'amour'. Taoism, on the other hand, is a doctrine of total indifference. As Grenier commented in an interview, 'Ce qui m'attire et m'effraie beaucoup dans le taoïsme, c'est que derrière la porte il n'y a rien.' He must finally discard two interpretations of Taoism which he has entertained and which are in closer agreement with his own previous meditations: that of a pantheistic doctrine based firmly on Being, and that of a search for an Absolute underlying the universe, which alone is value, and with which union may be hoped for. Typically, however, Grenier pulls himself back at the last moment from a position that would prove fatal to his

own continuing meditation. In the very last sentence of the note 'Quiétude et Wou-wei', after quoting at length from Étienne's *Six essais sur trois tyrannies* (Paris, 1947) to show that the concept of Yin and Yang in Taoism is not comparable to the Marxian dialectic, he notes: 'Quant au Premier Principe du Tao, les sinologues s'accordent pour y voir un Absolu impersonnel et fatal' (*EBL*, 156). It is the only occasion on which the word 'Absolu' is used in the whole of 'Le Non-agir d'après le Tao', and it cannot but take up the theme of the end of 'Existence et destinée': 'l'existence de l'absolu se cache et bouge derrière la tapisserie du monde' (*EBL*, 115). Grenier's exploration of Taoism, while provoking deep reflection, has thus not led him to any firm doctrinal statement, and he has succeeded in keeping open the less stultifying ways of Western mysticism and of his own cult of the Absolute.

When he came to devote a whole book to Taoism (*L'Esprit du Tao* (Paris, 1957)), Grenier ran the risk of becoming over-academic and losing his earlier insights in a mass of detail. The choice of 'L'Esprit du Tao' as a title is an attempt to guard against this by concentrating on the essence of Taoism rather than on its outward manifestations, as Maspero, for instance, had preferred to do. In fact Grenier gives a comparatively large proportion of the book over to the aspect of *wu wei* and its implications, and to comparisons with other doctrines of quietude, just as he had in 1948.²³ However, he can no longer approach his subject from the point of view of freedom and indifference. He is obliged to begin with more than a cursory examination of the concept of the Tao itself, and that of freedom is left until the last chapter. His treatment of freedom is notably different. In the *Entretiens*, as M-J. Lefebvre noticed,²⁴ Grenier follows an itinerary that is the reverse of that of an Oriental. His starting-point is a reflection on the possible modes of action. When he comes to consider the Taoist attitude, therefore, he is already equipped with a concept of freedom, which he carries over into his new field of investigation. He can still speak in terms of obtaining or using freedom. In *L'Esprit du Tao*, however, Grenier adopts a Chinese perspective. His point of reference is no longer freedom but the Tao, the Principle itself. When he comes to compare the Taoist attitude of *wu wei* with other doctrines of quietude, more familiar to Western readers, he is obliged to recognize that the existence and nature of freedom are not questions that occur to Chinese thinkers of antiquity. There is no word in classical Chinese to express freedom in the sense of free-will, of the power to choose between different courses of action. Consent and participation are the nearest concepts: 'L'homme est déterminé par la Voie, comme il participe à la Voie, il est libre.' *Wu wei* is not the result of a deliberate decision to make no use of a freedom that has somehow been obtained: it is simply an expression of the essence of the Principle. In the *Entretiens*, Grenier is examining the way of the Taoist sage from the outside, as it appears to Western eyes; in *L'Esprit du Tao* he endeavours to let Lao Tzu, Chuang Tzu and Lie Tzu

speak for themselves. Being more closely identified with his subject, he gives the impression of being on the inside. Grenier's familiar voice comes through more faintly.

It is significant, however, that Grenier should have allowed himself to come so close to the spirit of Taoism that he could no longer simply stand outside it and assess it from a Western point of view. He was moving, at the age of sixty, into a new phase in his career as a writer. He was aiming more and more to enter into the personality of other creative artists, mainly writers and painters. It was in 1955 that he began to write on artists in *L'Œil* and *L'Express*, and it was in the same year that the first of his prefaces for the Club du Meilleur Livre was published. The technique of espousing the contours of a creative mind, rather than standing back and making a critical assessment, was of course not new to him: it had already been put to good effect in the theses on Renouvier and Lequier. However, the discovery of a similar ideal in Taoism seems to have encouraged Grenier to go farther in the same direction, to the extent of almost submerging his own personality in the portrayal of the Taoist sage, or of Chagall, or of Dostoyevsky. In the *Lexiques* the most striking device is the constant use of quotations and definitions borrowed from others in such a way that Grenier himself is almost absent from the text. It is also significant that the largest number of entries in each *Lexique* is found, with only one exception, under the heading 'Wou-wei' or 'Non-agir'.²⁵ His debt to Taoism, or at least to concepts closely associated with Taoism, thus continued to be acknowledged both explicitly and in his whole approach to other creative artists, even if his active interest in the *Tao-tê-ching* was comparatively short-lived.²⁶ What happened between 1941 and 1957 was that he discovered and explored to his satisfaction a doctrine which had for him a twin advantage: it took to its extreme statement an attitude which had long attracted him, and at the same time it provided a clear record of the acceptability, in historical terms, of such a doctrine. It is the historical fact of Taoism that serves to legitimize Grenier's intuition of the Absolute and its claims. If he recognized that a 'glissement de l'Absolu à l'individu' is *almost* inevitable in practice, yet he now possessed one example of an intransigent refusal to compromise. In a way, indeed, this knowledge set him free to explore the Western forms of mystical indifference, by providing him with an absolute criterion against which to measure them. As with his investigation of the Vedânta, Grenier found that a certain familiarity with a tradition so far removed from that of the West encouraged a more flexible and more questioning attitude towards some of the central problems of existence. He complained to Louis Foucher that 'l'Européen se contente trop facilement. Quand il doute, c'est trop peu et de trop peu de chose' (*EBL*, 74). The East could not only teach an attitude of systematic doubt, thus emphasizing the heritage of Descartes and Lequier, but could propose quite different methods of thinking, anecdotal and parabolic rather than discursive. Grenier's

own teaching methods were not dissimilar, as Étiemble notes: 'Cela ressemblait à tout, sauf à une conférence.'²⁷ Taoism, for Grenier, then, was not an end in itself, but contact with it both broadened and deepened his own meditation on freedom and existence.