

CHAPTER 6

FROM INDIFFERENCE TO HUMANISM: *L'EXISTENCE MALHEUREUSE*

It was through investigating the problem of evil in the thought of Renouvier that Grenier had initially come to see the importance of the idea of human freedom. In the writings of Lequier that idea was fundamental, for in his search for a 'première vérité' Lequier was led to posit freedom, indeed to affirm it, as being itself that first truth. Grenier continued to meditate on freedom, linking it closely with the experience of contingency. In the *Entretiens* (1948) he examined the problem of freedom in relation to consciousness and value. In that work he noted: 'Il n'entre pas dans nos vues de traiter du problème du mal'; but he found himself obliged to refer to the place of evil in human existence in the context of the impossibility of making a rational decision about what is the best option in any situation:

L'homme ignore même si le *mauvais* ne fait pas partie intégrante du bon . . .
Il se peut même que le mal franchement recherché comme tel découvre un bien
. . .

Du point de vue de l'efficacité, le mauvais peut donc prendre la place du meilleur.
(*EBL*, 22–23)

Freedom is involved here only at the stage of response. Grenier had not, however, forgotten Renouvier's examination of the origin of evil and of the part played by freedom in that origin. In *L'Existence malheureuse* (1957) he was to return to the problem of evil and consider it from these two main angles: the origin of evil and the response to it.¹

Grenier does not offer his own philosophy of evil, but examines several different approaches to the problem. As in the *Entretiens*, his own insights and suggestions are to be found in fragmentary form, and are not necessarily susceptible of being compressed into a homogeneous whole. After an introduction in which he notes, like Renouvier, that the human spirit seems to be made for immortality, and, like Camus, that suffering and death present an absurd contrast to that destiny, he begins in the first chapter by asking whether it is not possible to consider *le mal* and *le bien* as necessary and complementary aspects of the whole of existence. What is good for one person is bad for another; life, which is good, can be preserved only at the cost of destroying life; the extension

of something which is in itself good may produce a bad effect; and so on. A true recognition of this fact will lead to an acceptance of the world as it is, with all its inconveniences and risks. It must be Nature as a whole that is contemplated, not simply the minute fragment of it that we ourselves represent: and Nature not only in its spatial totality, but in its temporal continuity. This attitude is not confined to any one tradition, but Grenier associates it in particular with India. It is an attitude in which the concept of hope plays no part, and it may even be described as 'un état inhumain' (*EM*, 27).² It has intellectual and aesthetic interest,³ and is at least worthy of consideration. It may also be seen as heroic and even super-human in its resolute suppression of hope: 'l'homme qui accomplit cet acte de non-espoir renonce à perpétuer ce divorce qui conduit l'être à toujours devenir autre chose. Il rentre dans le bloc de l'être' (*EM*, 27). It is an attitude similar to that of 'abandon', discussed in the *Entretiens*, by its emphasis on acceptance, and similar to that of 'dégagement' by its deliberate transcendence of values. It differs from the former by the conscious renunciation of any contingent *surabondance*, and from the latter by the lack of any apparent 'domination sur la Nature qui suit la domination sur soi' (*EBL*, 75). The resulting 'vertu négative' is said to be 'bien plus noble que celle qui mène à protester et à agir' (*EM*, 29). This is an oblique reference to those passages in *Le Choix* and the *Entretiens* in which Grenier warns that those doctrines which affirm the importance of liberation and action are deceptive. On the contrary, the attitude which he is advocating has both intellectual appeal and grandeur. The latter quality was always important for Grenier, from his early encounter with the 'hypothèse suprême en théodicée' of Renouvier onwards, and it is no accident that he should be drawn to the extreme attitudes of the sage and the hero, admitting that: 'Il est vrai que l'homme moyen n'offre pas d'intérêt' (*EBL*, 80). In the present instance, he claims that: 'Quoi que je puisse dire par la suite, je ne renierai pas ce premier point de vue qui est celui de l'immaculée connaissance' (*EM*, 29). Immaculate, because it seems to him to represent a pure attitude, worthy of the sage, uncorrupted by the weakness of contingency, which is the mark of the human. The word *connaissance* evidently has a double sense here. It means knowledge, because the universe is apprehended in its totality, and the misconceptions that result from partial knowledge are swept aside. It must also, however, have the Claudelian sense of *co-naissance*,⁴ for there is an intentional reference to the Immaculate Conception. Here it is a pantheistic version of that doctrine: the sage has gone through an experience of rebirth in which he coincides with the universe, having abolished the 'divorce' or 'hiatus' (*EBL*, 20; *MIX*, 88) that would keep his existence distinct.

This explanation of evil as being merely another and equally necessary aspect of existence, and the attitude to which it leads, are self-consistent, and they exercise an undeniable attraction, but they do not meet the need of the individual human being. The solution of an intellectual problem does not

necessarily bring with it the 'apaisement' of a torment. That is true as much for the 'mal de l'activité, ou mal moral' as it is for the 'mal de la sensibilité' or 'mal . . . empirique'. In the 'immaculée connaissance' of the sage there is no room for the contingency of the individual human existence, and he deliberately sacrifices his own.⁵ In the realm of activity, on the other hand, it is the freedom of contingency that is primary. The conscious exercise of freedom is the important thing: values are of significance only in that their recognition guarantees the reality of freedom. Grenier has thus opened up new fields of enquiry, begging more questions than he answers. Indeed, this chapter is a good example of the way his personal meditation unfolds. He has posed a question, 'pourquoi le mal?'; he immediately indicates that it is necessary first of all to ask, 'qu'est-ce que le mal?'; and he then proceeds to explain it away, by reference to philosophy, literature, art, music . . . , and not only in the Western tradition. He indicates two main lines of thought based on opposite premises, both of which are pursued elsewhere in his writings; but he does not develop them at this point, preferring to begin again from a different starting-place. This in itself shows a different approach from that followed in *Le Choix* and the *Entretiens*, in both of which the intellectual level was regarded as the most important. Here, while still giving full recognition to that level, Grenier suggests that other levels of response to the problem of evil may be at least as appropriate.

Grenier's new starting-place is the experience of the individual. He rewrote the second chapter extensively between 1949 and 1957, in order to emphasize even more strongly the fundamental experience of contingency which makes it impossible to see oneself simply as part of the Whole, except at rare moments of illumination. The situation of man is that he lives *à l'écart*, for if he is conscious of 'cet être, dont la seule chose que je puisse affirmer, c'est qu'il est ineffable' (*EM*, 40),⁶ then he is not one with it. He is exiled, separated by a *fissure*, subject to a *dualité*, a *dédoublement*:

l'existence individuelle est contaminée par le néant, par ceci même qu'elle est conscience et action, par conséquent dualité . . . ; j'existe à peu près comme je marche . . . mais la conscience que je prends de pouvoir tomber crée un malaise au sein de ma promenade. C'est ce malaise qui est l'angoisse, c'est cette conscience qui menace la sérénité de l'être comme le soupçon non formulé de la jalousie ou la muette amertume de l'exil.⁷

Each individual, then, has a unique existence and a unique importance. The universe does not consist of a certain number of interchangeable units added together, but of a 'cohésion des sujets': the real problem to be faced is not that of evil in general, but of the suffering subject, 'l'être malheureux' (*EM*, 46–47).

As Grenier himself points out, this is a peculiarly contemporary problem, and his statement of it is not strikingly original. However, his next move is unexpected. He does not go on to offer a contemporary solution in the tradition

of Nietzsche or in that of Kierkegaard. Instead, he suggests a radical solution that might be called, by analogy with that of the fourth chapter of the *Entretiens*, 'le dégagement de toute existence'. It is a global refusal of the universe: not a revolt against it, nor even a sceptical analysis of it, but an intellectual annihilation or *annulation*. In this process of decomposition, the unique individual subject is set up as the sole reality. Given such a thoroughgoing solipsism, 'le mal s'éteint, il est jeté dehors avec le bien', for what can touch those who have learned to 'frapper de nullité ce qui les entoure'? (*EM*, 49–50)⁸ However, while individual existence is preserved by such an attitude, and not swallowed up in some impersonal Whole, there can be no qualifications (nor, therefore, is there any possibility of evaluation, which Grenier elsewhere sees as a primary necessity). The possibility of friendship, for instance, is ruled out. 'Le néant est l'absence de bien comme de mal, étant la négation de l'existence qualifiée' (*EM*, 50). From the point of view of practical action, the corollary of this intellectual decomposition of the universe is a *dévalorisation*, such that no value is attached to the results of any action that may be performed. This is still to some extent a compromise:

Évidemment, il vaudrait mieux ne rien faire, ne pas agir; mais c'est impossible à l'homme; et, quand il ne fait rien, il fait toujours autre chose, mais seulement autre chose que ce qu'il devait faire. Le néant absolu est impossible. (*EM*, 52)⁹

Grenier is repeating here the same idea that underlies the theory of the *acte divergent* and that also informs his discussion of *engagement* and *libération*.¹⁰ The aim of attaining 'le néant absolu' is unrealizable. That is true whether it is seen in terms of a complete liberation from constraint or as a more positive goal, since the absolute presents itself under the twin aspects of 'le néant' and 'l'être'. Any course of action which supposedly consists in 'ne rien faire' in fact involves a betrayal of that ideal. The only acceptable solution is to act quite unequivocally, but at the same time to deny any importance to that action.

In these first two chapters, Grenier has considered two principal attitudes to evil, both of which involve recognizing it as a necessary part of existence, as the complement of good and not as a threat to it. One is an attitude of total acceptance, the other of total refusal. Both show heroic qualities, and both are also characteristic of the contemplative sage: the two extremes almost meet. In this conclusion to the first two chapters of *L'Existence malheureuse*, Grenier apparently offers a choice between the two attitudes: one, 'la voie héroïque', which 'dit *oui* à la vie et accepte à cause de cela, sans récrimination, ce qui paraît inacceptable'; the other, the 'voie d'anéantissement', which 'dit *non* à la vie et refuse à cause de cela, sans crainte, ce qui paraît impossible à refuser' (*ME*, 53–54). However, just as in *Le Choix* he had to adjust his focus to 'nous qui ne pouvons prétendre à des états aussi sublimes que celui du sage ou de héros' (*C*, 131 (111)), so now he has to recognize that

il se trouve que la plupart des hommes, tout au moins dans nos pays, répugnent à suivre ces deux voies, aussi bien l'une que l'autre, et qu'ils ne veulent imiter ni César ni Gandhi; ou qu'ils ne peuvent pas le faire. (*EM*, 54)

The way this is put implies a certain weakness on the part of such people, and this weakness is connected with the admission of differences, values and choices, as opposed to the total apprehension of an undifferentiated world. It is, once again, the weakness of a contingent consciousness. It is at this point that freedom begins to have real meaning: until now, Grenier has envisaged only the freedom to accept or reject the whole of existence.

If good and evil *are* distinguishable, if suffering *is* real, if some future recompense may be expected for the tribulations of present existence, whether in historical or spiritual terms, then what is required is not an intellectual explanation but a remedy. It will be found in the context of a faith, and will involve hope, whereas the extreme attitudes examined earlier suppressed hope. Such a conception of existence

rend le mal plus aigu, mais aussi elle lui procure un remède plus efficace que celui de l'héroïsme ou de l'abandon. Elle suppose que finalement le mal a sa source dans l'exercice de la liberté et peut être guéri par l'exercice de la liberté. (*EM*, 55)

This consideration leads into the third chapter, in which it seems that Grenier will at last examine the relationship between evil and freedom. Like Lequier, however, he is only too well aware of the limitations on personal freedom; and unlike Lequier, he cannot bring himself to break out by means of a free affirmation. His intellectual appreciation of possibility must be translated into practical terms, must be fitted into the *cadre* of normal existence. That operation involves a considerable reduction of the responsibility attached to existential action: not a complete abolition of it, but a reduction that minimizes the hiatus between the contingent individual and the background against which he exists.

The fourth chapter, despite its apparently different intention, is concerned with the same themes. Freedom is not mentioned explicitly, but the chapter could well be entitled 'Le Bon Usage de la liberté'. Grenier recommends modest aims and 'l'expression réticente' (*EM*, 89), and, in the case of a decision to be made, the search for 'la terre où elle s'enracinera, le tuteur le long duquel elle grandira', for 'C'est cet ensemble de choses médiates qui transforme la faiblesse humaine en force' (*EM*, 94).¹¹ His argument, essentially, is this: it is a mistake to be too bold and aim too high, because 'the best' will never be achieved in any case, and 'the better' is bound to disappoint the hopes that were placed in it. It is preferable to respect the distance between weak, contingent humanity and the unattainable absolute (represented by 'the best'), and, instead, to keep close to the background or framework of human existence. Progress may then be made, but it would be misleading to speak of 'getting

better': 'Nous soulignons que si un progrès s'est effectué, c'est vers le *moins mal*, . . . ce n'est pas vers le *mieux*. Tout ce dont l'homme est capable c'est de rectifier' (*EM*, 94–95). That is the 'profonde sagesse humaine' of Rieux in Camus's *La Peste* (*EM*, 93). Grenier is thus admitting a certain human value, which he was excluding in earlier chapters. This is the 'marge de l'humain', the 'presque' which he discusses elsewhere. However, he is careful to stress the need to avoid trying to compete with absolute value. It may be true from one point of view that 'le Bien est morcelé', but in absolute terms 'il n'existe pas de degrés dans le Bien'. Indeed,

l'homme a l'idée du meilleur et il n'en peut réaliser que des contrefaçons. Il fabrique de la fausse monnaie et rend hommage sans le vouloir, à la bonne. Aussi, notre thèse, loin de nier l'existence du parfait, n'en est qu'un corollaire. (*EM*, 95)¹²

Thus, even in a chapter which appears to end on a warm note of positive humanism, Grenier is still maintaining the uncompromising position put forward in *Le Choix*:

Le choix a une immense importance par suite des conséquences qu'il comporte dans le temps et pour l'individu. Mais il n'a qu'une valeur de second plan par rapport à ce qui est véritablement. Aussi faut-il maintenir la distinction entre ce qui vaut en soi et ce qui vaut pour nous à l'instant donné. Ce qui est évalué ne peut entrer en concurrence avec l'Inévaluable. (*C*, 127 (108))

This underlying thought explains how Grenier is able, in the conclusion to the first part of *L'Existence malheureuse*, to turn from the apparent humanism of the fourth chapter and adopt a position which calls for the devaluation of action, as counselled by the *Bhagavad Gîtâ* and by Lao Tzu. The role of freedom and choice has been minimized throughout this first part, and the problem of evil has been restated as the simple fact of existence. However, Grenier has at times spoken of the need to take the scandal of personal suffering into account, and in the second and third parts he develops that theme more fully.

In the two chapters of Part Two and in the third and final chapter of Part Three (the first two chapters of Part Three constituting a parenthesis), Grenier considers three traditions which provide an answer to the problem of evil in terms of justice, transcendent (religious), immanent, and historical. In the Christian tradition, evil is attributed partly to the very order of the world, and partly to the misuse of freedom on the part of human beings. However, God created both the order of the world and man, so that human responsibility would seem to be at least attenuated. The answer to that paradox is not intellectual but practical: man is to humble himself before God. No explanation is given which satisfies human reason (*EM*, 124). In an attempt to avoid the problems raised by the duality between God and man, Grenier turns again, in the second chapter of Part Two, to the doctrine of *karma*, according to which

good and evil are direct products of human freedom. Here again, however, the role of freedom is not what it at first appears to be: freedom operates only within the context of a fixed nature which is itself determined by previous free acts, so that the system is in fact one of global determinism. It has intellectual appeal, but on closer examination is seen to be based on beliefs which are simply unacceptable in the West. Grenier instances not only the belief in *samsâra* or transmigration, the over-simplified concept of determinism, and the philosophy of action which involves a refusal of life, but also the totally different cast of thinking (*EM*, 130–35). His argument here is related to that of an earlier chapter in which he emphasized the need of a *cadre* and of a modest aim within that *cadre*. It is unrealistic to attempt to exercise one's freedom by making a completely fresh start, in thought just as much as in action. Grenier himself is certainly tempted by extreme attitudes found in other cultures besides his own; but his reply to Louis Foucher is unequivocal:

— Vous n'avez pas eu la velléité de vous convertir ou simplement d'adhérer à une des philosophies ou religions extrême-orientales?

— Non. Et quand même j'en aurais eu le désir je n'aurais pas pu le réaliser. On ne peut pas, à volonté, quitter une tradition séculaire dans laquelle on a été nourri pour en adopter une autre, complètement étrangère . . . Les Orientaux eux-mêmes sont les premiers à vous déconseiller ce saut périlleux et à vous encourager à persévérer dans votre voie. (*EBL*, 73–74)

On the same principle as that which has just been stated, however, if the two solutions of the problem of evil in terms of transcendent and immanent justice are both to some extent unsatisfactory, it may yet not be necessary to jettison them. A modest attitude, which does not demand an absolute justification of evil, may be the best — or the least bad — that can be achieved: 'il semble que chacune d'entre elles ait une valeur propre et qu'elle ne perde celle-ci que lorsqu'elle cherche à s'appliquer trop loin de son point de départ' (*EM*, 137). In the 'Conclusion de la deuxième partie' Grenier makes the important suggestion that the place of freedom in any understanding of the problem of evil is not so much within particular solutions as in the attitude that is adopted towards them.

Le mot 'choix' convient bien en effet à la prise de position initiale d'où dépendra chaque sorte d'explications. Et le choix est fait indépendamment des raisons que l'on a de choisir. Les raisons viennent ensuite . . . l'élection divine commandant aussi la prédestination.

La réponse que l'on donnera à la question: D'où vient le mal? sera donc une réponse peu réfléchie, parce qu'elle dépendra de l'orientation générale qu'aura prise celui qui répond, à propos de questions de principe qu'on appelle métaphysiques ou religieuses. (*EM*, 139–40)

Here the *cadre* has assumed an importance at least as great as for action and for creative expression: it is central to Grenier's understanding of the use of

freedom, even if he can envisage an absolute freedom anterior to the exercise of conscious choice. The initial choice of the *cadre* will be largely determined by cultural and hereditary factors, and the *cadre* itself will in turn largely determine thought and action. The place allowed to freedom at each stage is minimal, although that margin represents the human element and is therefore of vital importance. If it becomes too great, however, it delivers the individual concerned over to an existence characterized by lack of definition and lack of creativity. That is the situation which Grenier explores at length in *Les Grèves* and *Voir Naples*.

The appeal to historical justice, after the appeals to transcendent and immanent justice, seems to provide a helpful *cadre* for thought and action. However, the theoretical basis of the belief in 'le sens de l'Histoire' involves an explanation and a justification of evil that 'risquent de faire perdre de vue le tragique de la question posée' (*EM*, 209), and its practical expression gives free rein to violence. It seems that Grenier's main objection to this doctrine is that it constitutes what he attacks elsewhere as an 'orthodoxy': it demands assent to a system of beliefs and values which are at the very least questionable, and it allows no room for manoeuvre. It explains the existence of evil as the necessary corollary of the 'passage de l'état d'innocence animale . . . à celui de la connaissance avec ce qu'elle implique de dualité consciente et de retour sur soi'. It is neither sufficiently human nor sufficiently inhuman.

Nous n'en sommes pas plus avancés, nous le sommes même moins du fait que nous croyons savoir *ce* que nous devrions savoir que nous croyons ou imaginons, du fait que nous hypostasions comme 'moments' dans un flux intelligible *ce* qui nous paraîtra toujours incompréhensible ou scandaleux. (*EM*, 202-03)

For Grenier, a *cadre* is indispensable, but it must be recognized to be provisional. Otherwise it will be in competition with the Absolute, which in his eyes is absurd. It is important to admit, with Franz in *Voir Naples*, that the 'point fixe' of which men see their need, 'ne l'est qu'en apparence, que lui aussi s'en va au fil du courant' (*VN*, 223).

In the chapter entitled 'L'Existence contingente', Grenier examines the contemporary attempt to solve the problem of evil by throwing off the *cadre* of existence, seen in terms of physical, theological and historical determinism, and so achieving liberation from all values except that of freedom itself. His discussion is similar to that of 'engagement' in the *Entretiens*. He points to the moment of glorious exaltation, followed inevitably by 'l'embarras qu'a cet affranchi pour jouir d'une liberté à laquelle il n'était pas préparé'. Indeed, even before choosing the particular system to adopt, modern man has opted for the orientation provided by 'la hantise de l'action à accomplir et de l'engagement à prendre' (*EM*, 164), and it is that which is responsible for the acuteness of the problem of evil. If he had opted differently, the problem would disappear.

Grenier harks back to his earlier suggestions: 'A notre époque un affranchissement total pourrait entraîner un renouvellement du sentiment de la nature grâce à celui de l'isolement' (*EM*, 153). This is the kind of 'dégagement' put forward in the *Entretiens*, in which freedom is preserved rather than being immediately sacrificed to the need for action and commitment. Once again, the concept of freedom is employed at the stage of *situating the problem* of evil, rather than in explaining or justifying the existence of evil itself.¹³

The remaining chapter, 'La Liberté absolue', examines two views according to which the source of evil is to be found in the exercise of freedom. Grenier is sympathetic, in principle, to the theory of absolute freedom as illustrated by Dostoyevsky.¹⁴ Man, according to Dostoyevsky, 'désire cette liberté, qui est sa nature même, en la payant au besoin de la souffrance et de la mort'. He demands the freedom to do evil and the freedom to suffer evil, if only for the sake of demonstrating that he is indeed free: 'le paradis acquis sans liberté et privé de liberté ne vaut rien parce qu'il ne satisfait aucunement la plus haute aspiration de l'homme, sans laquelle il n'est plus un homme' (*EM*, 181–82). Yet although such an attitude may account for certain human behaviour, it does not do justice to reality. If the attempt to reach absolute perfection is doomed to failure (and Grenier quotes: 'ce n'est pas le souterrain qui vaut mieux, mais quelque chose d'autre, quelque chose après quoi je soupire, mais que je ne puis trouver' (*EM*, 182)), then the absolute freedom of indetermina-tion may be claimed in compensation, but from the perspective of Dostoyevsky himself¹⁵ and from that of the ordinary human existent it does not override all values. It may be the 'marque propre' of man, but it is not his 'bien le plus précieux': 'la simplicité d'un cœur pur, comme celui d'Aliocha, la rend inutile.'¹⁶ Grenier concludes:

Que Nietzsche, Dostoïevski . . . aient raison de vouloir émanciper l'homme, c'est une question; c'en est une autre de savoir si le malheur de l'existence n'en est pas (comme nous l'avons suggéré précédemment) redoublé. (*EM*, 184–85)¹⁷

The solutions of 'l'existence contingente' and 'la liberté absolue' are in fact simply 'prétextes à évasions spectaculaires', and provide neither an explanation nor a remedy for the problem of evil. Both seek to set up freedom as the sole value, but both fail to achieve that absolute goal and are forced back to the sphere of relative human existence, in which the problem of evil reappears even more strongly than before. In being too ambitious, they fail to do justice to the modest but real needs of man (*EM*, 208, and n. 1).

In his discussion of various attitudes that may be adopted towards the problem of evil, Grenier has let it be seen that in his view only two, broadly speaking, are worthy of consideration. One is that which calls for a global appreciation of the totality of existence (whether it is totally accepted or totally rejected), in which case the problem disappears; the other is that which

involves seeing humanity as capable of making modest progress ‘vers le moins mal’. In the context of this second attitude, any long-term justification that is sought in religious or political terms must be recognized to be based on a *pari* and not on demonstrable evidence (*EM*, 209). Hence the call for modesty, in the realization that such a solution can never be more than a poor second-best.

L’insensibilité nous étant interdite par notre qualité d’être vivant et conscient, nous devons nous résigner à l’espoir; l’inertie nous étant odieuse par suite de notre éducation occidentale nous devons nous résigner à l’action. (*EM*, 209–10)

Once again the question is posed: ‘Quel espoir? Quelle action?’ Grenier has no hesitation in preferring the pessimism of Schopenhauer to the optimism of Spencer and Bergson, and he therefore turns once more to the first of two possible attitudes: ‘Le parti le plus héroïque en apparence serait d’adhérer à une doctrine qui, dépouillant l’homme au profit d’un Neutre indifférencié, aboutirait à une attitude d’indifférence absolue.’ Grenier aligns himself with Tarrou in *La Peste*. He is no longer counselling the ‘profonde sagesse humaine’ of Rieux, but claims that:

De ce Neutre on pourrait dire . . . que c’est ‘quelque chose qui est par-dessus l’homme, à quoi les hommes s’adressent et qu’ils n’imaginent même pas. Aussi les hommes n’en reçoivent-ils pas de réponse’. Nous ne devons pas nous en étonner puisque la nature même de l’objet questionné est d’être sans réponse et que la paix entre en l’homme à partir du moment où il comprend qu’il n’y a pas de réponse. (*EM*, 211–12)

What Camus says, however, is this:

Pour tous ceux, au contraire, qui s’étaient adressés par-dessus l’homme à quelque chose qu’ils n’imaginaient même pas, il n’y avait pas eu de réponse. Tarrou avait semblé rejoindre cette paix difficile dont il avait parlé, mais ne l’avait trouvé que dans la mort, à l’heure où elle ne pouvait lui servir de rien.¹⁸

Grenier is advocating an attitude which, he claims, leads to peace: for Camus, that peace is found only in death. Grenier’s intellect makes him incline towards an Absolute which leaves no room for the human, while Camus is more sensitive to ‘la tendresse humaine’, to the value of those human beings who ‘avaient demandé la seule chose qui dépendît d’eux’ (*La Peste*, loc. cit.). Grenier himself has to recognize that

Une doctrine qui ne tient pas compte de la faiblesse, si sublime que soit cette doctrine, n’est pas satisfaisante. Il faut se demander, en effet, si la faiblesse humaine ne comporte pas une signification, *même malgré nous*. (*EM*, 212)

That meaning may be that the second term of the *acte divergent*, supposedly ‘une attitude d’indifférence absolue’, turns out to have another aspect altogether, involving ‘un appel au proche et au présent’. It may even be that there is

after all some relationship between the Absolute and man. There may be a 'Dieu proche' . . . (EM, 213).¹⁹

In his advocacy of extreme attitudes, those of the hero and the sage; in his mercurial elusiveness, which makes him continually duck the question of the relation between freedom and evil; and in his constant references, explicit or implicit, to the Absolute and to the infinite distance between that Absolute and the domain of relative human existence, Grenier displays an approach that is strongly reminiscent of *Le Choix* and the *Entretiens*. However, *L'Existence malheureuse* marks a step forward in the place given to 'l'humain'. It is admittedly still small, but it is none the less significant. Freedom is a part of 'la faiblesse humaine', and unless limited by a firm *cadre* its exercise will merely aggravate the suffering of the human condition. Within an appropriate *cadre*, however, freedom allows man to achieve a certain limited development, essentially by the discovery of 'quelque chose de plus en plus attachant' in 'ce bien qui est à la portée de tout le monde' (EM, 98, 97). That is one reason for Grenier's continuing interest in, and concern for, everyday objects, the vegetable and mineral worlds, and animals.²⁰ *L'Existence malheureuse*, despite its recognition of 'l'humain', is still largely concerned with intellectual attempts to resolve the problem of evil: it is in the context of the suffering and death of an animal that Grenier is able to express something of the connection between 'la marge de l'humain' and the existence of evil, in a book which 'n'a été écrit que pour les esprits naïfs et les cœurs simples', and which is presented as an 'élégie' rather than as an 'essai' (SMC, back cover).

The contrast between *Sur la mort d'un chien* and 'L'Île de Pâques' is striking. His discussion of the fact of suffering and death in that essay revealed Grenier to be ill at ease, unwilling to accept the responsibility that is the corollary of human solidarity.²¹ The relationship between a man and a dog, however, simplifies matters. In the first place, like Mouloud the cat, Taïaut the dog offers the spectacle of an existence that is to a large extent free of agonizing contingency. Animals ask no questions, practise no deceit. They simply fulfil their allotted role, whereas man realizes at some point that one role has been allotted to him, and he longs to change. Animals do not waste time striving towards a future which never comes: their existence is a series of states, each of which is a 'présent immobile' (SMC, §xxi, 21) and so may be enjoyed and exploited to the full. In the second place, and from a rather different point of view, the relationship between Grenier and Taïaut illustrates the importance of the *cadre*: the choice of it involves the exercise, and therefore in some measure the sacrifice, of freedom, and it then exercises a determinative influence on both thought and action. This is established before the question of suffering itself is reached, and thus Grenier's suggestion in *L'Existence malheureuse* about the place of freedom in any understanding of the problem of evil is confirmed. Both the man and the dog have freely consented to a relationship

which limits the freedom of both parties (*SMC*, §IV, 9; §xxvi, 24–25). When the dog was stolen and managed to escape, he did not remain free but returned to his master: ‘Il n’avait donc pas seulement besoin de liberté?’ (*SMC*, §xxii, 22). This is a parable which illustrates what was said in the *Entretiens* about the incompatibility of freedom and value: rather than remain ‘libre et malheureux’, the dog has opted for the values of human affection, a home and regular food.

The third lesson of this relationship is that of the fundamental paradox of human existence, so often discussed by Grenier in different contexts and under different aspects. Human existence is torn between presence and absence, and the gulf between them is the ‘divorce’ of consciousness. Grenier only becomes fully aware of the bond of affection, and in particular of his need of it, after the dog’s death, that is, in his absence. ‘Si le chien vivait, je ne parlerais pas de lui. Je serais heureux (ou malheureux) de vivre avec lui, cela suffirait’ (*SMC*, §xxiv, 23). Robert Campbell saw in the idea of absence the pivot of Grenier’s thought and the source of his indifference, pointing out the connection with the theme of the absent loved one, and showing that for Grenier it is the Absolute that is felt as being absent (cf. *SMC*, §Lxxxiv, 52). That is undeniably important, and certainly in *L’Existence malheureuse* the yearning for the Absolute often seems to override other, more modest aspirations. However, it would be wrong to neglect the other term, that of presence. The contingency of human existence may point to the infinitely distant Absolute, but it also points to the material environment which is *proche*. If the exercise of consciousness aggravates the divorce from that environment and turns the individual towards the distant Absolute, then if any constructive progress is to be made in the realm of ‘l’humain’, the scope of consciousness must be limited by the acceptance of a *cadre* which ties it down to that which is *proche*.

Given these lessons, the suffering of Taïaut gives rise to a tension in Grenier’s mind between the two types of attitude that emerged from *L’Existence malheureuse* as being possible, and which might be called the total and the partial. There is a gulf between them, and he oscillates from one to the other. In the first place, belief in a transcendent reality does not explain away the problem: we can and must use what freedom we have to conquer a destiny that is by no means all foreordained and inevitable. On the other hand, in the particular case under consideration there was nothing that could be done, and regrets change nothing. It is tempting to refuse all consciousness of a particular evil, and to adopt an attitude of acceptance, or to find some form of escapism. However, human values are inescapable. In ‘Existence et destinée’ Grenier found that his humanity obliged him to abandon certain extreme attitudes:

je ne puis l’adopter puisque je suis un homme, je le regrette . . .

. . . je ne puis pas m’y arrêter, car mon existence est plongée dans le temps, et que si je continue de vivre, je me ressouviens d’être homme.

Etant un homme, je ne puis pas faire autrement que de chercher une destination à toutes choses. (*EBL*, 101, 102)

Here, too, although it is only a glimmer, it is not to be ignored — nor, of course, is it to be allowed to shine too brightly, raising hopes that are bound to be disappointed.

Toutes les pensées qui me viennent sont, je le vois, des pensées de désespoir, d'incrédulité, de révolte. Et cependant, je ne puis m'empêcher de croire. Deux êtres sont en conflit en moi; il me faudrait un secours tout-puissant pour me faire apercevoir ce que ma nuit me cache si obstinément, pas assez pourtant pour m'aveugler tout à fait. (*SMC*, §XLV, 33–34)

The answer is to express this glimmer of light and hope by responding to love, using one's freedom to display solidarity in small ways, if not to commit oneself fully. The *cadre* is that of the inevitable progress of illness, but within it there is a small margin for the exercise of freedom.

J'aime ces prévenances qu'ont leurs proches pour les malades, leurs enfants pour les vieillards et certaines garde-malades pour leurs patients. Changer l'oreiller est peu de chose; mais quand on ne peut rien faire d'autre? On laisse à la Nature (je ne dis pas à Dieu) le soin de tuer à petit feu, et on la contrarie dans la mesure du possible, c'est-à-dire de presque rien. Ce 'presque rien' me touche, c'est la marge de l'humain. (*SMC*, §LXXIV, 47)²²

The concept of the 'presque rien' has occurred before. It expresses the element of contingency, small though it may be, in human existence. There is an infinite distance between the individual being and the Absolute, but there is also an interval between the individual being and the necessary world. It is this interval of freedom that is his burden and his privilege. 'Que l'homme appartienne à la Nature, pas de doute. Dans la mesure où il ne lui appartient pas, c'est son malheur' (*SMC*, §LXXVI, 48: cf. *C*, 3 (7)); but it is also his opportunity to express his true humanity by the right use of what freedom he has. Paradoxically, the 'amour' of which Grenier spoke in the fourth chapter of *L'Existence malheureuse*, or the 'besoin vital de faire du bien' (*SMC*, §LXXXIII, 51), expressions of humanity, are aroused less by other human beings than by animals, because of the inequality that is involved. The realization of this truth gives grounds for a belief in a 'Dieu proche': if man feels pity for animals, surely God cannot but feel pity for man in his utter wretchedness, and rescue him (*SMC*, §XXXI, 27)? The possibility of such compassionate love may be not only the 'marge de l'humain', but also the margin of divine activity in the human world. At the end of *L'Existence malheureuse* Grenier had noted: 'Il faut se demander . . . si la faiblesse humaine ne comporte pas une signification', and in the final paragraph of *Sur la mort d'un chien* he offers a fuller understanding of that meaning:

N'usons pas nos faibles forces à convaincre. Ne croyons pas à nos mérites. Acceptons avec empressement la faveur insolite qui nous est accordée. Une main

écarte le rideau qui nous isole, elle se tend vers nous; hâtons-nous de la saisir et de la baiser. (SMC, §xc, 55)²³

In the context of such an *appel*, representing the irruption of absolute value into human existence, human freedom in the sense of contingency, independence, indetermination, undergoes the same kind of *dévalorisation* that the individual with a different attitude could apply to all his actions.²⁴ If the hand is the hand of love, then, 'Si elle se retire tu n'as plus rien, car tu n'es toi-même rien que par cet acte d'amour' (SMC, §xc, 55).

Sur la mort d'un chien makes no claim to be an intellectual treatise, and it differs from the more formal essays in its approach to the problem of suffering. The theoretical solutions, such as that of 'l'immaculée connaissance', still hold a strong attraction for Grenier, and they are not absent from this work, but more practical and human considerations are given greater prominence. Published at the same time as *L'Existence malheureuse*, it is strictly complementary to it, and neither marks an advance on the other. Indeed, both works exhibit a similar understanding of freedom, and it is only a slight variation in emphasis that makes the balance tip one way rather than the other. Possibility is played down, but that is not to say that Grenier has now moved beyond the concept of freedom as possibility. It is found throughout *Les Grèves*: and *Les Grèves* was published simultaneously with the two books discussed here. Indeed, Grenier has found a new way of preserving possibility, of keeping his options open: by publishing a 'simultaneous trilogy' of essay, elegy and novel in which similar problems are investigated in different ways, and somewhat different solutions are proposed.