

## CHAPTER 7

### MEDITERRANEAN HUMANISM

The ideals of possibility, of freedom, of a consistent indifference, all militate against anything that could be called commitment. The Absolute itself, while in one sense demanding a total commitment, at the same time denies its adepts the right to any positive commitment in the world of material things and human society. It has been suggested, however, that there is a case to be made out for adopting a provisional set of values which allow for some significant, if limited, human action, and that that set of values is not to be created *ex nihilo* (which would be to usurp the privileges of an Absolute Creator) or chosen arbitrarily (which would undermine even its provisional status), but found within a living, familiar tradition. The tradition is that of a Mediterranean humanism, in which man does not take the place of the Absolute, but lives, works and creates within a limited realm which Grenier calls 'la marge de l'humain'.

Born in Paris, and settled in Brittany by the time he was two, Grenier did not discover the Mediterranean until the spring of 1923, when he was twenty-five. He had already been to Rome in 1921 but it was Provence that first revealed to him, in that year, the special quality of the Mediterranean lands. Having obtained his *agrégation* in 1922, Grenier was appointed to a temporary post at the Lycée d'Avignon for May and June of the following year. Not only did he discover Provence in 1923, but later that summer he visited Venice with Louis Guilloux, and in October he sailed for Algiers to take up a teaching post there. Although he had spent much of his life since 1915 in Paris, he had thought of himself as belonging to Brittany. It was those three trips undertaken in 1923 that weaned him away from

le pays qui, avec ses landes perdues et ses brumes traînantes, avec tout ce qu'il a d'informe et d'indéfini, a suggéré les rêves vaporeux de Chateaubriand, les oscillations intellectuelles de Renan, un équilibre instable de l'esprit, une émotion sans contour. (*IM*, 100 (102))

The Mediterranean world presented him, by contrast, with, first of all, an affirmation of life in its physical aspect, and secondly, a sense of definition and proportion.

Une configuration sensible au cœur, voilà ce qui fait l'esprit méditerranéen. L'espace? C'est la courbe d'une épaule, l'ovale d'un visage. Le temps? C'est la

course d'un jeune homme d'un bout de la plage à l'autre. La lumière découpe les traits et engendre les nombres. Tout concourt à la gloire de l'homme. (*IM*, 88 (90–91))

Grenier had left Brittany behind, had deliberately rejected it, for the time being at least, in favour of the lands of the Mediterranean, and the metaphysical meditations to which Brittany lent itself were forgotten. The world was no longer some great Whole from which man was separated by his consciousness, but rather the very domain of humanity, in which there could be experienced a true 'coincidence de moi-même avec l'homme' (*IM*, 89 (92)). There is also an important element of what could be called nature-mysticism, with emphasis on the experience of 'extases', but the emotion is strongly positive. The expression of triumphant affirmation has little in common with the ideas of absorption or of waking out of a dream which Brittany inspired. In 'Les Îles Fortunées' the affirmation is 'J'ai gagné' (*LI*, 91–92 (91–92)). The human individual is at the centre, and the moment, the instant, is everything. The sense of joy, of glory, of sheer happiness, eclipses, at least momentarily, all feelings of disquiet. The Mediterranean peoples possess a land which is reassuring in its sheer physical presence and permanence.

Humanism, however, is based on more than mere physical presence. The perfect contours of Nature may be stifling rather than satisfying and restful. Grenier finds in the Mediterranean a further quality, that of definition and proportion, exemplified in man's dominion over Nature and particularly in the achievements of the Golden Age of Greece.<sup>1</sup> In 'La Même Lumière' he exalts the Greek tradition of *retenue*, preserved, despite the extravagance of Rome, in the Romanesque architecture of Provence (*APH*, 163–65: cf. *IM*, 91 (94)). It is to this Greek tradition that 'Cornélius' appeals to combat the apparently negative attitude of his correspondent. In reply to the maxim: 'Tout s'équivaut, donc ne faisons rien', he argues: 'Si tout est égal, pourquoi pas une œuvre plutôt qu'une contemplation?' (*IM*, 176 (179)). Instancing the architecture of Athens, he claims that 'ces édifices . . . commencent par créer leur ordre, et la vie leur est donnée par surcroît' (*IM*, 180 (182)). Humanism is not only a question of having an anthropocentric understanding of the world, there is a creative element to it as well. In 'Cum apparuerit' Grenier proclaims that in Provence 'L'homme ne s'unit à l'homme que pour fonder . . . Tout le monde ici naît architecte . . . Et le paysage est une construction' (*IM*, 91 (93–94)). The verbs *construire* and *créer* are inseparable from Grenier's understanding of Mediterranean humanism, but they must be seen in terms of the whole tradition of *retenue*: this is not the place for a display of man's *surabondance*.

The year 1935 marks the peak of Grenier's enthusiasm for the tradition of Mediterranean humanism. It was in that year that he addressed the First Congress of the Académie Méditerranéenne in Monaco, the theme of which was 'L'Humanisme et la Méditerranée'.<sup>2</sup> He emphasized the importance of a

rediscovery of a true Mediterranean humanism, on condition that it was rooted in the life of the people, informed by 'la sagesse populaire' rather than by an academic formalism. That is also the argument of 'Sagesse de Lourmarin', published in 1936 but probably written in 1935, the year of the Congress: that essay will be discussed more fully later, when the context of Grenier's understanding of humanism has been more firmly established. For the moment, the important point to notice is that Grenier's paper goes on to lay special emphasis on the Greek tradition of humanism, 'car l'héritage hellénique est le seul universel'. In other words his appreciation of this Greek tradition is fundamental to his idea of humanism, and it would be a serious mistake to see him as another Gide, fleeing the cold, repressive North and exalting the warmth and physical joys of the Mediterranean lands in general.

Grenier's response to Greece, already touched on in passing, is best illustrated in the essay 'Interiora rerum'. In April 1926 Grenier had visited Athens from Naples, where he was teaching, and had remained in Greece for a month. On reading one of his letters from there, Lambert commented: 'Je devine: vous vivez l'époque décisive de votre vie.' Later that year, the same correspondent wrote: 'Vous traînez toute votre vie le mois que vous avez vécu en Grèce.'<sup>3</sup> 'Interiora rerum' was composed probably in the late summer of 1926, when the memory of his visit to Greece was still fresh in Grenier's mind, and published in March of the following year by Daniel Halévy in the series 'Les Cahiers verts'.<sup>4</sup> The overwhelming impression that remained with him was that of 'ce point ténu entre tous où l'esprit et le cœur se tiennent en échec, où l'amour de la vie et la soumission au destin s'équilibrent de manière à prévenir un orgueil ou une humilité sans mesure' (*IM*, 133 (137)). The lesson of Ancient Greece is one of balance, between a total acceptance of life in all its profusion and all its contrasts, and what Grenier calls a 'rectitude', an order, imposed by man on that life. 'Voilà l'équilibre grec, je veux dire l'équilibre humain, je veux dire notre équilibre' (*IM*, 120–21 (125)).<sup>5</sup> It comes from a right understanding of the situation of man, of the relation in which he stands to eternity. Man is not devalued by this perspective, but he is clearly seen to be finite. It is the consciousness of that finitude that is the source of the disciplined order which offers so stark a contrast to the imprecision of Indian sculpture and architecture. For the Greeks, 'la vie humaine n'est vraiment qu'un emblème de quelque chose d'éternel . . . ; dans le regard humain s'entrecroisent deux mondes' (*IM*, 125 (129–30)), and man is fully aware that he exists at that point of intersection. For the Indians, there is no such clear boundary, so that sculpture and architecture merge into each other. 'Ce sont des bourgeonnements de la pierre, comme celle-ci, de la Nature. Rochers, bas-reliefs, statues, fresques: un seul bloc' (*IM*, 126 (130)). Humanity then has no place of its own in this latter conception of the universe. Instead of a tension there is a continuity. 'Où est-elle la fragilité de nos amours toujours menacées?' (*IM*, 128

(132)). Greece on the other hand preserves this sense of passion and fragility which finds its expression in the unmistakable definition of Greek art. Definition speaks of what is not there, what is beyond and unknown, as much as of what is present and represented.<sup>6</sup> Grenier therefore naturally turns, in the concluding paragraphs of his essay, to the Greek attitude to death.

Ces figures méditatives et tendres . . . nous conseillent d'accepter . . . Nous ne pouvons nous dépasser que dans nos frontières . . . Quelle beauté dans un regard qui sait ne pas se détourner de l'inévitable et qui sait n'y pas trop insister. (*IM*, 131–32 (134–36))

The appeal of Mediterranean humanism as exemplified by Greece stems not only from its creative vitality, then, but also from an awareness of the limits within which that vitality is expressed.

It is against this background that the affirmations of 'Cum apparuerit', of 'Les Îles Fortunées' and of other essays must be understood. In 'L'Humain' (1950) Grenier proclaims that 'l'humain réside dans une fissure', that 'l'humain ne porte . . . pas le caractère de l'accomplissement . . . L'échec est la marque de l'humain' (*APH*, 192, 196, 197); in *Sur la mort d'un chien* (1957) he speaks of the 'marge de l'humain'. Man is mortal, finite: incomplete, since his nature is so evidently unfulfilled by death.<sup>7</sup> The certainty of death and the unrequited presumption of the Absolute underlie the constructive humanism of the Mediterranean, giving its positive values a foundation of despair. This is the 'tremblement qui court dans *Les Îles*' that attracted the young Albert Camus:

Il nous fallait des maîtres plus subtils et qu'un homme, par exemple, né sur d'autres rivages, amoureux lui aussi de la lumière et de la splendeur des corps vint nous dire, dans un langage inimitable, que ces apparences étaient belles, mais qu'elles devaient périr et qu'il fallait alors les aimer désespérément . . . Il fallait qu'on me rappelât . . . la finitude de l'homme. (*LI* (3), 10–12)

To Grenier Camus owed 'un doute, qui n'en finira pas et qui m'a empêché, par exemple, d'être un humaniste au sens où on l'entend aujourd'hui, je veux dire un homme aveuglé par de courtes certitudes' (*LI* (3), 12). The humanism that he learned from him was not divorced from a true sense of perspective. The Mediterranean affirms life, and at the same time it affirms death. Life is apparently the only value, and yet it is already undermined by the inescapable fact of death. Hence light, too, is ambiguous. It represents the fullness of life, yet its uncompromising brightness both underlines the fragility and mortality of man and acts as a reminder of the uncompromising perfection of the Absolute. In 'Les Îles Fortunées' Grenier speaks of 'une lumière sans espoir' which has caused mankind to take refuge in various forms of humanistic religion in order to endure it: the alternative is to succumb and give oneself totally to a contemplation of the Absolute which may issue in suicide or in complete indifference to the world.<sup>8</sup> If this alternative is resisted, Grenier suggests that the most that can

be hoped for is the momentary experience of *grandeur* in which man coincides with himself. 'Ne vivons que pour ces instants où la frêle pellicule qui nous cache tous les jours notre mystère intérieur est crevée. Du fond de cette désolation un chant jaillira' (*IM*, 70 (70));

Toujours il faudra bénir . . . ces pudeurs, ces renoncements, ces sacrifices qui ajoutent à l'homme, en soi méprisable, la consécration du malheur; qui changent notre volonté en destin et nous donnent enfin — seul moment qui compte — le sentiment de la grandeur. (*IM*, 77–78 (78))

Human life is essentially a desolation, but it may become the setting for something glorious.

Grenier is never under any illusion about the fragility, indeed the essential nothingness, of human life, but under certain circumstances he is prepared to consider it as having a provisional, secondary reality. If it is dwelt upon at any length, it is seen all too clearly to be illusory, and so it can be enjoyed only in fleeting moments. 'Si je m'attarde à ce qui est humain, j'ai le malheur de voir ce qui me plaisait le plus s'en aller en morceaux' (*IM*, 99 (102)); the pleasure is not denied or renounced, but rather kept within due limits. In what sense, then, may we speak of humanism in Grenier's writings? That is the question raised in the important essay 'Sagesse de Lourmarin', from which the last quotation is taken.

Often, when Grenier attempts to tackle the problem of choice and commitment, he finds himself unable to refute the arguments against ever coming to the point of making a choice. In 'Sagesse de Lourmarin' he adopts a different starting-point, and considers the accomplished fact of his attachment to Lourmarin. He begins by analysing the cost of that particular commitment, and evokes the sacrifices which it demanded. In the first place, to opt for Lourmarin is to reject the sea. The north coast of Brittany, where Grenier grew up, naturally had a strong influence on him. There, the ocean retreats at low tide as far as the eye can see, until there is no longer any clear boundary between water and sky. The verb *pénétrer* comes to Grenier's mind as he recalls how he used to lie on the shingle, but he is unable to define what it was that penetrated him. He likens himself to sponges that offer nothing substantial to the observer, but only 'ce je ne sais quoi des choses qui se sont longuement imprégnées de toutes les traces de l'univers'. He continues: 'Peut-être un tel esprit n'est-il qu'un lieu de rencontre, un point d'intersection, un symbole mathématique?' (*IM*, 95–98 (98–100)). This is a much more passive understanding of the status of the human individual than is found in 'Interiora rerum', despite the similar formulation. There the Greek, as represented in statuary, knew himself to be at the point of intersection of two worlds, the present and the eternal. Here the Breton child is aware of no such binary polarization, but is open to the ebb and flow of the ocean of universal being. This inability to perceive anything as

coherent, and hence able to be retained and enjoyed, extends to all domains: 'tout est pour moi comme cette fleur des champs', which withers as soon as it is picked. A fixed role, a party orthodoxy, an acceptance of irreconcilable oppositions and incurable separations, all these are foreign to the environment in which Grenier grew up. Of course he is deliberately exaggerating the contrast with the Mediterranean here, and passing over those aspects of Brittany which do lend themselves to clarity and definition. In 'Interiora rerum' he indeed aligns Brittany with Greece against India:

l'Inde n'eût jamais pu créer la ligne si pure de ce bras d'adolescent en bronze que je vis au musée de Delphes. La fermeté d'un tel dessin plaît à un homme de ma race pour qui les possibilités se confondent avec les devoirs. Le granit et l'océan, si bruts à côté du marbre et de la mer Égée sont des écoles de résistance. (*IM*, 128–29 (132–33))

For the moment, however, he is concentrating on his intuitive grasp of the complex unity of reality, and the corollary of that, which is the avoidance of strict categorization and of choice. Is it simply that he is attracted by many things at once and is unwilling to opt for any one of them at the expense of the rest? Or is it that, at a deep level, he is not in fact sufficiently attracted by any of them at all? Grenier returns to the image of the flower of the field, but he adds a significant comment. No longer are the flowers that he picks by the wayside 'ce qui me plaisait le plus', by virtue of representing 'ce qui est humain'. Now he recognizes that 'cela ne dure pas, cela est trop à la mesure de l'homme, périssable et mensonger'. At the very heart of this essay on Mediterranean humanism, sounding the inescapable theme against which any theory of humanism must be tested, is the familiar concept of indifference, of the radical devaluation of all that is human for the very reason that it *is* human and therefore imperfect in comparison with the unnamed Absolute. 'Montez un peu plus haut, vous verrez les montagnes s'aplatir et se confondre avec les vallées': a little higher still, and the eyes may find themselves being drawn upwards rather than downwards (*IM*, 102–02 (104–05)).

But to opt for Lourmarin means to renounce these perceptions, fruit of the grey northern ocean and the mists of Brittany. How can Grenier renounce the universalism that he has been setting forth so persuasively? He pictures himself again out for a walk, as at the beginning of the essay. Now, however, instead of a gentle evening stroll in the darkening countryside around Lourmarin, on a 'sentier . . . imprécis et brouillé' which served to turn his thoughts back to Brittany, the walk takes on a new significance. As in the conclusion to 'Cum apparuerit', where the affirmation of life is the deciding factor ('la vie m'apparaît souvent affreuse. Mais ses commencements sont si beaux! Et elle recommence tous les jours' (*IM*, 93 (97): cf. *APH*, 165)), so now 'L'obscurité dans laquelle j'étais plongé ne va pas durer; bientôt, continuant à marcher et

parvenant dans un pays inconnu, je vais voir, à l'aube, des routes entre lesquelles il me faudra choisir' (*IM*, 103 (105–106)). It is not the first time that the verb *choisir* has figured in this essay, but it is the first time that Grenier has faced up to the actual nature of choice. He evokes some of the familiar obstacles which stand in the way of making a choice, but his approach is significantly different. In the first place, he takes hold of the clear opposition between night and day, rejecting the grey, indeterminate tones of Brittany; and secondly, he replaces the sterile couple of possibility and choice by two new terms.

Grenier begins by adducing a parable reminiscent of Lequier's 'Feuille de charmille', but which indicates the new cast of his thought:

Juliette, dans l'épaisseur sensuelle de la nuit, dans sa prolifération de formes et d'êtres, croit encore que *tout est possible* . . . A peine a-t-elle entendu, à peine a-t-elle reconnu le chant de l'alouette qu'il lui faut choisir, qu'il leur faut choisir, à elle et à lui. Il y a une heure, la trame n'était pas nouée, et le rossignol chantait sur le grenadier. Mais maintenant . . .

Si Roméo accepte de vivre, il lui faut refuser tout ce qui porte atteinte à sa vie — il lui faut choisir. (*IM*, 103–04 (106))

The drama of choice is summed up in the opposition between 'tout est possible' and 'refuser': an act of choice eliminates at one stroke the wealth of possibility. Possibility, or potential, and action are radically contrasted by Grenier: 'je vois tout ce que je perds en écartant ce qui peut être vrai à sa manière, tout ce qui, non choisi, peut me dispenser commodément de l'action' (*IM*, 104 (106)). His sympathy is, predictably, with the former, at least initially. Action has no value in itself, whether it is seen as a creative first beginning or in terms of what he stigmatizes elsewhere as orthopraxy.<sup>9</sup> Possibility, on the other hand, the infinite and intoxicating range of human potential, has evident value, representing all the assets of freedom, intact and unsullied by practical use. Much of Grenier's writing is concerned with the need to preserve that potential, whether through the practice of the *acte divergent*, or through the indifference of the Taoist sage, or through the drifting of Franz in *Voir Naples* (the last example being a warning against going to extremes).<sup>10</sup> At this point, however, in line with his chosen image of the emergence from night into day, Grenier takes a more realistic view of potential as expressed in actual living experience, and to that end recasts the terms of the problem. The contrast is now no longer seen as being between possibility and action, but rather between what might be thought of as realized potential and frustrated potential. The terms Grenier uses are *attachement* and *agitation*. 'Ai-je donc d'ailleurs tellement à regretter de ne pas me laisser aller à tous les vagabondages de la pensée?', he asks. The practical consequence of attempting to preserve possibility is precisely that. 'Que pourrais-je attendre de cette agitation qui est la stérilité même?' Grenier allows not only the accusation of sterility but also that of being 'né nulle part'

against those who seek to remain entirely free: they are in danger of losing 'le sens de la terre' (*IM*, 104 (106–07)). This is not a general plea either for Barresian roots or for a slavish attitude of commitment. What he is doing is simply to offer a justification for his own personal decision to adopt Provence, and Lourmarin in particular, as a 'terre de patrie'.

Grenier's point is that the object of his attachment is not unknown and is indeed not alien to him. There is already some kind of natural bond which authenticates its appeal to him. 'De Cadenet à Lourmarin, par les crêtes, tout est proche de l'homme, tout lui est fraternel et consentant. Cette terre ne manque pas à l'homme, c'est l'homme qui lui a manqué. Elle lui inspire une fidélité qu'il n'a pas su toujours respecter' (105 (107)).<sup>11</sup> It is in favour of this land, and not through any existential revolt, that Grenier is prepared to renounce the ties which bind him to Brittany.<sup>12</sup> 'Cum apparuerit' speaks in similar terms of his recognition of a natural affinity between himself and the Mediterranean lands: 'Il existe je ne sais quel composé de ciel, de terre et d'eau, variable avec chacun, qui fait notre climat . . . Il me fallait partir à la recherche de mon climat' (*IM*, 86 (89)). It is indeed a question of recognition rather than of choice. Elsewhere Grenier gives one of the main aims of travelling as being to recognize oneself, 'se reconnaître' (*LI*, 81 (84–89)), and his present argument is an extension of that understanding. The recognition, of course, comes only when things are well under way, and the period of vain agitation has been left behind. In 'Sagesse de Lourmarin' Grenier notes, as a counter to the desire to be dispensed from the need for action: 'Mais je suis embarqué' (*LI*, 104 (106)). In 'La Même Lumière' he extends the idea: 'Et puis nous sommes embarqués, nous ne pouvons faire autrement que d'accepter ce qui nous est imposé et d'en tirer le parti le meilleur; le choix ne commence pas avant, mais après' (*APH*, 165). The attachment has already begun, and because in Grenier's case it is to a tradition that is creative and constructive, he finds that his potential is released rather than destroyed, that, in fact, 'un choix nous libère' (*IM*, 105–06 (108)). The presence of a tradition, of a past, indeed of anything concrete as opposed to the nothingness of a supposedly total, uncommitted freedom, is the basis for the exercise of that creativity of which man, limited as he is, is capable. Grenier's association with the Mediterranean is not to be separated from his vocation as a creative artist. The paragraph just quoted concludes, significantly: 'C'est lorsqu'on est adossé à un obstacle que l'on peut le mieux se mettre à l'œuvre.'

That, indeed, is the key to the essay under discussion. Lourmarin is not just a representative village in Provence. Grenier's allusion to 'la volonté qui a construit le château de Lourmarin, qui l'a maintenu, qui l'a restauré plus tard et en a fait un centre spirituel' (*IM*, 106 (109)), indicates that he is thinking of the cultural Fondation de Lourmarin Laurent-Vibert. Having been married at Lourmarin in 1928, he was in the following year elected one of the first three

*pensionnaires* of the Fondation, in the company of the novelist and poet André de Richaud and the painter Louis Riou.<sup>13</sup> At the time of his lecture to the Congress of the Académie Méditerranéenne in 1935 he was described as being 'de la fondation de Lourmarin'. During the 1930s he was involved with Henri Bosco, Noël Vesper and others in publishing several series of *plaquettes* under the general title *Les Terrasses de Lourmarin*. His practical commitment to the tradition of Mediterranean humanism, expressed as a response to the 'sagesse de Lourmarin', was therefore cultural and artistic, and it requires to be considered in the context of the wider theme of artistic creation.

Despite the constant reminders that any positive commitment to human values must be seen against the background of finitude, of death, and ultimately of the Absolute, there is still a danger of taking Grenier's expressions of Mediterranean humanism as more advanced, because more positive, than his metaphysical speculations about the Absolute, indifference, possibility and so on: to see his thought as rising to a difficult but none the less firm statement of faith in these values. The simplest corrective to such a view is that based on the chronology of his writings. 'Cum apparuerit' was published in 1930, 'Sagesse de Lourmarin' in 1936, 'La Même Lumière' in 1952, *A propos de l'humain* in 1955. The more extreme writings on indifference come in the middle of that spread: *Le Choix* in 1941, 'L'Indifférence' in 1945, the *Entretiens* in 1948. Neither group can be said to have superseded the other at a given period, and both emphases continue to be present in Grenier's subsequent writings. Each is necessary to balance the other: the tension between them is never resolved, and it underlies all Grenier's conscious and unconscious expressions of the themes of freedom and choice.