

Claude Prosper Jolyot de Cr ebillon: Les  garements du c eur et de l'esprit [The Wayward Heart and Head], 1736-1738

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The story of Meilcour's sentimental education and initiation to the ways of eighteenth-century worldliness may not be the novel which brought its author either fame or literary recognition in his own time. Still, Crébillon's *Les Égarements du cœur et de l'esprit* [The Wayward Head and Heart] is a text which readers, scholars, and historians have continued to revisit, if not for the early modern circumvoluted beauty of the sentences, then for clues about the tacit system of rules associated with the liaisons of Parisian aristocrats during the Regency and early years of Louis XV's reign. Many readers, like the Earl of Shaftesbury, enjoyed Crébillon's novel as a guide to France's "galante" etiquette. More crucially, *Les Égarements du cœur et de l'esprit* has also increasingly and deservedly been regarded as one of the roots of the French novel and modern writing. Crébillon reinvents what novels should be about, defending realism and "le naturel" versus dramatic cataclysms and an exacerbated sentimentality, whilst offering subtle analyses – rather than moral judgements – of his characters' behaviour. That blend of historical artefact and literary experimentations promoted Meilcour's narrative to one of the masterpieces of French fiction.

Les Égarements du cœur et de l'esprit, in a vein typical of eighteenth-century novels, is a first-person narrative through which M. de Meilcour tells the story of a pivotal fortnight in his life when he fell in love for the first time, was enlightened to the ways of the world by a petit-maître, and became initiated to the pleasures of sex by an older woman – albeit after much confusion and many blunders. It is possible that Benjamin Constant and Gustave Flaubert had Crébillon's novel in mind when they wrote *Adolphe* (1816) and *L'Éducation sentimentale* (1869) [The Sentimental Education]. In *Les Égarements du cœur et de l'esprit*, the narrator, now older and more experienced, recalls the naivety of his youth. Such a perspective on the romantic entanglements of Meilcour creates a tight complicity between the self-mocking narrator and his amused reader. Both are united by a knowledge (which the young hero still lacks) about women, worldliness, and the all too human wanderings of both heart and mind. The text bursts with irony; it is a constant *persiflage* of which the characters are the victims. The tone is light, brisk. There is to be no sentimental drama in the narration of Meilcour's confused feelings. Still, underneath the causticity of Crébillon's eighteenth-century portraits, there loom solemn reflections about human nature, society, and the search for happiness.

"J'entrai dans le monde à dix-sept ans" [I made my debut at 17] (*Les Égarements du cœur et de l'esprit*, p.73): the novel opens on Meilcour's entry into society, the real beginning of a man's life at the time. In the next few lines, Crébillon sketches a portrait of his hero with classical efficiency coloured with modern subtlety. Every detail, chosen with care, is

pregnant with implications which the reader is invited to interpret. We learn that Meilcour is noble, of a most respectable family. He is proud (too proud?) of his name, conscious of his rank and of the dignities attached to it. The older Meilcour analyses his seventeen-year old self: besides being proud, he is also paradoxically shy and insecure when it comes women, an unfortunate affliction for a young boy who experiences lust for the first time without recognizing it: “L’idée du Plaisir fut à mon entrée dans le monde la seule qui m’occupa [...] je fus quelque temps sans comprendre la sorte de volupté qui m’était nécessaire” [At my debut, the idea of pleasure was the only one to preoccupy me [...] for a while I did not understand the sort of voluptuousness that was necessary to me] (*Les Égarements du cœur et de l’esprit*, p.73). This is the essence of Meilcour’s forthcoming “égarements du cœur et de l’esprit”. What is that voluptuousness for which he craves? Could that new and perplexing emptiness he feels be fulfilled by a woman? An essential point is mentioned in passing: France was in peace then. Aristocrats like Meilcour were consequently idle. With nothing to do, no purpose to their lives, as Crébillon implies in the most subtle manner, the members of the *très bonne société* were tormented by boredom. Vices become pastime, and frivolity, for lack of anything serious to occupy the mind, forms the essence of that society’s concerns. Meilcour, both to trump his boredom and to satiate his nameless cravings, then searches for a paramour.

Mme de Lursay is singled out from other ladies through the assiduity of her attentions to the insecure and lustful young man. Thus begins the comedy which the older narrator describes with a complacent irony. Mme de Lursay endeavours to seduce an inexperienced Meilcour but is limited in her manoeuvres by the rules which decency imposes upon women. The seductress must play the part of the seduced prey. While she invites the boy’s audacities, she must at the same time appear reluctant to give in, shocked if he is daring. Unfortunately for her (as the older narrator remarks), the young man fails to decipher both her coded invitations and the true meaning of her resistance. Not only does he remain passive, he even feels rejected by her compulsory exhibition of female virtue. The romance stalls. Finally, during one lonely night of meditation and introspection, Meilcour reaches the conclusion that he should be daring and not let himself be awed by Mme de Lursay’s resistance. But before he can act upon this new determination, he sees at the theatre a beautiful “inconnue” [unknown girl] (*Les Égarements du cœur et de l’esprit*, p.114), later to be known as Mlle Hortense de Théville. This brief encounter makes him realise that his interest for Mme de Lursay was purely sensual. He polarises sentimental passion versus erotic desires, the virgin versus the seductress. The rest of his narration recounts how, despite himself and his noble

intentions, he felt drawn to Mme de Lursay for reasons he could not quite identify then but which, as we guess through the older self's scrutiny, combined at once lust, pride, curiosity, and boredom.

Meilcour then meets Versac, this society's most notorious petit-maître, who promptly takes on the role of his mentor. His malevolent gossip reveals to Meilcour the extent to which Mme de Lursay's virtue was just a mask. He encourages his disciple to surrender instead to the advances of the indecent (and therefore for Meilcour, repellent) Mme de Senanges. Such a liaison would establish the young man in society as an *homme à bonnes fortunes* [a ladies' man], a coveted status among the *mondains* [men and women of the world] of eighteenth-century France. In a long, now iconic passage, the expert libertine gives Crébillon's candid anti-hero a lesson in worldliness and seduction at the Carrefour de l'Étoile. Versac enlightens Meilcour about the necessary duplicity of men and women in society. He exposes a system according to which one's existence is limited to one's reputation. The search for public admiration has replaced the quest for individual happiness. One seduces less for pleasure, according to Versac, than for success. This long dialogue does not only lay bare the hidden springs of eighteenth-century worldliness, it also complexifies the figure of the petit-maître. Frivolity is presented here as a varnish. It is the deliberate fruit of an intricate reflection. Crébillon therefore characterises the *mondain* as the direct offspring of Castiglione's courtier, Machiavelli's prince, or Hobbes's Leviathan. Ease of manners conceals cruelty. Power dwells in being both loved and feared. The carelessness of sprezzatura masks fastidious efforts at self-control.

After his pivotal theoretical lesson with Versac – and after several awkward episodes either with his “belle inconnue” or with the two impudent, more mature ladies who fight for his favours – Meilcour confronts Mme de Lursay one night. During a tête-à-tête, he condemns her openly for her bad reputation and for her pretences with him. Female libertinage for him at this stage is an object of repugnance deserving humiliation. What follows, however, is a remarkable testimony to the art of this heroine, as the narrator records her full defence and her own version of her aborted affair with Meilcour. The cunning Mme de Lursay manages to twist the situation to her advantage. In her own narrative, she is a sinner repenting the waywardness of her youth, and a tragic heroine disempowered by her passion for Meilcour. What he condemned as her duplicity is now presented, instead, as her admirable decency. His inability to perceive her civilised manner of responding to his attention for her is thrown back to his face as a sign of his imbecility rather than as a proof of her mendacity. Through the character of Mme de Lursay Crébillon stresses the inequalities

between men and women in libertinage, and posits the superiority of the latter on account of how much they have to dissimulate contrary to their male counterparts (thereby heralding Laclos's Mme de Merteuil's confession). Through the decency of her dissimulation, though she is not chaste, Mme de Lursay becomes virtuous again. Meilcour, confused, humbled, moved also – almost sadistically – by the spectacle of a tearful woman in love, and seduced again by her regained appearances of decency, surrenders to the moment.

On that night, at long last, after a fortnight of misunderstandings, Meilcour and Mme de Lursay make love. Subtly, decently, and perceptively – that is, in the manner characteristic of Crébillon's writing – the author paints one of the most memorable erotic scenes of French literature. He describes the whirlpool of sensations, the inability, in the instant of bliss, to resist the spell of desires and the ecstasy of voluptuousness. These final paragraphs, however, bring no resolution to Meilcour's questions. He is left more puzzled than ever before:

“Dérobé aux plaisirs par les remords, arraché aux remords par les plaisirs, je ne pouvais pas être sûr un moment de moi-même.” [taken away from pleasures by remorse, carried away from remorse by pleasures, I could not for one moment be sure of myself] (*Les Égarements du cœur et de l'esprit*, p.246). The novel ends on an image of his “égarements” on the next morning: “Quelques heures s'étaient écoulées dans ces contradictions, et le jour commençait à paraître, qu'il s'en fallait beaucoup que je fusse d'accord avec moi-même.” [A few hours had passed in these contradictions, and day was coming, still I was far from agreeing with myself] (*Les Égarements du cœur et de l'esprit*, p.247). Mme de Lursay makes him leave promptly at dawn, yet not without giving him another rendezvous which he, at this moment, is eager to attend. But will he come? Will he still feel so keen once the spasms of pleasure have left way for colder reflections? The narrator does not tell. The young hero is still a mystery to himself. The novel ends on an implicit question mark, denying the reader true closure, a clear conclusion, and a morality to the story.

A mystery remains over the final lines of *Les Égarements du cœur et de l'esprit*: was the novel meant to have an open ended finish? In his foreword, Crébillon had announced at least six parts to his novel: the first two parts, he says, would revolve around Meilcour's ignorance and his first emotions. The next parts would focus on the corrupting influence of Versac's system. The last parts would on the contrary show Meilcour brought back to reason and virtue through the love of a dignified lady. However, only the first three parts were published serially between 1736 and 1738. Contemporary readers were therefore expecting a continuation to Meilcour's adventure after his night with Mme de Lursay. In the many prolepses punctuation the story of *Les Égarements du cœur et de l'esprit*, the narrator had

announced that the indecent Mme de Senanges would be the one truly in charge of his libertine education, and that he would eventually outshine Versac as a *petit-maître*. Yet, we are to see none of that, the novel finishing instead on what may be Meilcour's last illusion about love and his first addiction to voluptuousness.

Other writings may have prevented Crébillon from resuming and concluding the story of Meilcour's *égarements*. Or perhaps the author perceived the genius of ending Meilcour's narrative on the perplexities following a libertine night, as he did in *Le Sylphe* (1730), *La Nuit et le moment* (1755) and *Le Hasard au coin du feu* (1763). There is something undeniably modern in Crébillon's refusal to provide his readers with all the answers, with a morality to the stories he tells. The reader is left to fill in the blanks or, rather, he is prompted to acknowledge, with Meilcour, that puzzles and "égarements" may not always be vanquished by certitudes. It seems that desires, love, liaisons between men and women, cannot be reduced to the mathematical certainties of Versac's system. Thus, be it intentional or not, this open ending is the perfect conclusion to *Les Égarements du cœur et de l'esprit's* demonstration that matters of the heart constitute a perplexing and never-ending maze. The title does not quite suggest, as tradition would have it, that the heart and mind oppose each other, tearing the self apart between sense and sensibility. Rather, it refers to the confusion experienced by Meilcour, as both his desires and his reasoning fail to bring him any sense of certainty and any clear cut guidance on what to do.

Despite the decency with which erotic matters are addressed and voluptuous scenes described, *Les Égarements du cœur et de l'esprit* deserves its label of a "libertine" novel. It focuses on "l'amour" in all its forms. There is of course the sentimental passion for the young and virginal Hortense de Théville, "la belle inconnue", but there is also and above all the love for Mme de Lursay, a blend of erotic lust and admiration. Meilcour is tormented as well by a desire for public recognition and a purely animal appetite which will eventually lead him (beyond the text's ending) to have an affair with the impudent Mme de Senanges whom he neither respects nor finds attractive. Crébillon writes about desire which he does not disguise as sentiment. He deflates the myth of a fleshless "amour-passion" [love-as-passion] and shows that "amour-gout" [love-as-taste], the voluptuous fantasy of a moment, can be as tormenting to a young hero and as worthy a topic of exploration for a novelist as the tragic passions of Phèdre and Berenice (that was what Crébillon "le père" [the elder], famous dramaturge in his time, would write about), the ill-fated romance of the Chevalier des Grieux, or the sentimental journey of Marivaux's Marianne. Through Meilcour's "égarements" (alluding at once to his bewilderment and to his twists to virtue), Crébillon describes love in a

libertine climate. His novel legitimises the characters' natural drive towards pleasure. Voluptuousness is not a source of tragedy here. Seduction is not presented as a temptation from the path of virtue: it is rather a contract between two individuals looking for pleasure. However, Meilcour's narrative also emphasises the imperative to cover Nature with civilised manners. In *Les Égarements du cœur et de l'esprit*, sex is aestheticized, intellectualised. The instinct becomes a heavily theorised art of love or even sometimes (as for Versac) a strict ideological system. This tension between natural erotic drives on the one hand and the need to negotiate these with the rules of decorum on the other composes the essence of the "mondain" [worldly] branch of libertine fiction. Crébillon's *Les Égarements du cœur et de l'esprit* would inspire Duclos's *Confessions du comte de **** (1741), Godard d'Aucour's *Angola* (1744), Dorat's *Les Malheurs de l'inconstance* (1771), Denon's *Point de lendemain* (1777), as well as, most notoriously, Laclos's *Les Liaisons dangereuses* (1782), to name but a few. Meilcour's education is indeed as much an erotic initiation as it is an education to the ways of the world. Learning how to deal with his feelings and that of his partners implies learning about the tacit rules which men and women must obey in order to find an elegant balance between lust and decency.

Still, Crébillon's *Les Égarements du cœur et de l'esprit* influenced French fiction beyond the confines of its libertine productions. It was to be also an example of a new kind of writing driven by a desire to paint men and women as they truly are. The novel was to be, if not yet "realist", then at least "realistic", truer to life, and written "avec naturel": "On ne pêcherait plus contre les convenances et la raison. Le sentiment ne serait point outré; l'homme enfin verrait l'homme tel qu'il est, on l'éblouirait moins, mais on l'instruirait davantage" [one would not sin anymore against proprieties and reason. Sentiment would not be excessive; man would see man as he is, he would be less dazzled, but more edified] (*Les Égarements du cœur et de l'esprit*, p.69). Crébillon defends the moral purpose of his immoral novel as was expected of eighteenth-century authors who had all been taught that the role of art was to teach and to please. Yet Crébillon is rethinking how best to touch a reader. Fiction does not need to pretend to be real to be truthful; rather, it simply needs to deal with eternal truths: "le vrai seul subsiste toujours" [truth alone always perdures] (*Les Égarements du cœur et de l'esprit*, p.70). Crébillon was not writing, he declares, to meet the fashion of the day. Good novelists, according to him, are writing for the centuries to come.

In this respect, the foreword of *Les Égarements du cœur et de l'esprit* takes a prophetic dimension. Crébillon's contemporaries did not give an overall positive reception to Meilcour's story. He was criticised for the indecency of the topic (the night with Mme de

Lursay shocking the most prudish readers) and the intricacy of his style (Diderot would mock him with the nickname “Girgiro l’entortillé” [Girgiro the tangled up] in *Les Bijoux indiscrets*). Yet Crébillon was rediscovered in the twentieth century alongside other libertine authors from Laclos to Sade. He was identified as their precursors, as the “father” of eighteenth-century libertine writing. The new scholarly interest for *Les Égarements du cœur et de l’esprit* brought to light the fact that it was also a cornerstone in the rise of the psychological novel. Crébillon took the moralist approach of the Grand Siècle to the next level as he goes deep below the surfaces of his characters’ behaviours and refuses to become a “moraliser”. He does so with an irony which creates a complicity between narrator and reader whilst leaving the latter enough room for his or her own interpretations. The ambiguity of Crébillon’s writing in *Les Égarements du cœur et de l’esprit*, all that is merely hinted at or unresolved in the story of Meilcour’s entry both into society and manhood, makes it a renewed source of interest for modern readers and exegetes. This novel, anchored as it is in the 1730s Parisian *très bonne société*, addresses the timeless dilemma of being caught in the maze of one’s own desires.

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