

Research Article

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Rousseau's Herbarium, or The Art of Living Together

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Abstract: In his botanical writings, Jean-Jacques Rousseau repeatedly returns to the idea that botanising exercises our faculty of attentive observation and teaches us to “see well.” Through botanical practice, we learn to transfer our attention from the self to what lies outside it and, specifically, to perceive other individual realities as they really are. To Rousseau, seeing well is not a matter of mere accuracy, but of disinterestedness and attention to the particularities of others, and the perceptual competences that he thought we might attain from botany have parallels in moral perception. Teasing out some of these parallels, this article's main objective is to establish that the botanical gaze that Rousseau cultivates in his final years is moral in character and that it promotes wisdom and virtues indispensable to the moral education of man.

Keywords: botany, moral education, perception

Sporadic engagement with the issue of plants can be found in the works of many great thinkers in Western intellectual history, but few have professed such a penchant for botany as Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Rousseau, best known as an influential philosopher and political theorist, was also an avid practitioner of botany. He went on botanical excursions, collected plants, made herbaria, and wrote about botany. The most well-known of these writings are found in Rousseau's autobiographical works *Les Rêveries du promeneur solitaire* and *Les Confessions*, published posthumously in 1782, but his botanical *oeuvre* also includes many fragments and letters on botany, as well as a draft for a dictionary of botanical terms.¹ Nomenclature was evidently important to Rousseau, but the first step towards becoming a great botanist was not, in his view, the acquisition of dry terminology. On the contrary, in a letter to Madeleine-Catherine Delessert, who had asked for his assistance in undertaking the botanical education of her daughter Madelon, Rousseau writes:

J'ai toujours cru qu'on pouvoit être un très grand botaniste sans connoître une seule plante par son nom, et sans vouloir faire de votre fille un très grand botaniste, je crois néanmoins qu'il lui sera toujours utile d'apprendre à *bien voir ce qu'elle*

¹ Alexandra Cook's *Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Botany. The Salutary Science* and Guy Ducourthial's *La Botanique selon Jean-Jacques Rousseau* constitute the only modern book-length studies of Rousseau's botanical work. However, his botanical writings, though not a major subject within Rousseau studies, have received a certain amount of critical attention and they continue to do so in the twenty-first century, notably in the works of, among others, Célia Abele, Jérôme Brillaud, Rachel Corkle, Fernando Calderón Quindós, Takuya Kobayashi, Bernard Kuhn, Timothée Lécho, Michael Marder, Marc Olivier, and Jane Walling. Rousseauian botany was also the subject of an exhibition at the Muséum d'histoire naturelle de Neuchâtel in 2012. The exhibition catalogue, *Rousseau botaniste: “Je vais devenir plante moi-même,”* edited by Claire Jaquier and Timothée Lécho, contains a series of articles that highlight and contextualise various aspects of his botanical practice.

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voit. (Rousseau, *Œuvres complètes*, vol. IV 1152, my emphasis)

[I have always believed that one can be a very good botanist without knowing one plant by its name; and without wanting to make of your daughter a great botanist, I believe nonetheless that it will always be useful to her to learn to see what she sees well. (Rousseau, *Reveries of the Solitary Walker, Botanical Writings, and Letter to Franquières* 131, my emphasis)]

According to Rousseau, mastery of botany requires an education of the eye and relentless practice in the art of careful observation. In fact, each of the eight letters on botany that he wrote to Mme Delessert incessantly returns to this guiding principle: *de bien voir ce qu'on voit*. If the mother is to initiate her daughter into botany, she must herself learn to see well, and this is what Rousseau sets forth to teach her – by way of letters. In his endeavours to teach his correspondent to see, Rousseau omits showing her the plants he describes and denies her knowledge of their names. His aim is to make her thoroughly conversant with its *structure* – not to teach her the “nom très arbitraire qu'on donne à cette plante en tel ou en tel pays” [“very arbitrary names that people give to this plant in this or that country”] (1171–72 [144]). In so doing, he attempts, beyond the task at hand, to relegate the common misconception that botany “n'est qu'une science de mots qui n'exerce que la mémoire et n'apprend qu'à nommer des plantes” [“is but a Science of words which exercises only the memory and teaches one only to name plants”] (1171 [144]). Quite the opposite, Madelon and her mother must learn to rely on their senses, for botany is above all a science of observation: “Avant de leur apprendre à nommer ce qu'ils voient, commençons par leur apprendre à le voir. Cette science oubliée dans toutes les éducations doit faire la plus importante partie de la leur” [“Before teaching them to learn to name what they see, let us begin by teaching them to see it. This science, forgotten in all educations, ought to comprise the most important part of theirs”] (1172 [144–45]).

Learning how to see well, it is Madelon's faculty of *attention* which will be exercised (Abele, “Rousseau's Herbaria: Leaves of Self, Books of Nature” 403), as Rousseau points out in the first letter to her mother: “Votre idée d'amuser un peu la vivacité de votre fille et de l'exercer à l'attention sur des objets agréables et variés comme des plantes me paroit excellente” [“Your idea of amusing the vivacity of your daughter a little, and exercising it to [pay] attention to agreeable and varied subjects such as plants, seemed excellent to me”] (*Œuvres complètes*, vol. IV 1151, [*Reveries of the Solitary Walker, Botanical Writings, and Letter to Franquières* 130]). Rousseau repeats the idea that botanising might enhance the practitioner's faculty of attention in other letters to Mme Delessert (*Reveries of the Solitary Walker, Botanical Writings, and Letter to Franquières* 144; 170), but it is also a notion he returns to elsewhere, as in the Seventh Walk, consecrated to botany, of *Les Rêveries du promeneur solitaire*. Here, he describes his botanising method as a form of attentive observation that enables him to perceive in detail the “spectacle of nature” and the individual things [“objets particuliers”] that constitute it:

Dans cet état, un instinct qui m'est naturel, me faisant fuir toute idée attristante imposa silence à mon imagination et fixant mon attention sur les objets qui m'environnoient me fit pour la première fois détailler le spectacle de la nature, que je n'avois guère contemplé jusqu'alors qu'en masse et dans son ensemble. (*Œuvres complètes*, vol. I 1062)

[In these circumstances, a natural instinct of mine that makes me flee all depressing ideas silenced my imagination and, focusing my attention on the things around me, made me for the first time consider in detail the spectacle of nature, which until then I had hardly ever looked at otherwise than collectively and as a whole. (*Reveries of the Solitary Walker* 71)]

The idea that turning the observer's attention to particular objects promotes observational skills is well-established in his thinking when Rousseau returns to it in *Les Rêveries*, as when he addresses it in his letters on botany in the early 1770s. Indeed, the stress on empirical observation, and on the importance of strengthening that faculty, is a central feature already in his pedagogical treatise *Émile, ou De l'éducation* (1662), and his botanical letters can thus be said to continue the pedagogical project of *Émile* (Cook, “Propagating Botany” 74). As documented by Alexandra Cook, one of the first to recognise this was Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, who found in the letters to Mme Delessert “a model for how to teach and a supplement to *Émile*” (Goethe, in a letter to Duke Carl August of June 16, 1782, qtd. in Cook, “Propagating Botany” 71). What is new, however, and what makes the educational project developed in the letters a *supplement* to the treatise, is late Rousseau's assertion that interactions with plants are particularly

beneficial to the development of our capacity for attentive observation. Immersed in nature, as he recalls it in *Les Rêveries*, “les odeurs suaves, les vives couleurs, les plus elegantes formes semblent se disputer à l’envi le droit de fixer nôtre attention” [“sweet smells, bright colours, and the most elegant shapes seem to vie for the right to seize our attention”] (*Œuvres complètes*, vol. I 1063 [*Reveries of the Solitary Walker* 72], my emphasis). In this sense, highlighting the lessons that plants present us with and their special ability to attract our attention, his botanical writings can, as Célia Abele has argued, be said to “rewrite” *Émile* (“Rousseau’s Herbaria: Leaves of Self, Books of Nature” 416), to the extent that Rousseau here makes “flowers the tool with which to carry out *Émile*’s project of training the faculty of observation” (414).

The interest that Rousseau takes in observation as a faculty that must be exercised and perfected speaks to his notion of the importance and difficulty of “seeing well.” And, as we shall see, the need to cultivate our capacity to perceive real things “in themselves” is a recurring theme in his botanical *oeuvre*, where he explores both the obstacles and the virtues and circumstances that enable us to see individual realities (pertaining to the human realm and beyond) *as they really are*. To Rousseau, seeing well is not a matter of mere accuracy, but requires us to perceive in a disinterested, yet loving manner, attentive to the particularities of others. As has been pointed out by scholars such as Paul Cantor and Fernando Calderón Quindós, Rousseau’s understanding of botany as the study of objects to be examined and appreciated for their structure alone, non-instrumentally, prefigures the principles of much modern aesthetics, from Kant’s *Critique of Judgment* to New Criticism (Cantor 377). Similarly, Rousseau arguably foreshadows Kant when he associates the study of nature *as itself* with moral attunement. Much like the latter, who famously argues that appreciation of beauty in nature enhances the moral disposition of man, since, as Kant puts it in *The Metaphysics of Morals*, it fosters a “sensibility that greatly promotes morality or at least prepares the way for it: the disposition, namely, to love something” (192), Rousseau takes an acute interest in the moral implications of the mode of perception cultivated through botanical practice and appears to conceive a loving disposition as a precondition of just perception. Indeed, the process of learning to see well, pivotal to the botanical education, is also a key to Rousseau’s program for developing moral sensibility in man. Teasing out these parallels between botanical and moral perception, as they come to expression in works such as *Les Rêveries* and the letters on botany, but also in *Julie, ou la nouvelle Héloïse*, a 1761 novel that contains a seed to some of these thoughts, my main objective is to establish that the botanical gaze cultivated by Rousseau in his final years is moral in character and that it promotes wisdom and virtues indispensable to the moral education of man.

I begin by contextualising my suggestion that there is an “art of living together” to be found in Rousseau’s botanical *oeuvre*, by pointing out some correspondences between the virtues deemed necessary for the apprehension of others “such as they are” in *Émile* and in the botanical writings. Subsequently, I explore Rousseau’s understanding of how botanical practice affects the self and, in particular, our relations to other individual realities. Finally, having examined what it entails to look at things like a botanist, and what distinguishes the botanical gaze from other modes of perception, I conclude with some remarks on how Rousseau puts the “botanical” lessons on living together to work in an encounter with a veteran in the Ninth Walk of *Les Rêveries*.

A Botanical Art of Living Together?

In *Les Rêveries*, Rousseau ponders the origins of his long-lasting attraction to botany: Where does his love of botany stem from? Among the answers that the text procures, the perhaps most striking is that botany, as Jean Starobinski has argued, constitutes a sort of medicine and that it assumes a therapeutic effect (279–80). Indeed, Rousseau’s insistence on botany’s ability to further the health of the soul by purging it of destructive passions has led Cook to characterise the status of botany in Rousseau as that of a “salutary science” (*Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Botany: The Salutary Science* 13–16). According to Cook, however, *pace* Starobinski, this salutary influence derives not from botany’s ability to spur introspection, but from its

capacity to draw our attention to that which lies outside the self. Botany, as Rousseau practices it, is a contemplative activity that “calms the emotions by focusing the mind of something outside itself” (15).

What, then, was the nature of the passions that Rousseau wanted to be purged from his soul? Above all, he wanted to rid himself of “the desire for revenge on his presumed tormentors” (15). In his final years, Rousseau, whose often-radical ideas had scandalised his fellows, struggled with a sense of persecution and isolation. In botany, he found a way to avoid thinking about his enemies, to escape “au souvenir des hommes et aux atteintes des méchants” [“the memory of men and the attacks of the wicked”] (*Œuvres complètes*, vol. I 1070 [*Reveries* 79]) and a means to secure the serenity of his soul, “ne laisser germer dans [son] cœur aucun levain de vengeance ou de haine” [“preventing any seed of vengeance or hatred from taking root in [his] heart”] (1061 [70]).

Living together is surely a thorny issue in Rousseau’s *oeuvre* and one he addresses in multiple ways and in different contexts – politics, civic and civil society, friendships, and marriage, to name but a few. But if his accounts of relations between self and others are often pessimistically tinted, it remains that to Rousseau, as he maintains in *Émile*, knowing how to live with others is an “art” of the utmost importance. Indeed, it is “l’art le plus nécessaire à l’homme et au citoyen” [“the most necessary art for a man and a citizen”] (Rousseau, *Œuvres complètes*, vol. IV 655 [Rousseau, *Émile or On Education* 328]). And even if *Les Rêveries* is frequently interpreted as a withdrawal from society, as it is prominently articulated in Starobinski’s seminal reading of the work, recent scholars such as Abele, Timothée Lécho, and Bernard Kuhn have begun to integrate late Rousseau’s turn to nature into the wider framework of his thought, to show that the botanical *oeuvre* in fact presents us with a thinker deeply engaged in contemplating the nature of the social. While Abele highlights the pedagogical intentions that shape Rousseau’s herbaria and perceives his botanical activities as parts of an educational project closely related to *Émile*, Lécho dwells on the social and pedagogical aspects of the practice of botanical gift exchange that Rousseau partook in, uncovering significant parallels between the values he associated with botanical gifts and his conception of friendship (225–31). And Kuhn regards botany as a means for Rousseau “to advance his own understanding of the complex encounter between the self and the other” (2). Particularly relevant in this context is Kuhn’s identification in Rousseau’s works of a “botanical mode of observation” (9) that emphasises the dynamic, ever-changing character of natural life forms. To Kuhn, this botanical mode of observation reflects Rousseau’s approach to exploring and understanding the self, since only “by viewing the self as an entity developing in time and history can the true nature of that self be given expression” (18).

Arguing that interactions with plants constitute a kind of moral training for the Rousseauian botanist and that botany, in Rousseau’s view, promotes wisdom and virtues necessary to see other individual realities well, the present article adds to these recent perspectives on Rousseau’s late-life interest in botany. Maintaining that the botanical gaze Rousseau cultivates in his final years relates to the moral education of man in significant ways, I want to suggest that there is an “art of living together” to be uncovered in Rousseau’s botanical writings as well, as in *Émile*, and that the lessons that these writings have to offer on how to live together are engrained in reflections on perception.

Wisdom and Virtue: Lessons Drawn from the Study of Nature

Rousseau’s most sustained reflections on the moral character of man’s perceptual capacities can be found in *Émile*. In the treatise’s Book IV, Rousseau contemplates the “second birth” of man, at the onset of puberty (*Œuvres complètes*, vol. IV 489 [*Émile or On Education* 211]). In this crucial phase, a growing interest in others awakens in young *Émile*, who thus finally enters the moral order (522 [235]). Humanity and a capacity for compassion must then be cultivated in the young man. The one previously occupied only with himself must learn to see and feel for the other (508 [224]) and, to arrive at that, must be taught how to see men “such as they are” (525 [236]):

Que faudroit-il donc pour bien observer les hommes? Un grand intérêt à les conoitre, une grande impartialité à les juger. Un cœur assés sensible pour concevoir toutes les passions humaines, et assés calme pour ne pas les éprouver. (536)

[What would be required, then, in order to observe men well? A great interest in knowing them and a great impartiality in judging them. A heart sensitive enough to conceive all the human passions and calm enough not to experience them. (244)]

To observe men well is, to Rousseau, a matter of equity. It requires one to negotiate and arrive at an appropriate distance between oneself and the other – to feel for the other, but not confuse the other's passions with one's own; to be curious but unbiased, not wanting to be in the place of the other, but sufficient unto oneself and free of prejudice (536 [244]). In other words, apprehension of others “such as they are” is brought about by way of not only perceptual but also cognitive and moral skills. Perceptual accuracy is not sufficient if the observer is incapable of sound reasoning or suffers from excessive sensitivity or lack thereof.

In the final part of Émile's education, in which he learns how to live with others, the art of living together is shown to largely depend on his capacity to “see well” – that is to say, on his ability to see others clearly, judge them righteously and feel for them. And the discerning, yet disinterested attitude required for the study of his fellows is one that Émile shares with the Rousseauian botanist – although the objects they study differ. Indeed, when Rousseau portrays the botanist as someone able to look at things without aiming to exploit them, fuelled only by “intérêt et curiosité” [“interest and curiosity”] (*Œuvres complètes*, vol. I 1069 [Reveries 78]) before an exhibition of singularity and otherness, he attaches to this figure – the botanist – much the same virtues that characterise Émile. And, as we shall see, the moral character of the botanical gaze is perhaps above all a matter of disinterestedness and an effect of the heightened receptivity that this disinterested attitude enroots within the botanist.

Studying nature as a botanist, Rousseau tells us, is to study nature “que pour trouver sans cesse de nouvelles raisons de l'aimer” [“with the sole aim of continually finding new reasons for loving it”] (1068 [77]). This is to say that much like there can be “no neat separation of cognitive and affective elements” in Rousseau's program for cultivating moral sensibility in man (Pierdziwol 156), botanical practice equally comprises a complex interplay of the cognitive and the affective. All the while advancing scientific knowledge, it should also, and perhaps more importantly, shape our emotional response to nature: “Ah sachons aimer la nature, sachons la chercher, l'étudier, la connoitre, sachons admirer des beautés dont ce n'est pas pour nous qu'elle s'est parée” [“Ah, let us know how to love nature, let us know how to search for her, study her, know her, admire these beauties with which she is adorned not for us”] (*Œuvres complètes*, vol. IV 1251 [Reveries of the Solitary Walker, Botanical Writings, and Letter to Franquières 251–52]). In other words, the disinterestedness of the botanical gaze should not be mistaken for affective indifference (Calderón Quindós 334). On the contrary, Rousseau's insistence that we must appreciate plants for themselves is a call for love – we must leave our egoistic needs and desires aside in order to leave room for a genuine interest in the object of contemplation (334). Only then can the study of plants reconcile human beings with nature, that is shift our attitudes towards nonhuman life. Exclamations such as the above, drawn from one of Rousseau's fragments on botany, thus suggest, as Marder and Vieira argue, that the *ultima ratio* of Rousseauian botany is indeed “not epistemic but ethical – not the knowledge of plants it procures but the love of nature it reaffirms” (40).

In *Les Rêveries*, the attention Rousseau gives to the botanical realm is characterised by his eagerness to acknowledge and attend to the uniqueness and singularity of each plant. In the Fifth Walk, he insists that he could have written an entire book on every grass in the meadows and every moss in the woods; that, in short, he would have wanted every single blade of grass and atom of a plant to be fully described (*Œuvres complètes*, vol. I 1043 [Reveries 51–52]). This provides a striking example of the delight Rousseau took in the particular – a delight which derails the usual procedures of botanical classification: “Radical botanical empiricism hinges on a continual detection of novelty in the flora – a sure sign of love, whereby the lover can never get tired, nor have enough, of the beloved” (Marder and Vieira 42). Before the botanophile's enamoured gaze, no plant goes without saying, for to attend to them lovingly is to acknowledge that no two plants are completely alike. That this fascination for the individual is fundamental to his botanical practice is easily perceptible in Rousseau's description of his herbarium, in the Seventh Walk of *Les Rêveries*:

Toutes mes courses de botanique, les diverses impressions du local des objets qui m'ont frappé, les idées qu'il m'a fait naître, les incidens qui s'y sont mêlés, tout cela m'a laissé des impressions qui se renouvellent par l'aspect des plantes herborisées dans ces mêmes lieux. Je ne reverrai plus ces beaux paysages, ces forêts, ces lacs, ces bosquets, ces rochers, ces montagnes dont l'aspect a toujours touché mon cœur: mais maintenant que je ne peux plus courir ces heureuses contrées je n'ai qu'à ouvrir mon herbier et bientôt il m'y transporte. Les fragmens des plantes que j'y ai cueillies suffisent pour me rappeler tout ce magnifique spectacle. (*Œuvres complètes*, vol. I 1073)

[All my botanical walks, the varied impressions made on me by the places where I have seen striking things, the ideas they have stirred in me, and the incidents that became connected to them have all left me with impressions which are renewed by the sight of the plants I collected in those very places. I shall never again see those beautiful landscapes, those forests, those lakes, those groves, those rocks or those mountains, the sight of which has always touched my heart; but now that I can no longer roam about those glorious places, all I have to do is to open my herbarium and it quickly transports me there. The pieces of plants that I gathered there are enough to remind me of the whole magnificent spectacle. (*Reveries* 82)]

The purpose of the herbarium described by Rousseau is clearly not to be a systematic catalogue of the vegetal world. Studying his specimens, Rousseau instead “revisits” not only the concrete places where he collected them but also an entire cluster of ideas and impressions that he associates with the act of collecting them. These dried plants are thus not random examples of a plant species, but unique beings, tied to a specific time, place and encounter, the memories of which they vividly evoke when he examines them, so that the herbarium produces, as it were, “l’effet d’une optique qui les peindroit derechef à mes yeux” [“the effect of an optical chamber, showing them again before my very eyes”] (1073 [82]). In this sense, Rousseau declares, the herbarium serves as a diary (1073 [82]) enabling him to revisit moments in his past, much like the reveries he writes, which also allow him to document and commune with fragments of his past selves (Abele, “Rousseau on the Île Saint-Pierre: Realism as Circumscription” 214–15). That this “journaling practice” can be seen as a testament to Rousseau’s social engagement, resulting as it did in herbaria thoroughly imbricated in the social world through his participation in botanical exchange networks, is well-documented by scholars such as Abele and Lécho. What is striking, moreover, is the transformative effect that attentive observation of the individual specimens has on Rousseau. Leafing through the herbarium, he forgets, he tells us, “les persecutions des hommes, leur haine, leur mépris, leurs outrages et tous les maux dont ils ont payé mon tendre et sincère attachement pour eux” [“the persecution of men, their hate, their scorn, their insults, and all their evil deeds with which they have repaid my tender and sincere attachment to them”] (1073 [82]). This forgetfulness makes him happy, he writes, despite the misery he endures (1073 [82]).

The herbarium’s salutary influence on its manufacturer in *Les Rêveries* recalls Rousseau’s description of botany in a letter to the Duchess of Portland. To the duchess, Rousseau writes that nature study soothes the soul and that this spiritual serenity stems from nature study’s ability to “detach” us from ourselves and draw our attention to what lies outside the self: “J’y trouverais cette précieuse sérénité d’âme que donne la contemplation des merveilles qui nous entourent” [“I would find there that precious Serenity of soul which arises from the contemplation of the marvels that surround us”] (Rousseau, *Correspondance complète de Jean-Jacques Rousseau*, vol. XXX 314 [Rousseau, *Reveries of the Solitary Walker, Botanical Writings, and Letter to Franquières* 173]). It is in this sense, he concludes, that the study of nature is conducive “pour la sagesse et pour la vertu” [“for Wisdom and for virtue”] (314 [173]). The question, then, crucial for appreciating the moral character of Rousseau’s botanical gaze, is what happens to ourselves, and to the relation between the self and its surroundings, when we practice giving attention to nature.

Pharmacists, Shepherds, and Botanists: Ways of Seeing

In an essay generally conceived as the introduction to his dictionary of botanical terms, Rousseau positions his own approach to botanising in opposition to a historically widespread utilitarian and reductionistic approach. The first misfortune of botany, he states, “est d’avoir été regardée dès sa naissance, comme une partie de la Médecine. Cela fit qu’on ne s’attacha qu’à trouver ou supposer des vertus aux plantes, et qu’on

négligea la connoissance *des plantes mêmes*” [“is to have been regarded since its birth as a part of Medicine. As a result, people have thought only to find or attribute virtues to plants, and have neglected *the plants themselves*”] (*Œuvres complètes*, vol. IV 1201 [*Reveries of the Solitary Walker, Botanical Writings, and Letter to Franquières*, 93], my emphasis). The risk of neglect and ensuing importance of studying the “plants themselves” is a theme to which Rousseau often returns, not least in *Les Rêveries*, where he condemns pharmacological exploitation of nature, which, in his view, “fleurissent l’email des prés, l’éclat des fleurs, dessèchent la fraîcheur des bocages, rendent la verdure et les ombrages insipides et dégoûtants” [“make the colour of the meadows and the brilliance of the flowers fade, they dry out the freshness of the woodland, and they make the greenery and shade dull and disagreeable”] (*Œuvres complètes*, vol. I 1064 [*Reveries* 73]). Forcefully rejecting exploitative approaches to nature, Rousseau insists that no morally beneficial effects can be obtained from studying plants as though they were instruments of our passions (1069 [78]). On the contrary, nature’s use-value lies in its *not* being useful to us in any strictly physical sense (Cook, *Rousseau’s “moral botany”* 213). Paying attention to the natural world, we focus less on our own desires and needs, and this has a beneficial effect on our moral being. Only when fuelled by a desire to know plants *in themselves* does nature study enable us to lead a more virtuous life by “purging our souls” of destructive social passions (*Œuvres complètes*, vol. IV 1251 [*Reveries of the Solitary Walker, Botanical Writings, and Letter to Franquières* 252]). And, as Rousseau implies, the one best equipped to teach us about attentive observation of what exists outside the self is none other than the botanist.

To study a plant as a pharmacist is to study it with an eye for its use value, and the habit of seeing plants as a source of drugs and medicine “blinds” pharmacists to the beauty that presents itself to their eyes. The organic structure of plants “interessent fort peu quiconque ne veut que piler tout cela dans un mortier” [“are of very little interest to anyone who simply wants to crush them all in a mortar”] (*Œuvres complètes*, vol. I 1064 [*Reveries* 73]). Certainly, this “blindness” to what surrounds us extends well beyond the apothecary’s garden as well. It touches virtually anyone who approaches nature with an eye above all for personal gain. Botanists as such are not immune to this. Rousseau adamantly condemns those who pursue plant studies due to self-interest or vanity, to make money or achieve a certain position (1069–70 [78]), and instead advocates an approach founded upon “une contemplation pure et désintéressée” [“pure and disinterested contemplation”] (1065 [74]). To him, attentive contemplation of plants constitutes, as Cook has shown, a kind of ascetic training or an outwardly directed *askesis* which is beneficial to the soul (“Rousseau’s Divine Botany and the Soul” 74–5). Maintaining that disinterestedness is indispensable in order to perceive and be touched by the beauty in vegetal nature, Rousseau’s study of *plants as plants* could, moreover, as Cantor has argued, be said to constitute an aestheticising of experience prefiguring the principles of much modern aesthetics and, not least, the path-breaking aesthetic insights of Kant (379). Similarly, according to Calderón Quindós, the aesthetic experience that originates from pure and disinterested contemplation of nature admirably exemplifies Kant’s notion of beauty as “purposive without purpose” (333). This is to say that, based on a practice that both depends on and cultivates non-instrumental sensitivity, botany most certainly is “akin to art for art’s sake” (Marder and Vieira 40). Finally, the association of nature study with disinterested contemplation of vegetal beings also emphasises the preservative, gentle quality of Rousseau’s approach to nature:

Quoi j’yrois couper, broyer, piler dans un mortier ces roses, ce reseda, cette Euphrase; je détruirois ces rameaux élégans, ce joli feuillage, je froisserois le tissu brillant et délicat de ces fleurs. Non *je contemplerai*, je cueillirai, j’arracherai, je diviserai, j’anatomiserai peut être, mais je n’irai point d’une main stupide et brutale pilant et déchirant [les] fragiles beautés que j’admire. Je veux que mes yeux en jouissent, qu’ils les observent, qu’ils les épuisent, qu’ils s’en rassasient s’il est possible. (*Œuvres complètes*, vol. IV 1252, my emphasis)

[What (!) would I cut up, grind up, crush these roses, this reseda, this Euphrasia in a mortar; I would destroy these elegant branches, this pretty foliage, I would crush the brilliant and delicate tissue of these flowers. No, *I will contemplate*, I will gather, I will uproot, I will divide, I will dissect perhaps but I will never crush and destroy the fragile beauties I admire with a stupid and brutal hand. I want my eyes to enjoy them, observe them, exhaust them, be sated if possible. (*Reveries of the Solitary Walker, Botanical Writings, and Letter to Franquières* 252, my emphasis)]

Botanists observe plants both in their live state and dead (1250 [250]). Even while dissecting, they advance with caution, making sure not to destroy the plant's form. In fact, contemplation of plants involves observing “des êtres organiques” [“organic beings”] on their own account, that is as they present themselves to our senses (1249 [250]). And though, admittedly, the human eye occasionally needs assistance in order to perceive every detail of the plant, the instruments chosen by Rousseau to aid him in his endeavours to fully know the plant, the magnifying glass and the microscope, are characterised precisely by their capacity to enrich the ocular experience without damaging the plant or modifying its structure (Calderón Quindós 326) and thus to promote contemplation rather than enable exploitation or instrumentalisation of plants. Hence, to associate, as Rousseau does, botany with disinterested contemplation of nature is to say, as he writes to Mme Delessert, that botany is “une étude de pure curiosité” [“a study of pure curiosity”] (1188 [156]), useful only to the extent that it promotes virtue in the observer, who takes care not to denature or disfigure the plant. In this line of botanical practice, contemplation accordingly involves a morally beneficial attempt to look carefully at something and hold it before the mind *in its integral form*.

That said, as Abele has shown, Rousseau does at times carefully modify the specimens in his own herbaria, for example by exacerbating the plants' natural symmetries or gently bending the stems and flowers into shapes that serve “the multiple purposes of pedagogy (allowing the plants' characters to be clearly seen), practicality (fitting the specimen onto a single page) and aesthetics (creating an arrangement of the plant pleasing to the eye)” (Abele, “Rousseau's Herbaria: Leaves of Self, Books of Nature” 413). The purpose of these subtle arrangements is not, however, to transform nature or turn these organic beings into something that they are not, but to “improve” nature in order to render the plants' identifying characteristics more immediately intelligible and more readily available for the viewer's concentrated observation (410–18). As such, while the thin red lines that Rousseau typically employs to “frame” the specimens in his herbaria accentuate the constructed nature of the herbarium, the effect of this combination of nature and artifice is that it creates “a special realm for focused attention and getting a sense of the variety and differences between plants, highlighted by the way that each plant must find its own way of fitting into the unvarying page and red rectangle” (414). Paradoxically, the blatant artificiality of the herbarium plate subsequently serves to render the singularity and the otherness of the natural object displayed *more* readily visible than it would otherwise be.

Cultivating nature in order to make it easier for the human individual to recognise and fully acknowledge the particularities encountered in the natural world, Rousseau's botanical work evokes the gardening practice of Julie, the titular character of his epistolary novel *Julie, ou la nouvelle Héloïse*. In the part of the novel set in Julie's garden, “Elysium,” Rousseau describes Julie's gardening efforts as an act of cultivation that has made this natural space, in some ways, “better” than nature itself would have made it. Through her efforts to repair the abandoned orchard close to her house, Julie has managed to create a space that appears natural and seemingly untouched by human hands. Consequently, when the central character Saint-Preux enters Elysium, he perceives it as “le lieu le plus sauvage, le plus solitaire de la nature” [“the wildest, most solitary place in nature”] (Rousseau, *Œuvres complètes*, vol. II 471 [Rousseau, *Julie, or the New Heloise* 387]). Julie corrects him: “Il est vrai, dit-elle, que la nature a tout fait, mais sous ma direction, et il n'y a rien là que je n'aye ordonné” [“It is true, she said, that nature did it all, but under my direction, and there is nothing here that I have not designed”] (472 [388]). In the novel's depiction of how Saint-Preux gradually learns to perceive the garden as what it is, we find embedded remarks on the virtues required to see well that invite us to place *Julie* on a continuum with Rousseau's botanical writings and to recognise, in the lessons Saint-Preux draws from his visits to the garden, a source to the reflections on the faculty of attentive observation that Rousseau would later revisit and develop with regard to his botanical practice.

Julie has directed the natural processes in her garden to create an artificial wilderness that bears not the slightest trace of cultivation. Her aim has been to, as it were, “force” nature – which typically flees much-frequented places (479 [394]) – to come live with her. Apart from wanting to repair the damage previously done to the place, she has intended to create a space beneficial to her children, hoping they will one day become her “petits jardiniers” [“little gardeners”] (485 [398]). As Trachtenberg notes, what Saint-Preux thus gradually comes to perceive, as he wanders through the garden, is “how human design can invest a landscape with moral meaning” (“Elysium”). When he learns to see through the illusions that Julie has

created and to perceive the garden as the product of human efforts – planted, as Julie's husband Monsieur Wolmar puts it, “par les mains de la vertu” [“by the hands of virtue”] (*Œuvres complètes*, vol. II 485 [Julie, or the New Heloise 398]) – Saint-Preux, in a turn of phrase that vividly recalls the voice of Rousseau the botanist, recounts how he feels the very state of his soul alter: “Il n’y avoit pas jusqu’à ce nom d’Élysée qui ne rectifiât en moi les écarts de l’imagination, et ne portât dans mon âme un calme préférable au trouble des passions les plus séduisantes” [“Even that very name Elysium called to order the aberrations of my imagination, and brought to my soul a calm preferable to the agitation of the most seductive passions”] (486 [400]).

As it turns out, when Saint-Preux learns to really perceive his surroundings, this affects his perception of Julie too. Returning on his own to the garden designed by the woman he has loved for years, Saint-Preux notes how, suddenly, “pour la première fois depuis mon retour, j’ai vu Julie en son absence, non telle qu’elle fut pour moi et que j’aime encore à me la représenter, mais telle qu’elle se montre à mes yeux tous les jours” [“for the first time since my return I saw Julie in her absence, not such as she was for me and as I still like to picture her, but such as she appears every day before my eyes”] (486 [399]). This is to say that what Saint-Preux learns in Elysium is that his capacity to perceive Julie *in herself* requires moral effort on his behalf. He must choose to direct his attention to Julie *as she is* and not as he wants or needs her to be. This task becomes significantly easier when, as a result of him having learned to see well, his natural surroundings detach him from himself, calm his passions and suppress his imagination. In this respect, Rousseau's depiction of the events that take place in Julie's garden, while not a part of his botanical *oeuvre*, most definitely anticipates and adds to those reflections on the circumstances that affect our capacity to *see well* that Rousseau concerns himself with in his botanical writings. The events that take place in Elysium strongly suggest that learning to attend to nature directly influences our ability to apprehend others – human and nonhuman – *as they really are*.

The fact that our imagination and emotional state sometimes complicate our perception of other realities is an issue to which Rousseau returns, not least, in his dictionary of botanical terms. Most notably, this is a central theme in the entry “flower”:

Si je livrois mon imagination aux douces sensations que ce mot semble appeler, je pourrais faire un article agréable peut-être aux Bergers, mais fort mauvais pour les Botanistes. Ecartons donc un moment les vives couleurs, les odeurs suaves, les formes élégantes, pour chercher premièrement à bien connoître l'être organisé qui les rassemble. (Rousseau, *Œuvres complètes*, vol. IV 1220–21)

[If I delivered my imagination up to the sweet sensation that this word calls up, I could write an article agreeable perhaps to Shepherds, but very bad for Botanists. Let us leave aside for a moment the vivid colours, the sweet odors, the elegant forms to search first to know well the organized being which brings them together. (Rousseau, *Reveries of the Solitary Walker*, *Botanical Writings, and Letter to Franquière* 108)]

Contrasting the botanist's mode of perception with that of the “Shepherd,” the quote adds another layer to the concept of nature study as disinterested contemplation of the natural world. Botanists aspire to know plants as they really are, and as such need to make sure that what they contemplate are in fact the plants themselves and not their own pleasurable fantasies about those plants. To be disinterested is, in this respect, to hold the imagination in check and practice a form of self-restraint akin to that of Saint-Preux. In a different way than pharmacists, shepherds too can become “blind,” if they allow themselves to be carried away by the fantasies that plants stimulate in their minds.

As Gasbarrone has argued, we might interpret the dictionary's “Shepherd” as an incarnation of a poet, and thus of Rousseau himself, who, in *Les Réveries*, repeats the shepherd's formula when he, as we have seen, recalls how nature's sweet smells, bright colours, and elegant shapes vie for the right to seize our attention (13). But Rousseau is not only a poet (or a shepherd) but also a botanist, and while he appears reluctant or unable to fully set aside the poetic voice and mode of perception, he comes forth as mindful of the need to contain his imagination when striving to get a clear view of real things (12). The botanist, Gasbarrone notes, is urged “to imagine nothing, to practice a certain distance and restraint” (12) so as to not lose sight of the actual plant. For that is what we risk if we, forgetting the task at hand, look beyond the

plant to what it might signify – either, in the manner of Saint-Preux, to what it means to us personally or to its symbolic value, which, as Jean-Paul Sartre (2010), addressing the topic of the language of flowers, reminds us, may equally “blind” us to what plants really are: “My attention cuts through them to aim beyond them at this abstract virtue. I forget them. I no longer pay attention to their mossy abundance, to their sweet stagnant odour. I have not even perceived them” (2).

It is the middle-position that Rousseau – half shepherd, half botanist – occupies that makes his reflections on the efforts required to see well so engaging. Time and again, he demonstrates that only when selfish concerns vanish are we able to pay attention to what exists outside the self and prevent the latter from degrading into self-pity, resentment, and despair. Time and again, he reminds us that our ideas, needs, and desires can cause blindness, that they can prevent us from seeing moss in the woods, and that they may prevent us from seeing another person. Time and again, he insists that botany can be beneficial to our moral education, due to the special ability of plants to inspire in us a particular sort of disinterested attention. But he never claims that leading our attention away from self and onto other beings is effortless. On the contrary, he shows us that it is hard and that we must cultivate and *exercise* our faculty of attentive observation.

In his reflections on the nature of the “botanical gaze” – that is on what it entails to observe like a botanist – Rousseau avers that apprehending the particularities of others requires us to focus not on how they can be exploited for our gain, nor on the sensations, fantasies, or memories that they evoke in us, but, as in Julie’s Elysium, on others as they appear to our senses. And even though Rousseau does not reserve moral awareness for botanists, he does proclaim botany as singularly suited to promote moral skills, since botanists have the advantage of being trained in observing *what is there*. For that is what discerns the plant kingdom from the other realms: A plant offers itself willingly to our senses, while the mineral kingdom, for example, requires us to dig down into the bowels of the earth, searching for imaginary gains (*Œuvres complètes*, vol. I 1067 [Reveries 75]). Plants, on the contrary, are naturally within our grasp, they “naissent sous nos pieds, et dans nos mains pour ainsi dire” [“grow beneath our feet and in our hands, so to say”] (1069 [78]) and seem to invite us, through the lure of pleasure and curiosity, to study nature and thereby learn how to see.

Considering, then, how thoroughly Rousseau, throughout his botanical *oeuvre*, investigates the effects of nature onto man’s moral being, it is tempting to suggest that the thesis on “sensitive morality” that he famously planned but did not proceed to write, did find its way into his writings, although in a different way than he had envisioned. This unwritten work, of which he offers merely a title (*La Morale sensitive, ou le Matérialisme du sage* [Sensitive Morality, or The Wise Man’s Materiality]) and an outline in *Les Confessions*, was to explore a notion that, as we have seen, imbues Rousseauian botany – namely, that the impressions that external objects make on us heavily affect our conduct and moral disposition, our “manieres d’être” (Rousseau, *Œuvres complètes*, vol. I 409 [Rousseau, *The Confessions and Correspondence, including the Letters to Malesherbes* 343]). To Rousseau, this meant that a suitable environment could predispose an individual to virtuous behaviour. The purpose of *Sensitive Morality* would thus be to establish an external regimen favourable to virtue, in order to compel “l’économie animale à favoriser l’ordre moral qu’elle trouble si souvent” [“the animal economy to favour the moral order which it so often disturbs”] (409 [343]). In light of late Rousseau’s writings, it seems reasonable to say that, when properly performed, botanical practice could readily provide such a morally beneficial regimen.

The Botanical Gaze: Finding the Right Distance

Do we, then, learn how to live together by learning how to look at a plant? Is there an art of living together to be drawn from Rousseau’s botanical works? Indeed, there is, and to claim that Rousseau’s reflections on humankind’s relation with nonhuman beings provide a still “most necessary art” for our times is not unreasonable, faced with a cluster of ideas that, as has been prominently established by scholars, such as Trachtenberg, Marder, and Joseph Lane, have provided a potent legacy to later environmentalist

thought. Rousseau's call for disinterestedness and his eagerness to observe each individual plant with loving attention – his, in the words of Marder, “remarkable capacity to be touched by and interested in ordinary living beings” and his “refusal to distinguish between the valuable and the useless” (113) – are a testament to the urgency with which the French philosopher encourages humans to reimagine our relationship to and attitude towards the nonhuman. Likewise, the botanical gaze is also morally vital in the sense that the ability to see well can help human beings live well together.

This is perhaps nowhere more patently displayed than in his final work, *Les Rêveries*, where Rousseau repeatedly relates his thoughts on the circumstances that enable encounters with others, and those that complicate them, to matters of seeing and blindness. Circling in on disinterestedness as a key to seeing well, the text evokes his botanical practice. An instructional example is the way in which Rousseau lets his enemies embody the apothecary's way of seeing “ce qu'on n'y voit point” [“what is not there to be seen”] (*Œuvres complètes*, vol. I 1063 [*Reveries* 72]), since, like pharmacists, they see only what they want or need to see: “le J. J. qu'ils se sont fait et qu'ils ont fait selon leur cœur, pour le haïr à leur aise” [“the J.-J. that they have created themselves and fashioned to their heart's content, which they can hate at their leisure”] (1059 [67]). Accordingly, he argues, he should not be upset by their disdain: “je n'y dois prendre aucun intérêt véritable car ce n'est pas moi qu'ils voyent ainsi” [“I should take no real interest in it, since it is not me that they are actually seeing”] (1059 [67]). The insight into different ways of seeing that Rousseau has drawn from botany allows him to discard their behaviour: they do not see him *as he really is*. But botanical practice has also instilled in him a form of wisdom that he makes use of in attending to others. This is prominently displayed in the story that crowns the Ninth Walk of *Les Rêveries*, and which is where we will end.

The story relates Rousseau's encounter with a poor old veteran who treats him courteously, in an open and affable manner. This, Rousseau maintains, must be because, newly arrived from the provinces, he does not know who he is looking at (1096 [105]). As such, the encounter confirms the point that Rousseau makes to Mme Delessert, that being unable to name something is not an obstacle to seeing well. Indeed, knowledge (in the simple, rudimentary sense of information about a subject) is neither a goal nor a prerequisite for attentive observation in Rousseauian terms. On the contrary, looking without knowing, relying solely on our senses, and thus upholding some distance between ourselves and the object of our gaze, can be exactly what enables us to see.

Rousseau and the veteran traverse the river Seine to the Île des Cygnes together, and the passage relates the former's inner negotiation of how to behave, his efforts to decide what is fitting or proper, and what would be indiscreet. A refined sensitivity characterises his way of attending to the old man, as he exhibits a willingness to be led by the other (“his courteous appearance reassured me”; “I was surprised and charmed by his open and affable manner”). His ability to recognise his own desires without acting on them is striking; clearly, Rousseau is mindful of the particularities of the situation when deciding how to act. When the boat reaches the shore, he insists on paying for the crossing, but restrains himself from offering further financial aid:

Je mourois d'envie de lui mettre une pièce de vingt-quatre sols dans la main pour avoir du tabac; je n'osai jamais. La même honte qui me retint m'a souvent empêché de faire de bonnes actions qui m'auroient comblé de joie et dont je ne me suis abstenu qu'en déplorant mon imbecillité. Cette fois après avoir quitté mon vieux invalide je me consolai bientôt en pensant que j'aurois pour ainsi dire agi contre mes propres principes en mêlant aux choses honnêtes un prix d'argent qui dégrade leur noblesse et souille leur desintéressement. (1097)

[I was dying to hand him a 24 sols coin so that he could get some tobacco, but I never dared. The same embarrassment which held me back then has often prevented me since from doing good deeds which would have filled me with joy, and abstaining from them has only made me regret my weakness. On this occasion, having left my old veteran, I soon consoled myself with the thought that I would have, as it were, contradicted my own principles if I had placed on courteous actions the sort of monetary value that degrades their nobility and tarnishes their disinterestedness. (105–06)]

Natural good will and true politeness or, in his own words, *urbanité* – a finely adjusted and delicate “feel” for the appropriate action in each situation; what Roland Barthes has called tact (*délicatesse*) – should govern everyday human dealings, Rousseau writes (1097 [106]). Tact, to Barthes, is what inspires in us respect for otherness (132). It is a virtue and a practice which, when allowed to govern our relations, ensures

that we work continuously to find the right distance between ourselves and others, attending to the particularities of each situation and each individual.

Rousseau's story about his encounter with the old veteran provides an exquisite display of the art of holding back and of the importance of adapting one's behaviour to the situation and the individual with whom we interact. In this case, holding back and not putting, as it were, a prize on the kindness shown to him by the other, is the right thing to do. Rousseau's ability to see that and thus to act against his impulses, abstaining from an act that would have given him pleasure, shows him to be in possession of this particularly sensitive form of politeness. In this, he resembles Émile, but also the figure of a botanist that he has portrayed in his *oeuvre*. In fact, if the encounter with the veteran remains in Rousseau's mind as a rare, reciprocal encounter with another human being (1096 [105]), this is, not least, because it is unsullied by selfish concerns. The disinterestedness that he cherishes is protected, since the other does not gain from the encounter, but also because Rousseau himself abstains from acting in ways that would have gratified his own emotional needs, but not the relation. Remaining true to the wisdom and virtues he has acquired through the botanical study of plants, the concern for the other detaches him from himself – and Rousseau includes the memory in his collection of reveries, alongside ruminations on life lived beyond the confines of society, as a lustrous example of how to live together.

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