

Rousseau on Arts and Politics
Autour de la Lettre à d'Alembert

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Rousseau's 'Spectacle de la Nature' as Counterpoint to the 'Theatre du Monde': A Consideration of the *Lettre à d'Alembert* from the Standpoint of Rousseau's Botanical Enterprise

In the *Lettre à d'Alembert sur les spectacles*, Rousseau takes up the question of the best and most virtuous use of leisure. In a departure from previous philosophers, he explicitly addresses how the great mass of people should amuse itself; while Aristotle had viewed leisure as suitable only for the few and the privileged, not for the many, Rousseau believes that civic culture depends upon the many also pursuing activities in accordance with virtue.¹ Rousseau agrees with Aristotle's view that free time should provide the multitudes with 'a form of rest,' and 'a means to further activity,' but he disputes the ancient philosopher's dictum that the 'pleasures of the body' suffice to refresh those who labor for a living. In taking the question of leisure in this way, Rousseau puts forward a hierarchy of leisure occupations suitable to different peoples at different levels of virtue and dissoluteness. Yet, as alternatives to d'Alembert's theatrical spectacle, he provides only a few concrete examples: the simple way of life of the Neuchâtel Jura, public dances and civic festivals.

The later Rousseau, the student of botany and natural history, makes it clear that games and festivals are not enough. The leisurely contemplation which Aristotle reserves for the wise man 'as the highest form of activity' must be more generally accessible. Along with the theater Rousseau rejects the nobility's exclusive and wasteful pastimes, the hunt and gambling:

if you permit man to have games, permit him also at least the examination of the universe and its parts. Since not everyone has either

¹*Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. H. Rackham, rev. ed. (Cambridge: Harvard U.P., 1934) 'happiness is thought to involve leisure,' but it is only the wise man who knows how to make use of this leisure in contemplation, the activity which 'is at once the highest form of activity (since the intellect is the highest thing in us...)' (613). He makes it clear that 'anybody can enjoy the pleasures of the body, a slave no less than the nobles of mankind; but no one allows a slave any measure of happiness, any more than a life of his own' (611; my emphasis). I am grateful to John Scott for bringing this discussion of leisure to my attention.

the honor or the capacity to pass their lives killing beasts or playing cards, it is necessary that some idlers amuse themselves with the contemplation of nature. (IV: 1251; my emphasis)

For the student of nature another spectacle therefore takes the place of the theater: 'the earth offers to man in the harmony of the three kingdoms a spectacle full of life, interest and charm, the only spectacle in the world of which his eyes and his heart never tire' (I: 1062; my emphasis).

Rousseau considers leisure a universal necessity, especially for those who work for a living: 'It does not suffice that the people have bread and live in their stations. They must live in them pleasantly, in order that they fulfil their duties better' (126n; V: 115n).

[W]hat must we think of those who would wish to take the festivals, the pleasures, and every form of amusement away from the people as many distractions which turn them away from their work? This maxim is barbarous and false.... This just and beneficent God who wants them to keep busy, wants also that they relax; nature imposes exercises and repose, pleasure and pain alike upon them. (126n; V: 115n)

Because all people must seek rest and relaxation, virtue therefore requires amusements that edify rather than merely mirror the passions. The stage cannot fulfill this requirement because it 'is, in general, a painting of the human passions, the original of which is in every heart' (18; V: 17). Thus it is not the need for amusement itself that lies at the root of Rousseau's concerns about the morality of the theater, but rather, the particular use people in cities make of their leisure: 'it is discontent with one's self, the burden of idleness, the neglect of simple and natural tastes, that makes foreign amusement so necessary' (16; V: 15).

Yet as Rousseau readily concedes, Parisians should not try to adopt the same pursuits as Spartans or Neuchâtel mountain dwellers: 'Reason dictates the encouragement of the amusements of people whose occupations are harmful, and the turning-away from the same amusements of those whose occupations are beneficial' (58; V: 53). Theater in Paris is a lesser evil which only interrupts 'sloth, inactivity, [and] the love of pleasure' (58; V: 54). For Rousseau the moral is clear: 'in order to decide if it is proper or not to establish a theater in a certain town, we must know in the first place if the morals [manners] are good or bad there' (65; V: 60). In Paris, where the morals are bad, the theater can do no harm; it might even do some good.

But is that all Parisians should do—attend theatrical performances? Does Rousseau have any other ideas about how Parisians should occupy themselves? The *Lettre* would seem implicitly to demand an account of leisure pursuits proper to corrupt and citified man. In his *Lettres morales* to Sophie d'Houdetot, composed beginning in November

1757 (hence shortly before the composition of the *Lettre*), Rousseau offers advice to a noblewoman who he thought might desire more moral instruction than urban amusements can provide. He counsels her to spend a few days alone—not in the city, where solitude is unbearable—but in the country, where objects are smiling and agreeable, they promote meditation and reverie, one feels oneself at ease outside the sad walls of the city and the impediments of prejudice. The woods, the streams, the grass divert our heart from the gaze of men; the birds fluttering here and there according to their caprice offer us in solitude the example of liberty; one hears their warbling, one detects the odor of the fields and forests. Eyes struck only by the sweet images of nature approach it more from the heart. (IV: 1114)

This is impossible 'in Paris, where everything is judged by appearances because there is no leisure to examine anything' (59; V: 55).

However, the *Lettre à d'Alembert* hardly stands as Rousseau's last word on the question of the right use of leisure. Rousseau's concern with the virtuous uses of leisure and a kind of purposive idleness reappears with notable frequency in the late-life autobiographical and botanical writings. These texts make clear that after his introduction to the detailed study of plant life, Rousseau believes that, of all the branches of natural history open to a person of his age and capacities, including zoology, mineralogy and astronomy, botany has the most to be said for it (I: 1067-8). He comes to view it as a nearly ideal use of leisure time, not only for himself, but also for others. For proof of this assertion, we need look no further than his rather quixotic project of making and distributing herbaria to his friends, as an aid to their cultivating plant study.² Hence botany provides a worthwhile way for town dwellers to fill their free time. Even though most people have lost touch with the 'natural sensibility' that enables them to surrender to the 'objects that strike their senses' (I: 1063), those who retain such a sensibility find that botany is 'a sweet and charming study ... which would fill with interesting observations the unoccupied time that others devote to idleness or worse' (IV: 1160). Hence, 'of the uses we can make of our leisure, that which cures us of ignorance is the least vain' (IV: 1251).

Rousseau came to botany late in life. While he had taken an

²In the Second Dialogue of *Rousseau Juge de Jean-Jacques*, Rousseau recounts 'how much time and patience this labor requires' (I: 832). To the Duchess of Portland (1715-1785), Rousseau writes on 17 April 1772: 'to have a diversion to my taste from my occupations, I plan to make herbaria for naturalists and amateurs who would like to acquire them.... I thought that small herbaria, well chosen and assembled with care, could encourage the taste for botany....' (CC, XXXIX: 42). See also his letter to Malesherbes, (CC, XXXIX: 37).

interest in chemistry, astronomy and even geology as a younger man,³ he did not start studying botany until 1763, after his flight from France led him to settle in the canton of Neuchâtel in Switzerland. He had long viewed botany with some scorn, as he recounts in his *Confessions*: 'having no idea of botany at that time I had conceived a sort of contempt, even a disgust, for it; I looked on it as no better than a study for apothecaries' (I: 180). In hindsight he acknowledges the error of his youthful arrogance toward, and jealousy of, his predecessor in Maman's household, the botanist Claude Anet:

The contentment that I saw in the eyes of Anet returning loaded with new plants put me two or three times on the verge of going herborizing with him. I am pretty sure that if once I had, the idea would have captured me, and to-day I might, perhaps, have been a great botanist: because I know no study in the world which better suits my natural tastes than that of plants, and the life that I have led in the country has been nothing but one continuous herborization.... (I: 180)

Bear in mind that when he composes the *Lettre à d'Alembert* in 1758, Rousseau is still merely a spectator of nature; ironically, his relationship to nature parallels that of the spectators at theatrical performances to each other: 'People think they come together in the theater, but it is there that they are isolated' (16-17; V: 16). Rousseau later looks back at this isolation from nature to note that mere spectators of nature display 'only a stupid and monotonous admiration' for the structure of plants; they 'see nothing in detail, because they do not even know what they ought to look at and they do not see the ensemble, because they have no idea of that chain of relations and combinations which overcomes the mind of the observer with its marvels' (I: 641). As a botanist, he finds that an instinct that is natural to me ... silenced my imagination and, fixing my attention on the objects surrounding me, made me examine for the first time the spectacle of nature [spectacle de la nature], which until then I had hardly ever contemplated except in the aggregate and in its ensemble. (I: 1062)

Therefore, '[t]o study nature usefully and agreeably, it is necessary to have its productions before one's eyes' (CC, XXXIX:192-193). It is not enough to study nature—as Linnaeus did—in herbaria and in gardens' (I: 641).

Rousseau's method consists in an attentive observation that at first sight would appear lazy and unproductive: 'there I lay down on the ground next to the plant in question to examine it...completely at my

³Alexis François, *Lyrisme et Géologie: Le Séjour de J.-J. Rousseau à Genève en 1754* (Geneva: Kundig, 1941), 9.

leisure.' (I: 643) Yet, at the same time, he 'did not want to leave a single blade of grass unanalyzed, and ... was already preparing to compile the *Flora petrinsularis* with a huge collection of curious observations' (I: 642). Thus, Rousseau's botanical study takes the lesson of the *Lettre* to its logical conclusion: 'let the spectators become an entertainment to themselves; make them actors themselves' (126; V: 115). In breaking down nature's spectacle into its concrete particulars, he becomes himself a kind of actor who transforms himself from a mere spectator into a participant in a process of attentive examination—an active leisure not unlike the 'laborious idleness' of the Spartans (133; V: 122). Rousseau's notion of leisure is fraught therefore with apparent contradiction and paradox; in the *Confessions* he explains that the idleness he loves 'is not that of a loiterer who stands around with folded arms in complete inactivity, and thinks no more than he acts' (I: 641). Rousseau prefers the idleness [*oisiveté*] of a child who is incessantly on the move and botany allows him to put this maxim into practice because it is an 'indolent study' [*étude oiseuse*], that combines the labor of study with the indolence of leisurely afternoon walks in the woods (I: 641). Hence, while Rousseau tells us that botany is the perfect 'study of an indolent and lazy solitary' (I: 1069), he shows us in fact a 'laborious idleness' predicated on active comparison, examination, observation and admiration:

I have neither expense nor trouble in roaming nonchalantly from ... plant to plant, to examine them, to compare their various characteristics, to mark their similarities and their differences, finally to observe the organization of plants in such a way as ... to find sometimes successfully their general laws, the purpose and goal of their diverse structures, and to deliver me up to the charm of acknowledging admiration for the hand which allows me to enjoy all this. (I: 1068-9)

Rousseau began to acquire the rudiments of this 'indolent study' not in the big city—in Paris, home of great plant specialists and learned academicians—but on the periphery, in the very same region he had earlier presented in the *Lettre à d'Alembert* as a counter-example to the empty idleness of the city. These rustic people are not the dull and listless rural idiots Parisians take them to be; indeed, it is the Parisian's very lack of the right sort of leisure that leads to this erroneous conclusion:

I see that in Paris, where everything is judged by appearances because there is no *leisure* to examine anything, it is believed on the basis of the apparent inactivity and listlessness which strikes one at first glance in provincial towns, that the inhabitants, plunged in a stupid inactivity, either simply vegetate or pester one another and quarrel. (59; V: 54-55; my emphasis)

Rousseau goes against fashionable opinion in depicting the inhabitants of the Neuchâtel Jura as self-sufficient, multi-talented and constructive in the use of their leisure time; they are never bored because they are always engaged in 'enjoyable labors' (61; V: 56). These versatile mountain-dwellers 'have useful books and are tolerably well educated. They reason sensibly about everything and about many things with brilliance' (61; V: 56). Yet Rousseau offers us this portrayal with a note of melancholy, as he sadly asks: 'am I never again to see that happy land? Alas, it is on the road to my own' (62; V: 57).

In fact Rousseau was to see 'that happy land' again, although under less than ideal circumstances, as an exile from France, his actual home of many years. In the *Lettre* Rousseau displays an uncanny prescience in his depiction of this corner of the Suisse romande: more original spirits, more inventive industry, more really new things are found there because the people are less imitative; having few models, each draws more from himself and puts more of his own in everything he does; because the human mind, less spread out, less drowned in vulgar opinions, elaborates itself and ferments better in tranquil solitude; because, in seeing less, more is imagined; finally, because less pressed for time, there is more *leisure* to extend and digest one's ideas. (60; V: 55; my emphasis)

In 1758 Rousseau could not have readily predicted that he would one day owe his own introduction to botany to the physician-botanists of the Neuchâtel Jura. Dr Jean-Antoine d'Ivernois of Neuchâtel taught Rousseau the rudiments of the Linnaean system of sexual classification, which had yet to catch on in France, despite its success elsewhere in Europe.⁴ When the death of d'Ivernois in 1765 left Rousseau without a teacher, he walked in June of that year from Môtiers in the Val de Travers to the out-of-the-way mountain hamlet of La Ferrière to study with Abraham Gagnebin, another provincial physician-botanist of considerable skill and local renown.⁵

Unlike the theater, botany does not arouse the usual social passions; for Rousseau it serves as 'a kind of passion that fills the void

⁴ In other words, the Neuchâtel botanists were more *au courant* than were the Parisian savants; Rousseau elsewhere depicts the French attitude toward Linnaean systematics as 'barbarous' (I: 1064) and attributes it to a chauvinistic disregard for everything not of French origin (IV: 1207). Dr d'Ivernois (1703-1765) receives Rousseau's praise in Book XII of the *Confessions* (I: 631).

⁵ Gagnebin (1707-1800) was a highly competent botanical guide, who had immediate recall of between twelve and fifteen thousand plant names. Fritz Berthoud, *J.-J. Rousseau au Val de Travers 1762-1765*, (Paris: G. Fischbacher, 1881), 177-8.

left by all those I no longer have' (I: 1070). One of Rousseau's most concise statements of his view of botany in relation to the passions occurs in the first of the eight posthumously published *Lettres sur la Botanique* addressed to Mme. Madeleine-Catherine Delessert née Boy de la Tour, a daughter of the family which befriended Rousseau when he fled to Switzerland in 1762. In 1771 Mme. Delessert asked Rousseau to provide her with some guidelines for instructing her five-year old daughter, Marguerite-Madeleine, in the rudiments of botany.⁶ The result was a series of didactic letters that provide a clear initiation into botany and continue to remain 'the best introductory treatise' on botany, according to the French ethnobotanist, André-Georges Haudricourt.⁷ Rousseau explains to Mme. Delessert that 'the study of nature dulls the taste for frivolous amusements, prevents the tumult of the passions, and provides the soul with a nourishment which profits it by filling it with the object most worthy of its contemplations' (IV: 1151).

In the *Lettre* Rousseau argues that the theater arouses the passions rather than teaching mastery of them (18, 118; V: 17, 108), while '[t]he only instrument which serves to purge [the passions] is reason, and...reason has no effect in the theater' (21; V: 20). Botany, in contrast to the theater, is preeminently an exercise of reason; it requires the student to build up an understanding of plant structure one step at a time, so that it 'is no longer a simple exercise of the memory, but a study of observations and facts truly worthy of a naturalist' (IV: 1154-5). Rousseau is adamant that botany not degenerate into a mere memory exercise occupied with systems and methods rather than with the plants themselves (IV: 1172). As he writes to Mme. Delessert, simply recognizing plants by sight and knowing only their names would be too insipid a study for minds such as yours.... I propose to you to take several preliminary notions of plant structure or the organization of plants, in order that you should take a few steps into the most beautiful, the richest of the three kingdoms of nature.... It is still therefore not a question of the nomenclature which is merely an herborist's knowledge.

⁶Botany was an extremely popular pastime of the educated 18th century person--both men and women alike. See Daniel Mornet, *Le Sentiment de la nature en France de J.-J. Rousseau à Bernardin de St. Pierre*, (1907; New York: Burt Franklin, 1971), 121ff.

⁷Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Le Botaniste sans maître ou manière d'apprendre seul la botanique*, ed. A.G. Haudricourt (Paris: Éditions A.M. Métailié, 1983), 10. Goethe, in a letter to his employer, the Duke of Saxe-Weimar, writes of these letters that they are 'a model of how one should teach and [are] a complement to *Emile*.' Letter 306 (17 June 1782), *Goethes Briefe*, ed. K.R. Mandelkow and B. Morawe (Hamburg: C. Wegner, 1962), I: 398.

I have always believed that one can be a very good botanist without knowing a single plant by name.... (IV: 1151-2)

Because Rousseau understands botanical study to be a study of reason, he objects strenuously to the view 'that botany is nothing more than a science of words, which only exercises the memory and teaches how to name plants' (IV: 1171-2). Hence, Rousseau writes to Mme. Delessert, 'I thought we could make this amusement useful to [your children] by a somewhat methodical approach, which would accustom them little by little to paying attention, observing, and especially to sound reasoning, instead of a simple nomenclature' (CC, XXXIX: 190). Rousseau conveys the character of seven plant families and the fabrication of herbaria with a view to the greatest possible simplicity and clarity of expression. He likewise picks his examples with care, choosing as his initial subject the lily family, which is actually in bloom in the month of August when he wrote the first letter. Lilies have the additional advantage of possessing large flower parts, which make them well-suited to introductory study.

Properly pursued, botany calms the passions because it is a study of 'pure curiosity ... which has no other real utility than that which can attract a thinking being sensitive to the observation of nature and the marvels of the universe' (IV: 1188). As such, botany prompts the practitioner to leave aside the material interests of the body (I: 1065) and more importantly, those of society, for it is necessary to leave the 'social passions' behind in order to find nature again 'with all her charms' (I: 1083). Rousseau realizes, nevertheless, that botany runs the very real danger—like every art or science—of transforming our subjects of study into mere 'instruments of our passions':

There is in this indolent occupation a charm which one can only feel in the complete suspension of the passions ... but as soon as we want to learn only in order to teach, and to botanize merely in order to become authors or professors, all this sweet charm vanishes ... we take no real pleasure in studying [plants], we do not want to know, but to show that we know, and in the woods we are on the world stage [*theatre du monde*] occupied with the project of making ourselves admired.... Thence come all the hate and jealousy that the competition for celebrity excites in botanical writers.... In denaturing this delightful study, they transplant it to towns and academies, where it degenerates no less than do exotic plants in the gardens of collectors. (I: 1069-70)

In botany properly practiced Rousseau seeks therefore to overcome or undermine that morally corrosive worldly vanity with which he is concerned not only in the *Lettre à d'Alembert*, but also throughout virtually all his writings: 'in a big city ... morals and honor are nothing because each ... shows himself only by his reputation and is esteemed

only for his riches' (59; V: 54).

There are also the more spiritually curative properties of plant study to consider: 'If the study of plants purges my soul, that is enough for me; I do not desire any other pharmacy' (IV: 1251). Rousseau insists there is no value for him in seeing plants ground in a mortar to manufacture medications (I: 1064): 'even if I believed in medicine[s] ... they could never bring me the joy that comes from pure and disinterested contemplation' (I: 1065). Botany therefore fulfills the purpose of leisure foreseen by Aristotle: 'The study of nature detaches us from ourselves and raises us to its Author. It is in this sense that one truly becomes a philosopher; in this way natural history and botany have a use for wisdom and for virtue' (CC, XXX:314). Botany would also contribute to Rousseau's project of a *morale sensitive*, the science of promoting virtue by regulating the impressions of external objects on the senses (I: 409). Finally, for Rousseau, botanical study is a 'great wisdom and as well as a virtue: it is the way to keep any seeds of vengeance or hate from taking root in my heart' (I: 1061).

Rousseau's botanical teaching exercised considerable influence not only on the readers of the eight *Lettres sur la botanique*, which came out in multiple editions and were translated into many languages, but also on education, especially in France and Germany.⁸ French educators subsequently espoused botany for 'its connections with morality and the happiness of society.'⁹ During the French Revolution, Bernardin de St. Pierre and Daubenton promoted botany as a pursuit in accord with republican virtue, one deserving of public sponsorship and encouragement.¹⁰ Hence we have one answer to the explicitly political question Rousseau poses near the end of the *Lettre à d'Alembert*: 'Ought there to be no entertainments in a republic? On the contrary, there ought to be many' (125; V: 114).

For Rousseau, botanical studies avoid the deleterious effects of the theater; they do not raise poll taxes, encourage luxury, or hand over society to actors or women. Botany does not make the aged ridiculous or falsely extend the realm of love. Most important, perhaps, botany,

⁸I discuss these questions at length in *Rousseau's 'Moral Botany': Nature, Science, Politics and the Soul in Rousseau's Botanical Writings*, (Cornell diss., 1994).

⁹Georges Toscan, 'Essais de botanique morale,' in *L'Ami de la Nature, ou Choix d'observations sur divers objets de la Nature et de l'Art*, (Paris: L'Imprimerie Crapelet, 1800), 62.

¹⁰For a discussion of these ideas, see Hans-Christian and Elke Harten, *Die Versöhnung mit de Natur*, (Reinbek: Rowohlt, 1989), 12ff, 85ff.

unlike the theater, does not mirror or exacerbate our passions because nature does not lie, only human beings do (I: 1064); the stage, by contrast, perpetuates falsehood and the actor is a kind of glorified professional liar. Conversely, botany is everything the theater is not: it calms rather than arouses the passions, it promotes wisdom and virtue rather than empty-headedness or worse, and it occupies the hands and the mind, thereby 'filling the emptiness of our time' (125; V: 115). Botany—the attentive study of the 'spectacle of nature' can reveal a kind of truth by means of reasonable study, while the *theater du monde* shows us only the self-interested passions of human beings. Rousseau's botanical enterprise poses the moral activity of nature study against the idle, passion-ridden spectacle of men and women passing themselves off as something they are not. Unlike the theater, nature's spectacle is anything but morally, socially or economically corrosive; in fact, it constitutes an object of empirical study, meditation and admiration worthy of 'every healthy mind [*tout esprit sain*]' (IV: 1186). Hence, Rousseau's own late-life botanical undertaking supplies a positive example for those who would heed his critique of d'Alembert's proposal to establish a theater at Geneva.

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