CHAPTER FOUR

THE GARDEN AS A PEDAGOGICAL PROJECT

Yesterday at twelve o’clock we drove in our carriage to Ypenburg to have dinner with our relatives, the Van den Burgs, and then return home before dark, but we stayed so long that it was already very dark by the time we left, causing us to run up against a mound of sand in the lane, which one of our horses stumbled over.1

Was this an incident of no consequence? Or was it a sign of the times? That mound of sand had no doubt been dumped there for a purpose, namely to transform the estate of Ypenburg into an Arcadian idyll, just as the garden of De Ruit and those surrounding the country houses of many of Otto’s friends and relations were thoroughly uprooted and replanted in these years to conform to the ideal of a romantic English landscape garden. When he returned from Paris in 1789, Lambert van Eck undertook the makeover of De Ruit with just as much idealism and fervour as the education of his son.

The two projects had much in common, if only because children were often compared to young trees. Like children, trees had to be guided and trimmed into shape when necessary, as pedagogues had been advising since antiquity.2

As one is wont to trim and prune young trees,
To grow to best advantage, bear good fruit,
So one must do to youth (though it displease):
Constrain and prune, all evil thus uproot.

Child-rearing was also frequently likened to the training of animals. Dutch portraits of the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries often depict children with a bird on their arm or a dog at their feet, the message being that both civilised children and domesticated animals are the product of careful training. In the 1757 portrait of Lambert van Eck, painted when he was six, he poses — not coincidentally — with a tame bird perched on his arm.

Rousseau objected strongly to such rigorous trimming and training. In Emile he had written: ‘[Man] forces one soil to nourish the products of another, one tree to bear the fruit of another. He mixes and confuses
the climates, the elements, the seasons. He mutilates his dog, his horse, his slave. He turns everything upside down; he disfigures everything; he loves deformity, monsters. He wants nothing as nature made it, not even man; man must be trained like a school horse; man must be fashioned in keeping with his fancy like a tree in his garden. In Rousseau’s eyes, nature – humans, animals and plants alike – should be given free rein. A child’s naturalness must be preserved, and so Emile was raised in freedom in rural surroundings.

The philanthropists, in their assimilation of Rousseau’s pedagogical ideas, adopted the comparison of children to plants, but interpreted this metaphor in a slightly different way. The ‘natural upbringing’ they