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Lessons for the Four-Year-Old Botanist: Rousseau's "Forgotten Science" of Childhood

Although the received image of Rousseau as botanist is usually that of the *promeneur solitaire*, the correspondence posthumously published as *Lettres sur la botanique* reveals a collaborative use of botany as a means to both construct and preserve childhood. Through a close reading of the eight letters written to Mme Delessert between 1771 and 1774, this essay analyzes the network of relations established between Rousseau, his correspondent, her four-year-old daughter, and the natural world. Rousseau's promotion of a "forgotten science" of vision helps him ground the child's emerging memory in nature, while botany provides the system that makes the experience accessible to the two adults and collectible as a "memorative sign."

In 1771, Jean-Jacques Rousseau penned the first in a series of eight letters to Madeleine-Catherine Delessert as part of a joint effort to introduce her four-year-old daughter to the joys of botany. Written between 1771 and 1774 and discovered among Rousseau's manuscripts after his death, the *Lettres sur la botanique* were published as a "petit ouvrage très propre à offrir aux femmes, et surtout aux jeunes Demoiselles" (4: 1885). Like Saint-Preux of *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, Rousseau's role in the epistolary exchange is that of the not-fully disinterested tutor who nevertheless claims to possess an *honnête attachement* to his married student. He invents the innocent titles "chère cousine" for the 24-year-old Mme Delessert (4: 1151) and "Tante Julie" for her sister (4: 1160), who had previously spent time collecting specimens under Rousseau's tutelage. Although the young child keeps the neutral labels "la petite" (4:

1151) or “votre fille” (4: 1155) in the more formal moments between Rousseau and Mme Delessert, elsewhere the shared possessive “our” of “notre chere petite botaniste” (4: 1156) and “notre petite *Botanophile*” (4: 1179) suggests the power of botanical studies to elevate Rousseau’s position to that of surrogate father. Together, Rousseau and Mme Delessert will raise a young botanist.

If we focus on the idea of a *Nouvelle Héloïse*-style romance between Rousseau and Mme Delessert, the child becomes inconsequential — not much more than a pretext for communication, a third party present only to guarantee the innocent intentions of the correspondents. But this is not *La Nouvelle Héloïse*. With the possible exception of a brief passage in which Rousseau compares Mme Delessert to the flowers she is collecting, the reader in search of erotic subtext will find the romantic content of the letters disappointingly tame.¹ For, unlike Saint-Preux, Rousseau is able to concentrate on studying. If we focus on the pedagogical goal — in which case *Émile* (1762) becomes the better suited parallel text — Mme Delessert is reduced to the role of intermediary, while her daughter becomes the key recipient of the lessons. Rousseau must first outline the principles of botany for the mother, but more importantly, he must teach her how to educate her daughter, whose untainted four-year-old mind makes her the more promising student.

Given the child’s age, the letters should not be mistaken for a vulgarization of the *Systema Naturæ* (1735) of Linnaeus. In spite of a professed admiration for the innovator of binomial nomenclature, Rousseau’s version of botany serves far different ends from those of Linnaean taxonomy. “Ce n’est pas une nomenclature de perroquets qu’il s’agit d’aquerir, mais une science réelle,” writes Rousseau in letter six (4: 1179). Part esthetics, part science, part study of memory, the “real science” of the *Lettres sur la botanique* must be understood through the network of relations between the object of study and the child. Rousseau’s letters teach, as he states in letter five, a “science oubliée” (4: 1151) — not botany as understood by his contemporaries, but a discipline opposed to abstraction and focused on engraving natural structures

¹ Joan De Jean remarks that “during Saint-Preux’s reign as teacher, teaching serves almost exclusively as a metaphor for seduction” (99). In the most overtly seductive passage from the *Lettres sur la botanique*, Rousseau imagines his “belle Cousine” collecting flowers “cent fois moins fleuries, moins fraîches et moins agréables qu’elle” (4: 1159). In the context of the letters, the compliment resonates less as pure seduction than as an attempt to transform the student into an exquisite botanical specimen.