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Alexandra Cook, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau and botany: the salutary science*. SVEC 2012:12. Oxford, UK: Voltaire Foundation, 2012. xii+436 pp. Chronology, appendices, bibliography, index, 41 black-and-white illustrations, 2 tables. €95/\$120 (cl). ISBN 978-0-7294-1055-7.

Review by G. Matthew Adkins, Columbus State Community College.

The first thing I did after I started to read Alexandra Cook's wonderful new study of Rousseau's botanical interests was go to my bookshelf to take down my worn Maxi-Poche copy of *Les rêveries du promeneur solitaire*, with its cracked spine and loose, brittle pages held together with an old rubber band. I bought the book in a small shop in Nice in 1998 near the language school where I was then taking French conversation classes during the summer after my doctoral exams. On the cover is an illustration of Rousseau staring calmly out at the reader, leaning contentedly against a boulder in a forest, wearing a sensible blue coat and brown breeches, his walking stick held between his knees. Sure enough, in his left hand he languidly holds a weed he has picked. On the ground to his left is an old brown hat filled with samples of plants he has collected. As I carefully opened the now fragile book, the first thing I noticed was "Maria, 510" scribbled on the front page in my own hand—the name and number of a lovely Swedish student on whom I had a totally unsurprising, and unrequited, I'm afraid, crush at the time. The first lines in Rousseau's text I had underlined were, "je suis cent fois plus heureux dans ma solitude que je ne pourrais l'être en vivant avec eux. Ils ont arraché de mon coeur toutes les douceurs de la société."<sup>[1]</sup> I used to read the book on the beach after class, and I took it with me on long bike rides up into the Maritime Alps north of the city, to accompany the reveries of a *cycliste solitaire*. Like Rousseau, I took care of my inner self—my soul, if you will—by lying to it.

I beg the reader's pardon for this *petite histoire*. It is the stuff of life, of course, and for me long bound up with my own personal reading of Rousseau and the other great writers of the eighteenth century, which serves as much a form of what we now might term "personal therapy," and what the ancients called *askesis*, as it served any particular scholarly interest. Reading Rousseau, especially, was, and still is, a way to take care of the self, for that seems to have been his own chief concern, one that puts him in a long line of philosophical thought dating back to Socrates's *epimeleia heautou*.<sup>[2]</sup> The first chapter of Cook's book begins, quite fittingly, with a quotation from the *Les rêveries*: "Il y a dans cette oiseuse occupation un charme qu'on ne sent que dans le plein calme des passions" (p. 11). For it was in these reveries, written near the end of his life, that Rousseau explicitly revealed the place of botany and the unmediated experience of nature and plants in his life and philosophy: it was his *askesis*. Rousseau is often thought of as primarily a moral and political thinker, and also as a proto-Romantic with a Romantic's interest in the sublimity of nature. The great strength of Cook's new book is to demonstrate that not only was the study of nature, and in particular wild flora, intimately linked to Rousseau's personal moral philosophy, but that his interest in botany was in no way secondary or a hobby divergent from the central themes of his thought. Cook argues in the Introduction that Rousseau's botanical work supported "his central philosophical premise of the primacy of nature," and furthermore "came to form part of an askesis," that is, a way to tend to the sickness of the soul, to care for the self (p. 2). But Cook's central claim, as she states it, is that Rousseau was an "engaged *natural philosopher* who studied the same book of nature that he extolled to his correspondents" (p. 3).

*Jean-Jacques Rousseau and botany* is more than a monograph on the place of botany in Rousseau's thought, however. It is a history of botany and botanists in the age of Rousseau, a compendium of Rousseau's teachers, correspondents, students, and influences, an encyclopedic reconstruction of Rousseau's botanical library and herbaria, and even a historical detective story. The depth of Cook's research and her erudition in this volume are astounding. Large sections of the book are given over to intensive explorations of the context of Rousseau's botanical work. Chapter two, for example, details Rousseau's early introduction to chemistry and the herbal pharmacology business during his teenage years living with "Maman," that is, with Madame de Warens. Ultimately, Cook argues, Rousseau rejected the instrumental, profit-oriented exploitation of plants as corrupting to the soul, and learned from Mme. de Warens' assistant, Claude Anet, to love pure botany for the healing it brought to the soul, not to the body. Chapter three broadens the context to explicate in detail the "Helvetia mediatrix," the environment of Swiss sciences where French and German ideas mixed and flowered. Cook argues that the biodiversity of Switzerland and its position as a cultural crossroads made it a prime location for the study of natural sciences, especially botany, and that its lack of botanical gardens encouraged the study of local flora in their natural settings, a practice that Rousseau insisted was critical to a botany that avoided the corruptions of human society. Chapter four explores the importance of Neuchâtel, to which Rousseau fled when the publication of *Emile* in 1762 led to arrest warrants in France and the condemnation of the book in his native Geneva. Neuchâtel's situation as a Prussian province connected it strongly with the larger learned European world. There, Rousseau forged relationships with worldly and foreign-trained savants such as Laurent Garcin, Jean Antoine d'Ivernois, and Abraham Gagnebin, and developed a progressive, open-minded, and flexible approach to botany.

Cook's thesis that Rousseau conceived of botany as "salutary"—that is, a form of medicine for the soul, or a "pratique de soi"—runs throughout even the more encyclopedic chapters of the book, but emerges to the fore in chapters one, five, and six, and then is given additional nuance in chapters seven and eight. As anyone who has read the *First Discourse* knows, Rousseau argued that the sciences themselves led to moral degeneration by developing the sources of luxury. This was because the sciences were themselves corrupted by civilization, and steered the study of nature toward instrumental and technological ends that satisfied human passions, not toward virtue. Virtue for Rousseau, as for the ancient Platonists, Epicureans, Cynics, and Stoics who influenced his thinking, resulted from aligning the self with nature. As Cook argues in chapter one, Rousseau believed that the one science that treated the ills caused by the other sciences was botany: "the study of plants *qua* plants, rather than studying how plants can be transformed into medicines, foods, clothing or other materially useful things" (p. 14). Such a study was capable of healing the soul, enabling a botanist to experience *ataraxia*, or tranquility, by directing one's inward gaze outward, elevating it to the author of nature, where one could discover wisdom and virtue through detachment from the corruptions and sicknesses of human society. Furthermore, botany must not be tainted with ulterior motives or the corrupting influence of civilization: "Rousseau considered pharmaceutical botany pernicious, as it had caused the neglect of the study of plants themselves in favour of the reductive search for pharmaceuticals, a direct result of the unhealthy conditions of civilised life" (p. 14). Only in the wild, Rousseau believed, could one find nature "untainted by human power relations" (p. 19). Horticulture and gardening served vanity, *amour-propre*, and empire, and were therefore contrary to nature and lacking in virtue.

Cook's fifth and sixth chapters examine Rousseau's connection to the larger history of plant classification in order to demonstrate that "Rousseau's technique of the self entailed studying taxonomy in a rigorous way" (p. 134). In short, Rousseau needed to become involved seriously in the emerging science of plant classification in the mid- to late-eighteenth century, because botany done properly, in his view, must take a systematic rather than pharmacological approach to plants. The desire to study plants systematically led Rousseau to an intense appreciation of the most famous botanist of the age, Carl Linnaeus. But Cook is at pains here to show that Rousseau's discovery of Linnaeus did not make him a dogmatic proponent of the artificial sexual system devised by Linnaeus for the simple reason that "no serious botanist," including Linnaeus himself, "believed that the sexual system could be the final

classification system of all time” (p. 173). As Cook writes in chapter six, Rousseau moved with the larger botanist community in the later eighteenth century toward adoption of the natural method pioneered by Antoine Laurent de Jussieu of the Jardin des Plantes in Paris. By the 1770s, Cook argues, Rousseau employed the methods of both the natural system for “exposition of the fundamentals of botany” and the sexual system “for organizing large numbers of specimens,” thus making him a taxonomic pluralist with a considerable amount of practical flexibility (p. 208).

In his desire to experience nature unmediated, Rousseau also became distrustful of words, names, and books themselves as artifacts of the “socialisation of humanity and humanity’s tragic imprisonment in relations of mediation” (p. 212). As Cook discusses in chapter seven, Rousseau therefore championed botanical books that included detailed colored illustrations of plants so that the student could see in an unmediated (or less mediated) way the works of nature. Yet, Rousseau could not abandon words entirely; they were a necessary evil. He therefore promoted the binomial nomenclature of Linnaeus in order to reduce the “nombre des signes” that stood between the student and nature unmediated (p. 251). Similarly, Rousseau developed and even perfected the art of making field herbaria, a subject Cook explores in chapter eight, both as a way to advertise botany as a salutary science and to preserve the botanist’s knowledge and unmediated experience of nature.

In eight chapters, Cook reveals a Rousseau who was a philosophically motivated and scientifically serious student of botany. This Rousseau approached botany for intensely personal reasons that necessitated a rigorous but flexible set of methods, and also a professional knowledge of the direction of botanical research, especially in his understanding and acceptance of the natural method of Jussieu. Yet, scholars of Rousseau have hitherto assumed with good reason that Rousseau was a Linnaean, based on his apparent approval of the Linnaean system in the posthumously published *Fragments pour un dictionnaire des termes d’usage en botanique*. As Cook argues in her penultimate chapter, however, “compelling evidence points to this text or texts having been cobbled together—‘forged’—after Rousseau’s death” (p. 298). In a delightful bit of historical sleuthing that utilizes her encyclopedic knowledge of the Rousseau corpus, Cook persuasively argues (at least to my mind) that Rousseau’s literary executors, Paul Moulou and Pierre Alexandre du Peyrou, “cobbled together” the *Fragments* from Rousseau’s reading notes, never intended by the author to form a publishable work.

Cook modestly asserts that her book is not a “definitive, exhaustive work on Rousseau and botany,” but one could hardly see it as anything but a major contribution to Rousseau studies (p. 6). In addition to the extensiveness (if she refuses to accept the term “exhaustive”) of her research in the body of the text, Cook also includes appendices that reconstruct the history and contents of Rousseau’s botanical library, herbaria, and botanical correspondents and contacts. Although I would like to learn even more about the role of nature and botany in Rousseau’s philosophy, I do not find fault with Cook, who shows greater overall interest in Rousseau the savant than in Rousseau the philosopher, for that would be to impose my own interests and prejudices upon another author. As Cook concludes, however, to understand Rousseau the philosopher requires us to understand Rousseau the botanist of wild flora, who believed that a rigorous study of plants in their wild state was necessary medicine or therapy against the degradation we and nature experience in “société civile.” Just as civil society deforms us by fostering *amour-propre* and the social passions, in gardens “plants are themselves deformed and denatured products of the social passions; they can provide no succour to the soul battered by those very passions. To seek succour among such products of human desire is to seek the cure or palliative in the disease itself” (p. 346).

When next I sit down with my old copy of *Les rêveries du promeneur solitaire*, I think I shall try to seek out not only solitude but wild nature for my setting, knowing that, like Rousseau, I am only fooling myself that anywhere I can find nature unmediated so long as I am present in it.

## NOTES

[1] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Les rêveries du promeneur solitaire*, (Paris: Booking International- Maxi Livre, 1994), 15.

[2] On the care of the self in ancient philosophy, see Michel Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1981-1982*, ed. Frédéric Gros, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Picador, 2001).

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