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# Butler's Mountains: Discourse Analysis of Details in *Alps and Sanctuaries* (1881)

Samia OUNOUGHI\*

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## RÉSUMÉ

*Cet article traite de la rencontre entre l'humain et le non-humain en montagne avec une approche interdisciplinaire à la croisée de l'analyse du discours, de la géographie constructiviste et de l'histoire. J'y explore Alps and Sanctuaries of Piedmont & the Canton Ticino (1881) de Samuel Butler, un récit de voyage en montagne dans lequel l'auteur synthétise des années de notes et de dessins de sa composition accumulés pendant ses randonnées dans les Alpes suisses et italiennes. Il s'agit de mettre au jour les modalités discursives par lesquelles Butler construit un discours original, qui rompt avec les canons des récits de voyages en montagne. Je montrerai comment sa poétique fait écho à la fois à sa perception intime de la montagne et à une approche renouvelée de la compréhension de la montagne (et en dernière instance, de l'espace) comme une construction élaborée à partir de l'expérience du randonneur.*

**Mots-clés :** Alpes, analyse du discours, Butler, constructivisme, géographie, linguistique, montagne, stylistique, temporalité.

## Introduction

Samuel Butler (1835-1902) first toured the Leventina Valley in the Italian-speaking canton Ticino in Switzerland as a child in 1843. He spent all his summers there from 1865 to 1902. He collected years of notes and drawings and published *Alps and Sanctuaries of Piedmont & the Canton Ticino* (1881), a compilation and a synthesis of his travels. From his roaming in the mountains, Butler mainly retains details which concern the lives of the Alp dwellers, but also details about fauna and flora. I would here like to show how Butler delineates a different track to access knowledge of the mountains through his observation and expression of the nonhuman. Though Butler was the son of a geographer, a theorist of evolution<sup>1</sup> and an experienced mountaineer and explorer<sup>2</sup>, his book comes nowhere near that of a scientist or an alpinist. His writing is disconcerting, for while the object he reconstructs is indeed a mountain area, the species specific to it he very seldom refers to. Here, it is not so much his contemplation of majestic mountain scenes that shapes his knowledge of the mountains but rather the ever curious and amazed look he casts upon the ordinary beings he observes along the paths. It is in this very attraction to simple things and his "discourse without a method" that Butler's Alps emerge. Such a production is interesting for constructivist Alpine geography today as this approach essentially considers the mountains as constructions (Debarbieux in Veyret 2001). Geography here meets discourse analysis, for "whether we like it or not 'mountains' are first and foremost lexical objects." (Debarbieux in Veyret 2001). I will attempt here to show how this observation of ordinary fauna and flora gives the mountains the specific status of an observatory. I will explore the main traits of Butler's discursive creativity, especially his redefinition of temporality and spatiality which render his encounter with the nonhuman unprecedented in the field of Alpine biology and geography.

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<sup>1</sup> He wrote three books on the theory of evolution: *Life and Habit* (1878), *Evolution, Old and New* (1879), *Unconscious Memory* (1880), *Luck, or Cunning?* (1887).

<sup>2</sup> Three mountains spots in New Zealand are named after him.

## The Telimep project and the LABEX ITEM

This research is part of work carried out by the cross-disciplinary research team LABEX<sup>3</sup> whose main project is to explore Innovation and Mountain Territories.<sup>4</sup> We mainly explore the concepts of frontiers and boundaries within the TeLiMép team: Territoriality, Liminality and Peripheral Metropolisation:

One of the objectives is to study the specific relations to the mountains between places and their temporalities, in connection with the knowledge and the imagination they stimulate, the adaptations and changes they have implied throughout history, from the XVI<sup>th</sup> century to the present day.<sup>5</sup>

I work with historians and geographers and my research aims at analysing the writings of British travellers in the Alps in the XIX<sup>th</sup> century, using the tools of pragmatics. In this article, I will raise the question of territoriality or the way in which Butler created his own territory on the other side of Saint Gothard.

### Butler blurs our horizon of expectations

The 26 chapters of *Alps and Sanctuaries* list the numerous villages he tours. They are close to one another along a 40km north to south route that takes up the major part of his book. He stops in small inns wherefrom he starts hiking around in a hub and spoke manner, tours small mountain villages and visits their churches. His discourse is characterized by the freedom he takes from the standards of tourism: "*Alps and Sanctuaries* is thus more than a signpost in the history of anti-tourism; it is a challenge to the intellectual foundations of the structural Continental tour by encouraging the traveller to see for himself rather than 'by the book'" (Zdanski 2007, 230).

In *Alps and Sanctuaries*, there are no recurrent traits of mountain descriptions or narratives, as can be found in travel guides such as *Murray* or *Baedeckers* or in *The Alpine Journal*. He does not describe snow-coated peaks or heroic ascents. He observes fauna and flora in Alpine and subalpine milieus. He never climbs beyond 2,500m (The Great Saint Bernard Pass) and mostly rambles between 800m and 1,200m. Incidentally, the elements of wildlife and flora which retain his attention are not specific to the mountains. Yet, this observation of the nonhuman, of flora in particular is a precious resource for geographers: "We have learnt by experience to which extent vegetation considered in its global floristic composition—or in large sub-categories like ligneous species—, formed a much accurate reflection of the physical milieu."<sup>6</sup>

*Alps and Sanctuaries* is however a very promising title. It foreshadows a certain grandeur in evoking the Alps as a mountain range. This grandeur is emphasised by a certain spirituality inspired by the mountains (Debarbieux 2001) as sanctuaries and the Alps are presented on the same grammatical level. The title plainly announces the description of a concrete aspect ("sanctuaries") of precise areas in the Alps. The detailed table of contents presents a document containing general knowledge that could come of use to travellers or to any reader seeking information on this area.

*Alps and Sanctuaries* is also a very attractive book in that it is lavishly illustrated. It contains text, drawings and musical scores. Butler does not systematically follow a linear route but rather a succession of phases halts. The way he phrases his discourse depicts the Leventina Valley as a living space that is meant to be read, contemplated and listened to. The texts, musical scores and drawings echo one another. Butler annotates his drawings as well as the musical scores and refers his readers to them throughout the text: "boys of twelve do drawings like the one given on p. 147" (148). His wandering discourse (Ounoughi, 2016) is not linear and therefore neither is the reading of his text. Butler does not offer a generic and expected vision of what characterises the mountains; he displays

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<sup>3</sup> Laboratoire d'Excellence.

<sup>4</sup> ITEM : Innovation et Territoires de Montagne.

<sup>5</sup> To access the presentation of the TeLiMép project, visit the LABEX ITEM webpage: <http://labexitem.fr/projet/telimep-territorialite-liminalite-et-metropolisation-peripheriques>

<sup>6</sup> "L'expérience a montré à quel point la végétation considérée dans l'ensemble de sa composition floristique— ou dans de larges sous-ensembles, comme celui des espèces ligneuses—, constituait un reflet beaucoup plus fidèle du milieu physique" (Essai phytogéographique dans les Alpes occidentales, entre Rhône et Pô) <http://www.cairn.info/revue-espace-geographique-2002-2-page-153.htm#re3no3>

details that drew his attention on a very small scale. For example, he composes a musical score to transcribe a birdsong (232). The murmur of River Ticino reminds him of a composition by Handel (31). He aesthetises what he enjoys contemplating or listening to. *Alps and Sanctuaries* is not therefore about "objective" knowledge. Butler puts into words traces of his experience, his impressions displayed as he perceived them in a flow, with no logical organisation. For instance, when he cannot find any further trace of a subject in his notes, he simply stops writing about it and even claims so in metatextual remarks:

**I find nothing more in my notes about Giornico** except that the people are very handsome, and, as I thought, of a Roman type. The place was a Roman military station, but it does not follow that the soldiers were Romans; nevertheless, there is a strain of bullet-headed blood in the place. **Also I remember being told in 1869 that two bears had been killed in the mountains** above Giornico the preceding year. **At Giornico the vine begins to grow lustily, and wine is made.** The vines are trellised, and looking down upon them one would think one could walk upon them as upon a solid surface, so closely and luxuriantly do they grow. (75)

Hence, in the same paragraph he compiles the remaining fragments from his notes, tackling the locals' physical appearance, the antique history of some villages, wildlife in the mountains and wine production all successively and without logical transition.

The drawings seldom offer sufficient extent for the viewer to recognise the location they represent. The same applies to the descriptions; how could any traveller spot a landmark thus phrased? "The sketch I give is taken from about a mile further on than the place where the summit is first seen" (239). As in the text and the musical scores, these drawings pick out details in the immensity of the Alps. Here the question of scale arises, for it renders the reading of Butler's text very confusing. However, before analysing the question of scale, we need to address the question of "narrative" temporality for want of an accurate term.

Butler made many summer trips to the Leventina Valley. During his visits, he made notes on the landscape, wildlife, flora, and life in Alpine villages, and pastures—locally named alps. His close observation of this natural milieu inspires his thoughts regarding aesthetics, education, philosophy, biology, etc. At this stage, ants, hens, and all sorts of butterflies reach a much higher degree in his discourse. Concerning time marks, Butler only gives dates twice (53,75), but each being given separately, the reader cannot situate the moment either regarding the time when Butler wrote his text, or the moment when it took place during his travels. Butler visited the same places several years running but he displays his narrative as though he had only been there once:

For the convenience of avoiding explanations, I have treated the events of several summers as though they belonged to only one. This can be of no importance to the reader, but as the work is chronologically inexact, I had better perhaps say so. (11)

There is therefore no trace of iteration of his travels, nor any chronological order in their narration. Furthermore, he does not indicate any systematic journey time. If he does so, it is only in the case of walks, that is, a natural travelling pace, considerably slowed down and above all a temporality that is not constrained but by differences in height, for the traveller's pace is imposed on them by the mountains. The traveller therefore goes freely through their own experience as Daniel Roche puts it: "The common traveller chooses a coach to save time, a horse because it is both convenient and pleasant, or else walking because they are then free and accept to get lost" (225).<sup>7</sup>

Conversant readers will infer the milieu and the time of year from Butler's succinct descriptions of wildlife and flora. The cuckoo (26, 230) and the auricula come into flower in April and May, the dandelion (30) comes in August. The Rhododendron (26) survives as high as 3,000m in altitude and the fact that Butler comes across some in the same place as auriculas also helps locate the height at which he is walking. Flowering is a cyclical phenomenon setting the pace at which Butler travels. This temporality outside calendar dates is paced only by nature that is, the amount of sunshine, height,

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<sup>7</sup> "le voyageur commun choisit la voiture pour gagner du temps, le cheval qui joint l'utile à l'agréable, ou encore d'aller à pied parce qu'on est libre [...], qu'on accepte de s'égarer" (225).

temperature, etc. Temporality being expressed implicitly, it reveals his natural mode of observation of the mountains. His is not a discourse about the mountains but a discourse of the mountains.

Thus Butler can do without science to identify the salient traits of a mountain area. Landscapes in turn display chestnut groves, (17 occurrences) and pine woods (7 occurrences) depending on altitude and exposure to the sun. The numerous occurrences of these two types of trees are salient traits of life in Alpine pastures both in Canton Ticino and in Piedmont.<sup>8</sup> Butler does not explain the presence of pine woods or chestnut groves; they just permeate his rambling area and this perception "naturally" stands out in his speech which, despite its apparent chaotic structure, offers a very accurate picture of the mountain area he explores. There is no need for state borders where the order of nature itself prevails and it is therefore easily understandable that Butler should merge Canton Ticino and Piedmont and define them as a single territory: "I was attracted to this place, in the first instance, chiefly because it is one of the easiest places on the Italian side of the Alps to reach from England" (22).

Erasing the iteration of his travels as well as his merging of the narrative temporality reveal that for Butler geography prevails over history. For that matter, he does not create or reconstruct a plot in order to give an account of his travels.

Abandoning the logics of time brings out the advent of space as the sole marker of Butler's narrative thus giving much more relief to Alpine ground itself. R.A. Streatfield, who wrote the introduction, calls this work by Butler a "holiday book". Butler's discourse breaks with daily life, with standards and temporality. Holiday time elapses slowly adjusting to the pace of the traveller's experience. The American term for holidays, "vacation" literally refers to a time that leaves a vacancy within which Butler reveals he is a "mountain maker."<sup>9</sup> Such are the conditions necessary for the author to give relief to details and consider a new method leading to the shaping of his own knowledge of the mountains.

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<sup>8</sup> The inhabitants of these areas fed much on chestnuts until the XX<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>9</sup> Debarbieux, Rudaz, *Les faiseurs de montagne*. CNRS, Paris: 2010. (I here quote the title of the book).