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# **Butler's Mountains: discourse analysis of details in *Alps and Sanctuaries* (1881)**

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## **ABSTRACT**

*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-CLES:** *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 non-human. 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 non-human unprecedented in the field of Alpine biology and geography.

## **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

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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

<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>

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 *Baedekers* 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 non-human, 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

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<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>

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 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, temperature, etc. Temporality

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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).

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.

### **From macroscopy to microscopy, an elusive view 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).

In his wandering discourse (Ounoughi, 2016), chance plays a major part. Butler goes through Primadengo to go back to Calpiogna and as he is walking a cherry falls on his head. He lifts his eyes and sees cherry trees in which many villagers are sitting eating cherries.

The village was so quiet that it seemed as though it were deserted; after a minute or so, however, I heard a **cherry** fall, and looking up, saw the **trees** were full of people. There they were, crawling and lolling about on the **boughs** like **caterpillars**, and gorging themselves with **cherries**. (33)

The picking and eating of cherries is the opening and closing theme of chapter III although Butler announced it would depict 5 villages: “Primadengo, Calpiogna, Dalpe, Cornore, and Prato”. Similarly, while he dedicates his narrative to sanctuaries, Primadengo Church becomes a simple landmark to seize the small scale at which he observes subalpine nature: “Here is a sketch of Primadengo Church – looking over it on to the other side the Ticino, but I could not get the cherry-trees nor cherry-eaters” (35). Within 15 pages, his discourse mixes all-out the definition of an alp, his tour of three villages, one of which he only mentions to describe cherry picking: “On leaving Primadengo I went on to Calpiogna, and there too I found the children’s faces all purple with cherry juice” (33) and to give information about height, e.g.: “5680 feet above the sea” (35). He describes his walks on the scale of the continent, while his observations on the ground he describes on the scale of a piece of fruit. All the same, he explains his walks and their geographical location in the summary mode and even in ellipses (Genette 1973) while he gives minute details on the passage concerning non-humans on a very small scale. These vertiginous scale variations characterise Butler’s specific mapping method (Ounoughi 2016) which he renders by the variations between metonymy and meronymy. The rare sights he gives on a large scale always come with a much smaller reference point: “This, again, commands the most exquisite views, especially over Como, through the trunk of the trees.” (238). Contrary to tourist guides or geographical atlases, Butler prefers a definition based on the notions of pleasure and boredom (Ounoughi, 2016). With this observation mode, what is generally seen as a fortuitous detail becomes the metonymy of a whole territory. For Butler, it seems that the definition of a territory stems from the encounters between the human and the non-human. It draws its legitimacy from its small scale which represents the hiker’s genuine life experience.

It also explains the long passages about his observation of the smallest animals: “About three or four hundred feet above the river, under some **pin**es, I saw a **string of ants** crossing



and recrossing the road; I have since seen **these ants** every year in the same place. In one part I almost think the stone is a little worn with the daily passage and repassage of so many thousands of tiny feet, but for the most part it certainly is not.” (38)

This is some very unexpected narrative of hiking in the mountains, for it is narrated on a minuscule scale and because the observation has an iterated character. These ants are interpreted as a moving landmark which is part and parcel of life in the mountains. Being embodied by a widely-spread species leads Butler to draw a continuum between biology and geography from his sole personal experience.

The ants’ coming and going that Butler observes echo his own travels. He himself repeats his trip every summer in the same area. He believes they are the same ants walking the same minuscule route indefinitely, and he identifies himself in their displacement. Butler ends up being one with the ants sharing their habits and habitat, so much so that they become an individualized landmark and a figure of identification.

Half-an-hour or so after crossing the string of ants, one passes from under the pine-trees into a grassy meadow, which in spring is decked with all manner of Alpine flowers; after crossing this, the old St. Gothard road is reached, which passed by Prato and Dalpe, so as to avoid the gorge of the Monte Piottino. (38)

Once more, Butler gives landmarks that can be of no use but to himself. His discourse displays a geographical map yet, it is one that matches no standard. While Butler invites his readers to share his experience, it is not so much an invitation to follow the same itinerary but rather the way in which he observes nature that he seeks to share, and this allows the hiker to become permeated with the mountains to get to know them better. Such a mode of observation resembles that of children, who can spend hours on end looking at ants working. This comparison is to be found elsewhere in Butler’s text: “There was something of the child about him to the last” (142) he says about Beaconsfield’s increasing talent. A similar idea is to be found under Kev Reynold’s quill: “To gain most from the mountain experience I believe one should retain a childlike sense of Wonder”(2004, 12). Here the child’s gaze upon nature combines with the notion of pleasure, this blend being the meaning of travel for Butler. Each movement is a passage and each contemplation is an anchorage (Ounoughi 2017).

## **The non-human: from the ordinary to hyperonyms**

The lexicon Butler uses to describe fauna and flora is mainly ordinary (meadow, pasture, sparrow) unspecific to the mountains. It is composed of numerous occurrences of hypernyms (flower, tree, bird) with 65 occurrences of ordinary flora alone. On top of the absence of maps and dates, this lexical composition displays another paradigm of this discourse without any scientific ambition. The text is not meant to guide future travellers in their exploration of the singularities of this subalpine milieu. Butler's discourse paradoxically varies between the specific and the general, and can even become hazy. The localization of the places he tours is so minute that the map needs to be zoomed to a 1/1000<sup>th</sup> scale to spot his halting places. Yet, it does not display anything specific that would stand out as mountainous.

Ordinary animals and plants in a temperate climate can naturally be found in mountainous and subalpine milieus. Butler is doubly in between mounts. First, his adventures unfold on the other side of Saint Gothard. Then, he travels at a moderate altitude and therefore is precisely in the heart of the Alps. Neither is he in high mountains where flora becomes scarce and becomes the habitat of specific Alpine species (chamois, ibex). His trip nonetheless remains mountainous, as can be inferred by his mentions of altitude<sup>10</sup> (85), changes in height (13) and some descriptions of the breathtaking sights on the peaks and valleys (308), for he crosses many passes (11). Yet, why should he dedicate a book to the mountains if he is not willing to offer a specific mountainous picture to his readers?

This could be accounted for by Butler's potential ignorance of wildlife, yet it should be highlighted that he is a theorist of evolution and an experienced mountain hiker and explorer. He knew Lamarck, the inventor of the term "biology" and the discipline in 1802. The species whose natural habitat are the high mountains are not completely absent. He mentions the edelweiss, mountain arnica and the gentian. He even mentions types of fern using their Latin name "woodsia hyperborean" and "asplenium alternifolium woodsia" (37). This brief scientific incursion reminds us that Butler is more than learned enough to write a scientific book. Yet, that is just not the way he meant to go about it and rather aimed at creating a poetics of geography that would do away with any standards.

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<sup>10</sup> Only one example each is here mentioned.

Animals, flowers and plants do not count so much; it is rather their mountainous milieu that gives them and Butler's text degree in so far as they can be differently observed there. Walking also plays a seminal part in this respect. Butler observes the ordinary in a setting and in a mode of displacement that are extra-ordinary, but not in the sense that they do not require any particular physical capacity. However, it is the time he spends observing ordinary wildlife, as it becomes his main centre of interest and literally gives relief to the ordinary beings that hardly anyone notices in other conditions. It inspires him with philosophical reflections on time and space: "The fact is [...], science is rapidly reducing space to the same unsatisfactory state that it has already reduced time. Take lamb: we can get lamb all the year round. This is perpetual spring; but perpetual spring is no spring at all; it is not a season; there are no more seasons, and being no seasons, there is no time" (62).

Choosing hyperonyms and the lexicon of the ordinary also reveals how much the discourse on the non-human typically permeates Alpine peoples' language, for they don't need to name the non-human: "Guglielmoni had some edelweiss in his hat, and we asked him the Italian name for it. [...] **The Italians are great at suppressing unnecessary details.**" (291). Further down, Butler evokes an exchange with an Italian-speaking local:

I asked him the name of a bird I happened to see, and he said: "Oh, he got no name. There is two birds got names. There is the *gazza*: he spik very nice. I have one; he spik beautiful. And there is the *merlo*; he sing very pretty. The other, they not got no names; they not want no names; everyone call them what he choose. (291)

Alpine populations know this habitat they share with birds and flowers and this is precisely why they do not need to elaborate a glossary to name and categorise them. Butler is fluent in Italian but his experience in Alpine pastures and villages also leads him to observe the non-human without necessarily naming or labelling it. It is an experience to be lived rather than to be told. Thus, his repeated holidays in the Leventina Valley reveal that Butler's alienage as a traveller gradually leads him to the adoption of a vision of the mountains similar to that of Alpine people. This aspect of discourse can be understood as a territorialisation that is a place defined by the way it is experienced, an "art of space" as defined by Frémont (1999), as soon as Butler makes an environment his own territory.

The last fragment Butler quotes shows his personal approach in his learning about space: “They not want no names; everyone call them what he choose” (291). It is the humans who have a language and need naming. Yet there are places where the human, just as the non-human can easily do without any form of language, or else, they use it with total freedom, going much further than conventional naming described by Plato’s Hermogenes so that they themselves choose the names and nouns they use. Butler shares this intimacy of the human and the non-human in the mountains where both belong to the same habitat and where each human is free to conceive and understand this space according to what makes sense to them and at the same time, what pleases them both, which in Butler’s view is all one.

## Conclusion

As the drawings and musical scores show, the comings and goings between metonymy and meronymy, Butler’s writing does not prompt the reader to follow in his footsteps. Butler does not aim to guide his readers; he merely shows them how to yield to experience and accept to lose their way (Daniel Roche). *Alps and Sanctuaries* teaches us that exploring the mountains and getting to know them is an experience that is completed by oneself and for oneself. It should be free of canons and not seek to distort or twist experience itself to produce an expected picture of the mountains while no one ever experiences it this way in their hikes. Distorting what one has been through to better match the horizon of expectations of the greatest number would also drag the traveller away from the deeper meaning of their travel, should they neglect the non-human that, albeit ordinary, retained their attention. The mountains give degree to these small beings which are still part and parcel of our daily habitat although we seldom take time to contemplate them. Thanks to Butler’s leaving aside any temporal logics his book is a milestone for the emergence of a renewed approach of space.

The mountains are the most salient form of relief on earth. They are also a geographical object with denizens of constructions and conceptions. They vary in altitude and comprehend a wide range of milieus from the almost urban to the rural and the hostile desert at their highest. There is no need for a hiker to climb very high to command the highest summits; the diversity of scale and milieus are perceptible along the paths. The viewing points that the mountains offer on the infinitely large blend with the pleasure of observing the infinitely small. The hiker walks slowly and can halt, which is what Butler does. He thus puts into

perspective life on a very small scale, life in alpine pastures and the spectacle of the Alps as a whole mountain range.

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